ALMINE RECH

James Turrell
Path Taken

Oct 14 — Dec 21, 2024 | Paris, Matignon

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to announce its 12th exhibition in 3 decades with James Turrell organized by the gallery. A new light piece from his ongoing Glassworks series started in 2004 is on view.

I've always wanted to make a light that looks like the light you see in your dream. Because the way that light infuses the dream, the way the atmosphere is colored, the way light rains off people with auras and things like that... We don't normally see light like that. But we all know it.
— James Turrell

The man who poked the sticks of burning wood would say he did it to make the fire burn better; but he is none the less fascinated by the colorful drama of change enacted before his eyes and imaginatively partakes in it.
— John Dewey, Art as Experience (1934)

There is just over an hour until sunrise. The first glimmers of dawn have not yet erased the constellations or the sparkling of earthly lights. This is the time of day when James Turrell likes to get into the pilot's seat. Contact. The dials light up. Green needles, red or green indicators, a yellow light. The vibration of the airplane shakes the cabin. The air is moist, and drops of water shine in the beam of the headlights. The plane glides into the secrecy of the night. The sidelights blink quietly. After a little altitude and a few moments, already, toward the east, a brightening on the horizon announces the day. A pale pearly gray, then a touch of faded yellow, and a barely blueish white try to assault the darkness, which is barely breaking up. The stars that were still so vivid a few minutes ago give up their song. The glow of the dashboard is diluted by the strengthening dawn. Then the ocher of the desert gradually reddens under our wings. Spots of brown, timid traces of dusty trails. A world being recreated. This experience of time, light, colors, and subtle changes in perception is an exceptional journey toward our very selves. This is what Turrell's work creates. A pared-down voyage, a silent time of contemplation, so that the viewer can explore transformations experienced by all the senses. No objects, no representation, no symbols, no narrative. White walls, shadows, and lights; the viewer, consciousness, and emotions. That's all. That's all. If we can say that of a poem.

Glassworks

Glassworks: a preverbal poem, preceding words, that places us before the artwork as before a fire or a sea whose every wave holds our body while our mind, detached from analysis, can simply feel the breeze, the attraction, and the colorful scansion of an original rhythm. This is not a luminous artwork, but light arriving as changing matter whose subtle shifts embrace the mental processes of the observers. Our senses are gradually heightened as the shades of colors evolve and vary, controlled by the electronic score. The colors of the work spread onto the walls following the progress of the composition. Reason and attention relax and, as this flow washes over us, we abandon ourselves to an inner imaginative trance.

After lengthy planning, this series benefited from technical advances Turrell made during his work on monuments, including a computer program to create continuous variations and the very subtle use of light-emitting diodes.

During over twenty years of creating installations on buildings, Turrell transformed the idea of lighting, the typical way of highlighting architecture, by substituting an almost aura-like luminous emanation that occurs electronically over time in subtle variations. The Glassworks pieces came out of these explorations. Turrell has always emphasized the time of perception, but now he has added the modulation of light over time, as if measured by the rhythm of our breathing, influenced by his interest in music and dance.

And life...

From childhood, from encounters, discoveries, and adventures, comes the random material of our destiny. Sometimes of our work. And it can be difficult to separate the fertile from the sterile, what was significant from what was negligible. And James Turrell's experience was so rich and varied, combining so intensely the personal and the theoretical, the private and the mythic, and the subtle and the immense that we can no longer easily distinguish what legend claimed from what was. What effect did the dull and lengthy Quaker meetings of his childhood have on the explorations of processes of consciousness that characterize most of his art?
What resulted from his teenaged discovery of the strange and unjustifiably forgotten work of Thomas Wilfred, a wonderful early- twentieth-century artist who made extraordinary luminous abstractions, which unfolded over time by means of a mechanical program, and whose work Turrell saw in the late 1950s at the Museum of Modern Art in New York?
There are other episodes that clearly formed his thinking and his approach. His life as an accomplished aviator, and his secret missions to the Himalayas in challenging weather conditions to support Tibetan rebellions, which put him in situations of extreme optical disorientation. Or, in a university program on the relationship between art and technology, his experiments with NASA researchers on the effects of acceleration on the consciousness of the flight crew. And his studies of the psychology of perception and mathematics and, of course, the books he read, such as Night Flight by Saint-Exupéry and especially Art as Experience. This famous book by John Dewey published in 1934 made a big impression on the young James Turrell, having already influenced the history of the American avant-garde. It led Thomas Hart Benton at the time of the WPA Federal Art Project, then John Cage, Pollock, Kaprow, and many others to base their aesthetic approach on exploring the sensations stimulated by art and devising cooperation between artists and participants, such as happenings.

The exceptional adventure of the Mendota Hotel in Ocean Park (between Venice and Santa Monica) began in 1966 and was a turning point. This old hotel that was rented and turned into a huge studio became the spatial and temporal source of James Turrell's luminous inventions. He used the twelve rooms in the building as a cosmic clock in which he built and affirmed his ideas by creating cycles of works that would become manifestos of his approach. There were projections and external luminous events through openings that were meticulously calculated, with some spaces devoted to twilight and others to night, dawn, or midday. This was already the creation of a contemplative overall environment whose means were light—sculpted light, shaped by the artist. During its physiological path through the retina, the light was transformed into a psychic effect, showing that the relationship between sensation and perception is the true medium of Turrell's work.

The spaces of the Mendota Hotel had thus been made attentive to celestial events. The same would be true of the Roden Crater, the volcano that the artist spotted from an airplane in 1974 and which is now certainly the most ambitious artwork ever developed on our planet.

The transformation of the Roden Crater is nothing more than the result of experiences that began 40,000 years ago in Paleolithic caves in Borobudur, Chichén Nitza, or Angkor, these essential observatories of ourselves. This is what the experienced eyes of Gene, the Hopi chief of the Eagle clan, saw and understood when he stretched out with Turrell under the dome of the sky in the crater of the volcano. He knew, without having to speak a word, that in this monument James was reconciling timelessness and the present day, the light of our dreams and that of the cosmos. That's all.

— Jean de Loisy, Art critic and curator