



## JAMES TURRELL: A RETROSPECTIVE DIDACTICS

### **A Retrospective**

Since his first, groundbreaking exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967, when he was just twenty-four, James Turrell (b. 1943) has thrilled and mystified viewers around the world with his statements in light. Influenced by perceptual psychology, aviation, astronomy, and his Quaker upbringing, Turrell creates experiences that allow viewers to “see themselves see.”

The first part of this retrospective (on view in BCAM) focuses on the works Turrell developed in his Santa Monica studio in the 1960s. He began by projecting light into a darkened space, as with the iconic *Afrum* (1966), in which a white cube seems to float in the corner of a room. He would continue to explore the relationship between light and space in innovative ways, developing varied types of works such as *Shallow Spaces*, *Wedgeworks*, and *Space Division Constructions*, among others.

The installation in the Resnick Pavilion features more recent works, including fully immersive environments that grew directly out of Turrell’s work with perceptual fields, sensory deprivation, and meditation as part of the *Art and Technology* program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1968–69. The Resnick presentation also offers a comprehensive look at the Roden Crater Project, Turrell’s unfinished magnum opus. For nearly four decades he has been transforming an extinct volcano in northern Arizona into a naked-eye astronomical observatory and monumental artwork.

In addition to the well-known light works, Turrell has also created photographs, prints and drawings, holograms, and models. Ranging in scale from intimate watercolors to an enormous *Ganzfeld* installation within which viewers can experience indeterminable light and space, the fifty works in this retrospective reveal the extraordinary breadth and depth of Turrell’s practice.

## **Roden Crater**

In 1974, yearning to work in the landscape, James Turrell sought an outdoor site in the western United States that he could transform into an astronomical observatory and monumental artwork. After more than five hundred hours scouring the region in his single-engine airplane, Turrell found Roden Crater, an extinct volcano on the western edge of Arizona's Painted Desert. Inspired by such diverse architectural achievements as Buddhist stupas, Native American cliff dwellings, and ancient observatories, Turrell aimed to create a space that would allow visitors to gaze at the sky without the aid of a telescope and experience some of his own insights into human perception.

Turrell began the Roden Crater Project by carefully carving out the rim of the volcano in order to build a viewing space that would offer visitors the experience of celestial vaulting—the realization that the sky is not limitless, has a definable shape, and encloses the space below it. As part of this first phase he has completed the Sun and Moon Space, East Tunnel, East Portal, Crater's Eye, Crater Bowl and Plaza, and South Lodge. The second phase will complete the construction on the upper portion of the crater and continue the alignment from the Crater Eye to the West Portal and Tunnel, North Moon Space, Amphitheater, and the pathway to the South Lodge. The third phase will comprise the Fumarole Space, the Cardinal Spaces at the lower crater level, and finally the Egg Road around the crater. More than twenty distinct tunnels and chambers in and around the volcano will provide different experiences and moments for observation during astronomical events such as solstice, and will link visitors to the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. But the work is still guided by Turrell's desire to construct spaces throughout the crater that harmonize with the natural landscape and offer extraordinary visual and auditory sensations that convey the vastness of the cosmos within the tangible space of human experience.

## **Mendota Stoppages**

In 1966 Turrell leased the former Mendota Hotel in the Ocean Park section of Santa Monica and built a studio from the outside in. He sealed off the two main spaces and blocked all external light by painting the windowpanes. He began to create works by projecting light onto the interior walls. Eventually, Turrell would allow some light back into the

studio by cutting into the building. The Mendota Stoppages was a series of orchestrated light performances for invited viewers. Turrell controlled the way light from both natural and artificial sources entered the darkened studio space. "The big thing," recalls Turrell, "was that the interior space was created by the light and not by the physical confines of the room." *Music for Mendota* records, in a format similar to a musical score, the shifting "architectures" created by light at various times of the day. Turrell depicts the sequence, structure, and tempo inherent in the movement of light.

### **Holograms**

To create these holographic works, Turrell recorded light waves on a handmade transparent coating applied to glass. The result is that instead of using light from only one angle to generate the illusion of a three-dimensional object, these holograms explore the physicality of light by appearing to have depth from almost any perspective. There are often complex edge-coloration effects and variations in intensity across the plane of light. The holograms vary in size and color, with some pieces containing a full spectrum of light.

### **Prints**

Turrell began making prints using the intaglio process in 1984, attempting to capture on paper the delicate and ephemeral quality of light. The portfolio *Mapping Spaces* (1987) relates directly to the light performances of the Mendota Stoppages and to the early studies for Roden Crater, the extinct volcano near Arizona's Painted Desert that he has been transforming into a naked-eye observatory and monumental artwork since the late 1970s. *First Light* (1989-90) and *Still Light* (1991) represent the ideas for Turrell's earliest body of light works, the Projection Pieces. Turrell adopted the aquatint technique in an attempt to evoke the misty atmospheric effect of the projected light. It was, he said, "the purest, most lightcatching form of etching, one which could dispense with line, and instead allow for the subtle all-over tonal effects present in the light works."

### **Autonomous Space Models**

Autonomous Spaces are freestanding chambers that evolved from Turrell's exploration of light-receiving spaces at Roden Crater. The first of these,

*Second Meeting*, was a Skyspace that Turrell created in an existing structure next to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1985 as part of his exhibition there. But as the practice of cutting into buildings became increasingly difficult and costly, he realized the need to erect separate structures for shaping the perception of light. At first, these autonomous spaces were Skyspaces within cubes, but by the late 1980s they began to take on forms such as spheres, pyramids, and stupas. They evoke the history of visionary architecture from Russian avant-garde architects and artists such as Vladimir Tatlin to classical architects like Étienne-Louis Boullée and builders of observatories such as Hindu ruler Jai Singh II. The models on view represent ideas for the autonomous spaces whose interiors are either Ganzfelds or Skyspaces. The titles come from archaeoastronomy, science fiction, and ancient history. *Milarepa's Helmet*, for example, refers to a Tibetan Buddhist tale of an eleventh-century yogi and poet. Cast in smooth, bare Hydrocal plaster, these architectural prototypes use basic geometric elements as possible forms for architectures of light.

### **Roden Crater Models**

These works come from a series of twenty cast-bronze and plaster models of the viewing spaces at Roden Crater. *Crater's Eye* represents the twenty-six-foot-wide aperture that is both the skylight of the interior Skyspace and the opening in the center of the outdoor plaza. During sunrise and sunset, light entering the interior space can seem heavy and almost tangible. *South Space* represents one of the many other chambers in the dormant volcano. Based on Turrell's interpretation of the eighteenth-century observatory built in Jaipur, India, by Jai Singh II, bronze measuring instruments will allow visitors to track the actual path of the sun over the course of the year. An aperture will also direct the night viewer's gaze to the North Star, which marks the north celestial pole, the still spot in the sky around which we perceive the earth is turning. Thousands of years from now, when the wobble of the earth's axis has moved the North Star out of alignment, Turrell's instrument will still indicate where the pole remains.

### **Selected Skyspaces and Commissions**

Skyspaces have become the most widely recognized site-specific works by James Turrell, with more than seventy-five examples spanning the globe to date. They are derived from Turrell's earlier Structural Cuts and Sky Windows series from the Mendota Studio, where he removed sections of the former hotel's walls to open up the space to the sky. A Skyspace is a simple enclosed chamber with benches along its walls and an opening in the ceiling that allows viewers to see the interplay of sky, light, and atmosphere. A viewer who remains in the space for a period of time, at dusk or at dawn, will experience the sky in an array of colors that shift in concert with programmed lighting embedded along the interior walls. Giving the appearance of the sky as a flat plane of color or at times a painting, "these pieces deal with the juncture of the interior space and the space outside by bringing the space of the sky down to the plane of the ceiling," explains Turrell. He has created over one hundred commissions and site-specific works at public and private venues around the world.