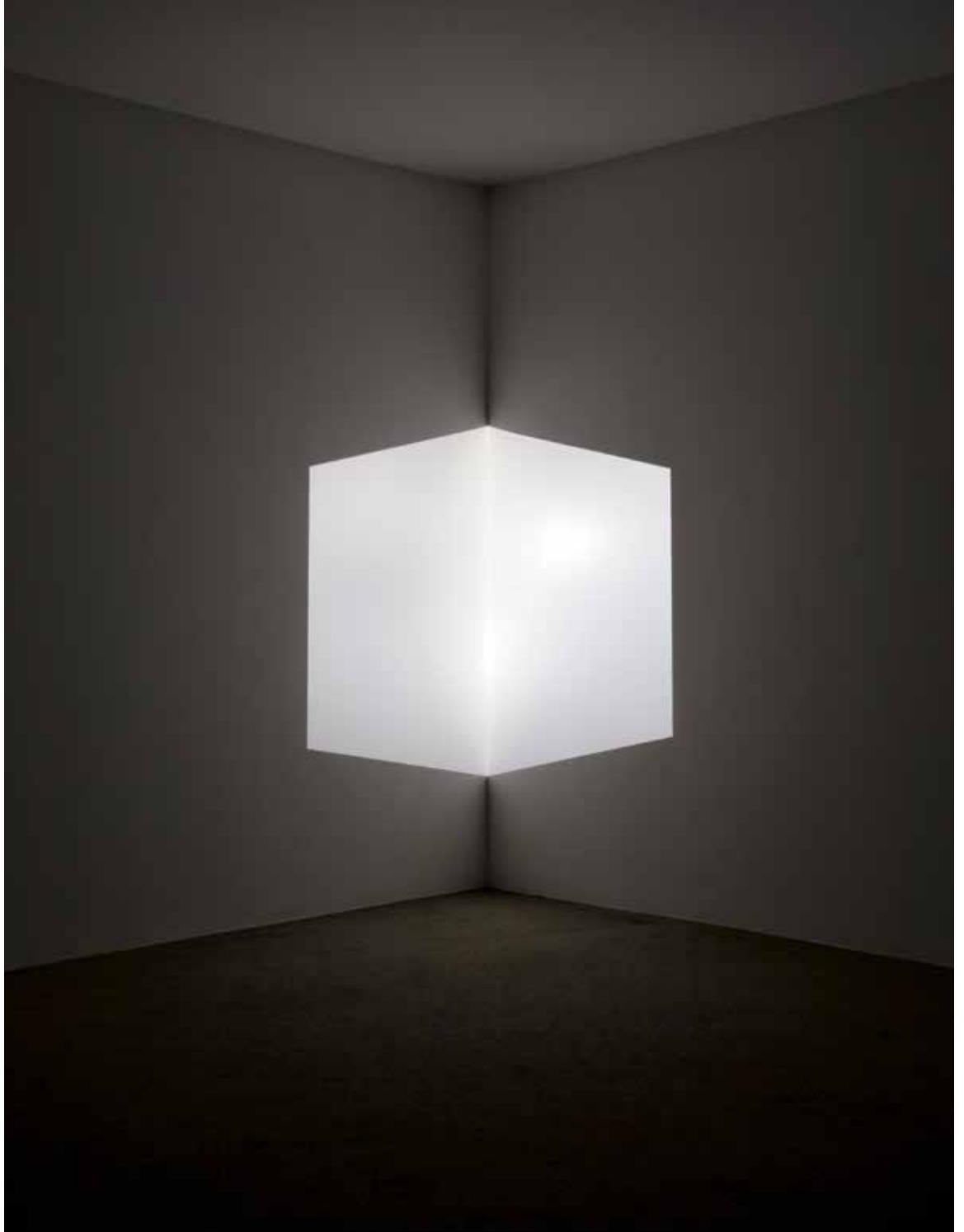


A R E T R O S P E C T I V E

JAMES
TURRELL

May 26, 2013–April 6, 2014

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART



COVER
Purusa, 2011

Afrum (White), 1966



INTRODUCTION

Over the course of nearly fifty years, James Turrell has created a vast body of work exploring the properties of light, perception, architecture, and the space of the viewer. Throughout his career—from his early light projections to his immersive installations to his magnum opus, the Roden Crater Project—Turrell has provided experiences for visitors rather than simply creating objects. *James Turrell: A Retrospective* presents the most comprehensive overview of his work to date through a variety of mediums, including projections, sensory environments, photographs, and works on paper.

Born in 1943, Turrell grew up in Pasadena, California. By the age of sixteen he had earned his pilot's license. While an undergraduate at Pomona College, he completed extensive coursework in art, art history, mathematics, and astronomy, graduating in 1965 with a bachelor's degree in perceptual psychology. He took graduate courses at the University of California, Irvine, and received his master's in fine arts from Claremont Graduate School. He has been honored with numerous awards, including the prestigious Guggenheim and MacArthur "genius" fellowships. His works prompt visitors to consider not only what they are perceiving but also the nature and process of perception.

L I G H T

Although the theme of light has preoccupied artists for centuries, no artist has considered the theoretical and material properties of light as fully as has Turrell. Drawing on sensory experiences of light—such as light streaming through the leaves of a dense forest—he creates opportunities for viewers to experience light as a primary physical presence rather than as a tool with which to see or render other phenomena. By devising the means to hold light as an isolated and almost tactile substance, he invites viewers to contemplate the nature of light itself: its transparency or opacity, its volume, and its color.

Turrell saw the potential of light as a creative medium from the very beginning of his career. Fascinated by the light emitted from the slide projectors used in his college art-history classes, he created some of his earliest artworks by projecting a single controlled beam of light across a room; these are known as the **Projection Pieces**. Standing before *Afrum (White)* (1966), the viewer sees a luminous cube floating in one corner of the room, as if the light has a palpable presence. Yet with the blink of an eye or a shift in position, the cube disappears and the light falls flat on the surface of the wall, calling attention to its delicate and elusive nature.

From 1966 to 1974 Turrell's studio was located at the former Mendota Hotel, on the corner of Main and Hill Streets in Santa Monica, California. To create his early light projections, he sealed off two main spaces from all external light by painting the windows black. He later reopened the space, letting in outside light by making small scratches that allowed tiny slivers of light to enter, opening the painted windows, and cutting holes in the studio walls. He began orchestrating sequences of light projected inside the darkened studio—sunlight during the day and urban light in the evening—thereby creating intricate performances of light, shadow, color, and movement and transforming it into a space ordered by light.

These early explorations led Turrell to make other works in light in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He began to create spaces to hold light—at times filling entire rooms with intensely colored light or juxtaposing two rooms inhabited by light of varying qualities—in order to give it a more tangible presence.

Turrell has pursued his interest in light throughout his career and across different mediums. In two portfolios of aquatint prints, *First Light* (1989–90) and *Still Light* (1991), he revisited his early light performances at the Mendota Hotel by capturing on paper the effects of the light projections. Using the most light-catching form of etching, he reproduced the brightness of light as it strikes a wall in the first series and evoked the hazy atmospheric effect of a projection in the second series.

In his latest works Turrell has incorporated technological advances while extending his interest in the properties of light. *Yukaloo* (2011), from the recent **Wide Glass** series, is made of solid glass panes illuminated by neon and LEDs so that they appear as distinct floating fields of light. And although technically complex, his **Holograms**, which seem to hold multidimensional fragments of light, can be made only through painstaking and unpredictable misexposure of holographic film.

P E R C E P T I O N

Along with his college courses in perceptual psychology, Turrell's interests in science, religion, meditation, and aviation have also greatly influenced his consider-



Mendota Stoppages, 1969–74

ation of the wondrous and complex nature of human perception. His works have explored the mechanical and temporal aspects of seeing as well as how our observations are illuminated by the “inner light” of our own experiences. From his early work with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s (LACMA’s) groundbreaking *Art and Technology* program to his study of meditative practices across multiple religions, the relationship between what is seen by the eye and what is seen by the mind has been an ongoing concern.

In 1968–69, as part of the *Art and Technology* initiative, Turrell collaborated with artist Robert Irwin and NASA scientist and psychologist Ed Wortz at the Garrett Corporation. Together they developed a series of art- and science-based investigations into the mechanics of perception, with special emphasis on sensory deprivation. The research impacted Turrell’s later work; he went on to create immersive installations and environments that explore the effects of meditative states on perception and the physical aspects of seeing.

In his **Perceptual Cells** series, Turrell makes freestanding enclosed structures that provide an experience for just one viewer at a time. Visitors to a Gaswork (a specific type of Perceptual Cell) enter a spherical chamber on a sliding bed and are surrounded by saturated light. The intense experience of the visitor to a work such as *Light Reignfall* (2011) reveals the multidimensional power of light and the complex and malleable seeing instrument that is the human eye—and, Turrell believes, it offers the potential for transformation and psychological growth through heightened perception.

Turrell also incorporates perceptual phenomena that occur in utter darkness in his series known as **Dark Spaces**, which he began in the 1970s. Stressing the absence of light rather than its material presence, *Dark Matters* (2011) consists of an unlit corridor that leads to a sealed and darkened room. After experiencing complete blackness for seven to fifteen minutes, the viewer’s eyes slowly adjust, and a faint glow begins to appear from a low-wattage incandescent bulb. Because the light source is so dim that the room never becomes truly visible, the mind struggles to distinguish between internal and external visual stimuli. “The longer you stay [in a Dark Space], the more the difference between having your eyes open and having your eyes closed is diminished,” notes Turrell.

Since the mid-1970s Turrell has also created rooms filled with light of a single color, calling the series **Ganzfelds**. *Ganzfeld* is a German word meaning “complete field” and comes from a psychological term for the disorienting effect of being immersed in a homogeneous visual field, as one would find in a whiteout during a snowstorm or when flying through thick clouds or fog. Turrell’s most recent *Ganzfeld*, *Breathing Light* (2013), is a large, enclosed, and nearly seamless environment. Carefully programmed lighting, together with an apparently blank space, prevents the visitor’s eyes from latching on to any specific architecture, thereby making it difficult to tell the difference between internally and externally generated visual sensations. “You are not really sure anymore which way is up or down,” Turrell says. “I am interested in this new landscape without horizon.”

ARCHITECTURE / SPACE

Since his early statements and performances at the Mendota Hotel, Turrell has continued to develop series of works that address architecture and the space of the viewer. As part of his evolving practice, he has utilized architectural interventions, created immersive environments, designed and erected autonomous outdoor spaces, and continues to build structures within Roden Crater, an extinct volcano in the northern Arizona desert. In all of these works he has used architecture itself to frame light and directly address the viewer’s perception.

Raemar Pink White (1969) is an early work known as a **Shallow Space**, in which small architectural modifications create space that is then filled with light. **Cross Corner Constructions**, such as *Raethro II (Red)* (1969), are Shallow Spaces in the corner of a room that also employ a cavity to hold light.

The ideas that grew out of these early works informed subsequent series that furthered the use of architecture in creating viewing experiences. In **Space Division Constructions** such as *St. Elmo’s Breath* (1992), for instance, viewers stand in a viewing space that is directly lit and look into a sensing space, which is filled with diffuse light. Turrell since the late 1960s has created immersive environments known as **Wedgeworks** that use architecture to frame light and call attention to the ways in which light shapes our



understanding of space. The longer the viewer remains within the misty light of a Wedgework such as *Key Lime* (1994), the more heightened his or her awareness becomes. Each individual's perception generates a unique understanding of the logic of the space.

In addition to interior architectural interventions, Turrell also has made dramatic structural cuts to exteriors in order to open his artwork to the outside. In the mid-1970s he created an aperture to the sky in the roof of the Mendota Hotel. With artificial light framing the opening from the inside, something so far away—the sky—seemed closer and more tangible for viewers. This led to a body of work known as **Skyspaces**, and as Turrell's ability to cut into extant buildings became increasingly limited and limiting, he started to construct independent structures for them. Consisting of an enclosed chamber with benches along the interior walls, programmed lighting, and an opening in the ceiling that lets the viewer see the interplay of sky, light, and atmosphere, the Skyspaces are now his most widely recognized site-specific works. More than seventy have been built across five continents.

Turrell is concerned with working in the wider landscape as well. After crisscrossing the western United States in his single-engine airplane for seven months in 1974, he found Roden Crater, which he has been transforming into a naked-eye astronomical observatory and monumental artwork for nearly forty years. Within this 400,000-year-old volcano, he has created a series of tunnels, rooms, and apertures as celestial viewing chambers designed to sample and track light from the sky and mark astronomical events such as solstice.

Many cultures have designed buildings and other structures to bring the sun's light inside, where it can then be redirected, seen, and felt. Through almost four decades of planning and revision, Roden Crater has come to embody elements of nearly all of Turrell's ideas about light, architecture, place, and perception. As viewers of his work, we are invited to slow down and consider the very ways in which we see.

ELIZABETH GERBER
*Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Education and Public Programs*

James Turrell: A Retrospective

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ILLUSTRATIONS

All artworks © James Turrell.

Purusa, 2011
Ganzfeld
Dimensions variable
Installation view at Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, 2011

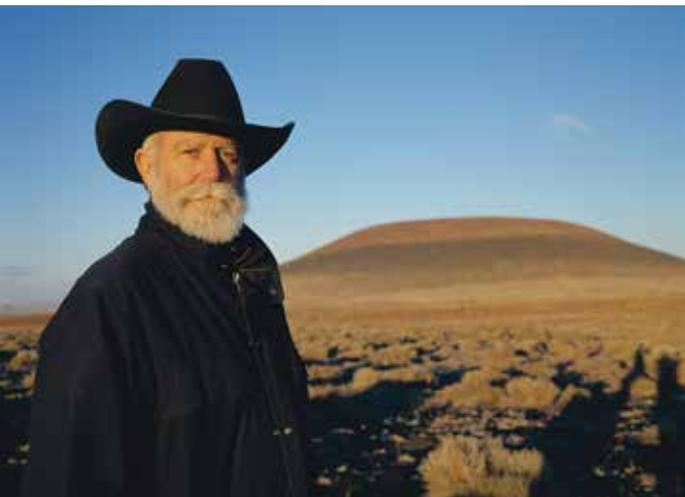
Afrum (White), 1966
Cross Corner Projection
Dimensions variable
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, partial gift of Marc and Andrea Glimcher in honor of the appointment of Michael Govan as Chief Executive Officer and Wallis Annenberg Director and purchased with funds provided by David Bohnett and Tom Gregory through the 2008 Collectors Committee, M.2008.60

Raemar Pink White, 1969
Shallow Space
Dimensions variable
Collection of Art & Research, Las Vegas
Installation view at Griffin Contemporary, Santa Monica, CA, 2004

Mendota Stoppages, 1969–74
Black-and-white photograph
6 × 8 in. (16.5 × 21.6 cm)
Karen Comegys-Wortz and Edward Wortz Collection

St. Elmo's Breath, 1992
Space Division Construction, Danaë Series
Dimensions variable
Houghton Hall Collection, UK

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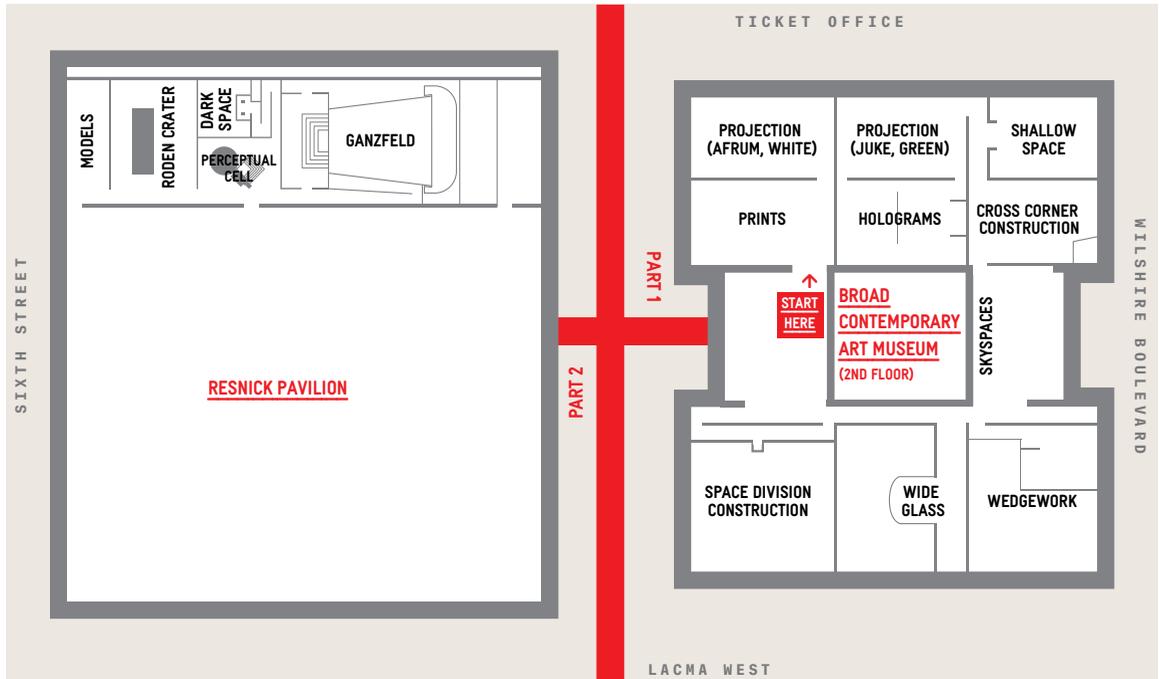


TIPS FOR TURRELL

START HERE

At your specified time, begin your experience on the second floor of LACMA's Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM). The second part of the exhibition is in the Resnick Pavilion, directly across from BCAM.

Most guests spend an hour to an hour and a half in the *James Turrell* exhibition. Allotting enough time allows you to experience the artworks as the artist intended. See artwork labels for suggested viewing times.



CONNECT

Share your experience and ask questions at #LACMATurrell.

TAKE HOME THE CATALOGUE

The exhibition catalogue *James Turrell: A Retrospective* illuminates the origins and motivations of Turrell's exciting body of work through insightful essays and specially commissioned new photography. Purchase it in the LACMA Store today or order it online at shop.lacma.org.

RESERVE A PRIVATE TOUR

Delve deeper into the exhibition with a private, docent-led tour after the museum closes. Please check lacma.org/Turrell for more information, or stop by the ticket office to purchase a ticket and make a reservation.

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