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James Turrell – master of light

As he debuts a new Skyspace in Denmark, the artist discusses Quakers, Kanye West and his volcanic ambitions

© Tobias Nicolai

Tom Faber. Photography by Tobias Nicolai

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The sky is a dull grey, and I expect it to stay that way. I will turn out to be wrong. Not because the weather is going to change – the clouds will continue to drag themselves, blank and featureless, over the port city of Aarhus, Denmark, for the entirety of this January day. But because I am about to meet James Turrell, an artist who works in the medium of light, who has promised to show me a new artwork that could turn this grey sky blue – or any other colour that I could imagine.

We meet inside the ARoS art museum: Turrell, 83, arrives in a wheelchair pushed by his wife Kyung-Lim Lee, a Korean-born artist. Dressed in a fine navy three-piece suit and gleaming oxblood cowboy boots, he looks the very model of an upstanding gentleman of the old west, fresh from his ranch outside Flagstaff, Arizona.

He stands – he can walk, but not with great ease – and takes a seat. Museum staff serve him black coffee and a glass of iced water. They treat him with the hushed reverence befitting one of the greatest living American artists, whose installations scramble the senses and sell in the high six figures. “I always wanted people to value light,” he begins. “In art, people – particularly collectors – are always looking for treasure. That’s why painting still holds force, though we’ve gone forward in the world. And I paint with light. I use light to work the medium of perception.”

James Turrell at ARoS in Aarhus, Denmark © Tobias Nicolai

The Dome, a Skyspace, at ARoS © Florian Holzherr

Turrell’s work tricks your senses. His series of Ganzfeld rooms are spaces where clever lighting makes viewers lose their sense of orientation. He can make rays of light seem like physical objects you could reach out and touch. He makes rooms so dark that you must sit for 10 minutes to let your eyes adjust before you can witness the artwork. His work demands contemplation. He is best known for his Skyspaces, rooms he has been making since 1974, which feature a large aperture in the ceiling that frames a swatch of sky; the work in Aarhus, *As Seen Below – The Dome, a Skyspace*, will be his largest yet in a museum.

The invitation to sit quietly and commune with a work is rooted in Turrell’s Quaker upbringing. Quaker meetings take the form of silent contemplation. Practitioners also feel a connection to light. The earliest Quakers called themselves “children of light”, and Turrell often quotes his grandmother, who told him to “go inside and greet the light” while attending religious gatherings. One of his Skyspaces in Houston, Texas, is located in a Quaker meeting house. While Turrell says he actively practises his faith now, and married Lee in a 40-minute silent ceremony, he doesn’t align with every precept of the religion. “My family are conservative Quakers, and they don’t believe in art or music. They think it’s a vanity,” he says, before slyly adding: “And after looking at today’s auction prices, I think they’re right.”

Turrell in the changing light of his installation at ARoS © Tobias Nicolai

Turrell was born in 1943 in Los Angeles – his father was an aeronautical engineer and his mother, a trained doctor, worked in the Peace Corps. He studied maths and the psychology of perception, and got his pilot’s licence at 16, which led to a lifetime of flying. It was in the air that he first witnessed the atmospheric and perceptual phenomena that influences so much of his art. It also lead to experiences he does not often discuss, such as the time he flew Buddhist monks out of Chinese-controlled Tibet during the Vietnam war, or the near year he spent in prison after being arrested in an FBI sting in 1966 for advising young men how to avoid the draft, in accordance with the pacifism of his religion.

When Turrell began making art in the 1960s, the idea that an artwork could be a perceptual effect rather than a physical object was still novel. Yet he sees his work as part of a long artistic tradition. “If you look at the history of art, it’s littered with people doing work about light,” he says, namechecking Caravaggio, Rothko, Vermeer, the impressionists and Turner, whom he calls “probably the most prescient of all artists”. At first, galleries didn’t understand how to package his immaterial, site-specific works; in his words, how to “sell blue sky and coloured air”.

Sometimes audiences didn’t understand them either. At a 1980 show at the Whitney, a woman leaned against a wall of light in a Turrell work, fell and hurt her wrist. She sued. It wasn’t until institutions and audiences began to embrace immersive, experiential installations by younger artists such as Olafur Eliasson that Turrell was recognised as a pioneer. Today he’s fashionable. There are a hundred Skyspaces, everywhere from Australia to Uruguay, and a dedicated museum for his work is housed in a vineyard at Colomé in Salta, Argentina.

The installation in Aarhus in one of its varying colours © Florian Holzherr

With sunset approaching, it's time for us to visit the Aarhus Skyspace. At dusk each day, there is a programmed light show that plays across the inside of its dome. Turrell gets into his wheelchair. "This is the first day in Aarhus that I've used the wheelchair," he says, with a hint of embarrassment. He calls himself a "crippled cowboy".

We descend through a curving passageway into the dome, which is perfectly smooth and surrounded by concrete benches. Settling on two cushions with thick wool blankets on our laps, Turrell directs my attention to the circular aperture in the roof that reveals a perfect disc of summer-blue sky. It takes me a second before I realise what's wrong: the sky isn't blue today. It has been resolutely grey since I woke up. I wonder if perhaps I'm looking at an optical illusion, but then a bird flies across the opening, as if on cue. This sky is the real deal. Turrell explains that lights around the dome can, like mixing paints, turn the sky any colour.

"It's a long sermon that you're about to see," he says. The light show begins, and the dome starts to glow, shifting between a variety of vivid colours. Fuchsia, peach, indigo, the palest duck-egg blue. A silly question: does he have a favourite colour? He raises his eyebrows. "It's like asking who's your favourite child," he grumbles. "Even if you have one, you don't tell people about it."

Turrell's shadow, cast by his installation © Tobias Nicolai

Turrell in his installation at ARoS © Tobias Nicolai

We go back upstairs. An assistant murmurs that Turrell should eat "before the arrival of the King". Denmark's King Frederik X is due to come and meet the artist. Beyond monarchs, Turrell has attracted a coterie of notable admirers. Drake borrowed the aesthetic of Turrell's Ganzfeld rooms for his "Hotline Bling" video. "A lot of athletes, too, and basketball players," Turrell adds. "In the celebrity world all you need is Drake or Kanye to make a comment and our website gets a million hits and collapses. I asked Kanye: how does an 80-year-old white guy appeal to hip-hop artists and Black basketball players, and he said: 'Well, you're an artist of colour.'"

Drake and West are among the donors to *Roden Crater*, Turrell's magnum opus, which has been in development since 1979. The project is perhaps the most ambitious undertaking in contemporary art: the transformation of a 400,000-year-old extinct volcano in Arizona into a naked-eye observatory, where visitors can walk through stone chambers and tunnels that focus their attention on various astral phenomena. Turrell has been ploughing resources into it for decades and has dug out more than a million cubic yards of earth. When finished, the site will have 33 lodges to accommodate guests, a pool to watch the sunrise, and an amphitheatre.

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The installation at ARoS © Florian Holzherr

Securing funds for *Roden Crater* has been one of the central missions of Turrell's life. Over the years he has raised money for it by restoring antique aeroplanes, raising livestock and undertaking private Skyspace commissions. He has given multiple dates for completion and has now abandoned public deadlines. "I swore it would be done by the year 2000," he jokes, "and I'm sticking to it."

Would this have been easier if he had become successful earlier in life? "I'm a late bloomer," reflects Turrell. "And the thing about that is that I'm having opportunities now that I wish I'd had 20 or 25 years ago. But that's how life is." He still travels often for work, though it's not as easy as it used to be. When he's not moving around, he lives on his vast cattle ranch near *Roden Crater*. So the cowboy boots aren't just for show, then? "Yes, they *are* for show," he says quietly.

And at that moment, we are told that Turrell has to go. He is wanted in the other room. He has a king to meet.

As Seen Below – The Dome, a Skyspace, opens at the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum on 19 June

"I paint with light," says Turrell. "I use light to work the medium of perception." © Tobias Nicolai

Tadao Ando, architect

I first worked with James Turrell on *Backside of the Moon* at Minamidera in Naoshima. In complete darkness, one's sense of time gradually dissolves. As a faint light slowly emerges, you feel as if suspended in a small universe. Light is a fundamental theme in architecture. I myself believe that architecture can be made by pursuing light alone. Yet Turrell does not create space with light. He enters human perception itself. Through light, he unsettles the very premise by which we see the world. For half a century, he has pursued this demanding and delicate exploration without deviation.

Kyung-Lim Lee, artist and Turrell's wife

I saw James's work for the first time before I ever met him. I was living in New York in the 1980s and I took the subway at an odd hour because it had to be seen at sunset. I didn't know what to expect at the MoMA PS1 Skyspace, but I remember sitting there and just being completely stunned. I watched through the ceiling aperture as the colour of the sky changed slowly. This process created a sense of communion and confrontation at the same time. It was a humbling experience to watch the sky as it seemingly watched me. I felt that I was seeing his way of thinking through looking at the work – it was very moving.

Es Devlin, artist and stage designer

I was introduced to Turrell by the theatre director Ian Rickson in the mid-1990s. But I think of *Mendota Stoppages*, Turrell's pivotal early work with apertures to [the] Los Angeles light, most mornings as I observe a line of light that lands on the wall opposite my bed through a crack between the blinds – my daily access to our nearest star.

Meeting, by James Turrell, at MoMA PS1 Skyspace © James Turrell. Photograph by Pablo Enriquez

Geoff Dyer, author

I've had quite a few great Turrell experiences, but the one I most prize was actually the most constricted. *Bindu Shards* at Gagosian in London about 15 years ago involved the viewer being slid into the isolation of something like an MRI machine – which patients can find horribly claustrophobic. The purpose of this confinement was to use a carefully manipulated bombardment of lights to offer a psychedelic expansion whereby corporeal, eye-based perception became indistinguishable from disembodied consciousness. Inner and outer swirled together. You could opt for a degree of intensity ranging from soft upwards. I didn't even have to think. "To the max!" – obviously. A few days later I went back for seconds. Far in!

Jane E Houser, docent coordinator of Live Oak Friends Meeting House, Houston, Texas

We were a very small meeting out in the hinterland of Quakerdom and we had no money for a building. So we had this idea that if we were willing to help James fulfil his vision of a meeting house with a Skyspace, maybe people in the art community would help finance it, and that's what happened. The building was finished 25 years ago. It's bright and feels like a comfortable place to worship. There's a sense of peace that's been laid down before you get there. I'm a chemist and an engineer, not an artist, but I know there's something special about it. When people walk in the door, they're struck by silence; people who have never been quiet for five minutes in their entire lives are now quiet for the better part of an hour. We've even had people come to see the Skyspace and then end up as members of the Quaker community.

Bernar Venet, artist

We have two major pieces of Turrell's here at the Venet Foundation in Le Muy, France: *Prana*, which is a mysterious volume of light that seems to float in space; and a Skyspace, *Elliptic, Ecliptic*, an oval shape that frames the sky, turning the sky itself into a material. On Saturday evenings, we invite people to come, have a glass of champagne, talk, then we go and sit in the Skyspace as the lights start to move. You don't need to have knowledge of art to enjoy it, because it's pure pleasure, but someone who's knowledgeable will have another experience, knowing that this is a fabulous gesture within the context of contemporary art.

David Cholmondeley, 7th Marquess of Cholmondeley

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I first saw James's work in Vienna in '98, and I thought it was extraordinary. It was bringing Rothko into the contemporary age, doing with pure light what Rothko did with paint. Turrell was the first contemporary artist I wanted to work with after I'd taken on the Norfolk estate of Houghton Hall from my grandmother. We first made a Skyspace in a kind of treehouse – like a contemporary take on a garden folly. We later did a major show of his work and he took great trouble to create this wonderful lightscape over the house, a changing show that lasted an hour or so at dusk for our summer season. The second piece was a dark space in a converted 18th-century water tower where your eyes only grow accustomed after about 10 minutes. I love the idea that you can't just go in, walk past and go on to the next thing. You actually have to take the time.

Christoph Ehrbar, managing director, Bodega and Estancia Colomé, home of the James Turrell Museum, Argentina

In Colomé, we have many visitors who have no relationship to art, no expectations before their visit, and most of them come out of the museum fascinated by what they experienced. Turrell's work pulls people out of their everyday lives. It's a meditative experience.

Unseen Blue, by James Turrell, at the James Turrell Museum at Bodega Colomé © James Turrell

Unseen Blue, by James Turrell, at the James Turrell Museum at Bodega Colomé © James Turrell

Eva Langret, director of Frieze Emea

Turrell’s work is inextricably linked to the golden, hazy light of California, but I do have a soft spot for his installation in a former deer shelter at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. *Deer Shelter Skyspace* is a deeply contemplative, peaceful, minimalist concrete-and-stone chamber with a single aperture through which the viewer can observe the sky. Thanks to a play with light and perspectival geometry, the sky appears flattened – a living, moving painting: infinity contained within a frame.

Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

One of the reasons I took the job as director of the Dia Art Foundation in 1994 was to help James Turrell continue his efforts to build his *Roden Crater*. What’s compelling about that monumental work of art is that it is not an ode to gods or history, but to our own beautiful and malleable human perception.

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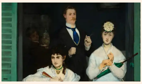

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