



A *Skyspace* light installation by James Turrell ©Corbis

James Turrell by Amy Raphael

James Turrell, now 71, is a hyphenate with a grand silver beard that makes him look like the daddy of all hipsters. One of America's greatest living artists, he is also a pilot and a rancher who tends a Black Angus herd of nearly 2,500 across nearly 150,000 acres in northern Arizona. His is an impressive brain, able to absorb the most complex scientific theories - and he can more than hold his own when talking about literature, history and religion.

Turrell's ongoing work with light has changed the way we look at art. His obsession with light dates back to his time as a student of perceptual psychology at Pomona College in California in the mid-Sixties. Here he learned about the Ganzfeld effect, the theory that viewing a uniform field of colour can lead to an altered state of consciousness, to spiritual experiences and hallucinations. In other words, spend some time in a darkened room and you will start to see things. By the early Seventies, he was experimenting with projected light in a small studio in Venice, California.

The fascination with light runs deep in Turrell. He was brought up Pasadena in a devout Quaker family: the Quakers were originally called 'the children of the light' and his grandmother used to say, 'You go inside to greet the light'. On the other hand, he told

the New York Times last year that his family 'does not believe in art to this day. They think art is vanity.'

While his mother was busy eschewing household appliances, cars and electricity alongside art, the young Turrell's imagination was fired during trips to New York to see his fashion journalist aunt. A visit to the Museum of Modern Art became a turning point when he discovered Thomas Wilfred, an artist who experimented with projected light in the 1900s. The young Turrell was transfixed by the shifting lines of shadow and colour in the 'light boxes'. It's really too glib to say, but he had seen the light.

Over the last 50 years, Turrell has become world-famous for his extraordinary light projections and installations. By last summer his status in America was such that he was opening three major art shows - at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Guggenheim in New York - in the space of a month. At the latter, he recast the rotunda as an enormous space filled with shifting artificial and natural light that the Guggenheim itself described as 'one of the most dramatic transformations the museum has ever conceived'.

Critics often talk about the need to 'surrender' to Turrell's art. During a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1980, several visitors to a work called 'City of Arhirit' were discombobulated by the bright blue haze and tried to steady themselves on a wall - unfortunately, it was only a wall of light. One woman broke her arm, another her wrist. Turrell was wistful. As much as he likes to play with people's perception of reality, he ultimately felt he'd failed.

While Turrell makes highly original and complex works of art with light as their focus - a Seventies series, *Skyspaces*, involved him cutting a large hole in the walls and ceiling of an old hotel to create a view of the open sky so that it looked as though the sky was painted onto the ceiling - he acknowledges that artists have forever been driven by light. He talked to *Interview* magazine about Turner and Vermeer having lived 'in places where really amazing displays of light were rare, so they treasured that... then there's the more emotional, southern view of light, where you have Caravaggio, Velázquez and Goya.'

Turrell wants us to treasure light the way we treasure gold and silver, and paintings. He is endlessly excited about the fact that if you mix blue and yellow paint, you get green paint, but if you mix blue and yellow light, you get white light. And he is nothing if not ambitious. In 1974 he was flying his plane when he spotted Roden Crater, a natural volcano crater on the southwestern edge of the Painted Desert in North Arizona. With on and off arts funding, he ended up buying the vast swathes of land around it so that he could transform it into a work of art (hence the Black Angus).

In one of the most ambitious artworks ever attempted by a single artist, Turrell has thus far transformed Roden Crater into a series of chambers, tunnels, pathways and openings into the sky. Those who have been lucky enough to visit - and the New York Times describes an invite as 'one of the most coveted tickets in American art' - describe it as a celestial, life-changing experience. Chuck Close, a contemporary who has enjoyed the kind of celebrity that has oddly eluded Turrell, was lucky enough to visit Roden Crater a few years back. '[Turrell is] an orchestrator of experience, not a creator of cheap effects. And every artist knows how cheap an effect is, and how revolutionary an experience.'

Close even went as far as saying that Turrell's work made him wonder if he was 'making pabulum for the masses'. He was joking, of course, but, at its best, Turrell's work makes us question our mortality, our perception of the world and our ability to live in the moment. Simply put, surrender to James Turrell's art and it may change your life.