

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

James Turrell: Consciousness of light

Will Gompertz | 12:20 UK time, Wednesday, 17 November 2010

Two words would have been running through my mind yesterday if I was Kate Middleton, soon to be Windsor. As the roomful of flashlights popped; the cacophony of their electric clicks creating an instant soundtrack, standing there blinded and unsure; entrapped and feeling claustrophobic, I'd be saying to myself: Bindu Shards.



This is exactly like Bindu Shards I'd be thinking, except a bit more public. Well, a lot more public actually as there were loads of people in that room and Bindu Shards is a solitary experience.

But as experiences go it definitely comes under the heading of unforgettable - just like Kate's big moment was yesterday. I should explain. Bindu Shards is an installation at the Gagosian Gallery in Kings Cross, London by the American artist James Turrell.

It's what happens when you cross an MRT scanner with an artist whose primary concern is light. And James Turrell is interested in light in the same way Alex Ferguson is interested in football. That is to say, he's obsessed. And when you encounter one of his works it becomes your obsession too.

Light - the way we do and don't see, perceive and feel it - has been Turrell's overriding concern for some time; decades in fact. For more than 45 years he has been contemplating and making artworks designed to heighten the viewer's consciousness of light.

And Bindu Shards certainly does that. It consists of a spherical object that looks like a prop from a Wallace and Grommit film: a fibreglass dome that sits atop three or four spindly legs. It is about 10 feet in diameter and 15 feet tall. To one side there are some steps that lead to a platform resting against its midriff where a small hatch has been cut.



On instruction, one of the gallery assistants - all of whom are dressed theatrically in lab-coats - presses a remote control button in their hand, whereupon the hatch opens and ejects an eight foot long bed. At which point you are asked to sign a health and safety form, lie on the bed, don some headphones and answer one simple question: do you want to go for the relaxed or hardcore version?

Before you've finished saying hardcore the machine has devoured you, the small hatch has been locked and a 15 minute light show like no other has begun. It starts off nice and serenely. The white domed chamber in which you lie facing upwards becomes bathed in blue and red lights. Nothing hardcore about that. But then there's nothing hardcore about the slow ascent of a rollercoaster in those moments before it sends you plummeting over a precipice.

Within 30 seconds Turrell has you tripping the light fantastic. The sensation is decidedly odd. It feels as if some child has got hold of each of your eyeballs in their sticky fingers and is twisting them to-and-fro like a kaleidoscope. You are totally engulfed in fractured images of bright colours; creating a wholly disorientating and oppressive atmosphere.

The idea is to get behind the eyes. It does that all right: and then promptly to your brain and onto your imagination. At first it feels like being in a Van Gogh painting, living within his distorted, vivid world. Then after about five minutes it feels like being inside Van Gogh's head, which is an altogether scarier place to find yourself.

James Turrell wants to create this artwork to facilitate a state of mind of total relaxation. Quite how he expects that to happen after submitting the visitor to such an intense psychedelic blitzkrieg is beyond me. I emerged confused and amused; my eyes still popping, my body slightly shaky. I was not relaxed.

But I was after going into his next installation; called Dhatu. Again you walk up some steps but this time into a more open space that is about 18 feet long and 12 feet wide. It's a bit like a photographer's studio with white walls and ceiling and infinity curves running down the sides.



At one end, taking up almost the entire back wall is a lozenge-like shape that subtly, yet constantly changes colour. In fact it's not a wall at all but a large hole in which light and mist is gently projected into the space. Now this installation is relaxing, and clever. The wall of light at times appears completely solid, but then moments later like an ethereal tunnel beckoning you forward. And then you turn around and realize you are experiencing one of the finest artworks to be on display in London at the moment.

What you see when looking back towards the opening through which you entered Dhatu is both surprising and sublime. It has turned into a flat surface of block colour. A perfect piece of colour-field painting that is framed by the edges of the entrance. It is in fact the back wall of the gallery that is some fifteen feet from the entrance, but the effect is that the entrance has gone and been replaced by a painting: perspective has been removed.

As the light changes in the installation so does the block of colour, going from a deep orange to a dark green, through to a ruby red: all of which is done by manipulating the light and your state of mind. Extraordinary.

I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that Bindu Shards is fully booked for the duration of the show and therefore unavailable. The good news is that Dhatu is not - you can go along when the gallery is open and check it out for free. I think it is the better artwork anyway, it felt like less of a gimmick and more thoughtful and profound. My only advice is try and get there early (the gallery opens at 10am) as it is much better when you can see the block colour without other people standing in the way.

Turrell is an interesting man and artist, not only making us look at something we normally take for granted, but to change its status too. He sums up his work thus:

"My desire is to set up a situation to which I can take you and let you see. I am interested in light because of my interest in our spiritual nature and the things that empower us. My art deals with light itself, not as the bearer of revelation, but as revelation itself."

James Turrell has spent a lifetime thinking about, playing with and enjoying light. I hope Kate Middleton has the same appetite for it, because as from yesterday, she's going to be standing in it for the rest of her life.