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Sci-Fi Sphere Takes Art Fans on a Trip in London Exhibit: Martin Gayford

By Martin Gayford - Nov 7, 2010 4:00 PM PT



"Dhatu" (2010) by James Turrell. The work is on show at the Gagosian Gallery, 6-24 Britannia St, London until December 10. Source: Gagosian Gallery via Bloomberg Photo credit: Florian Holzherr/Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery, Source: Bolton and Quinn, via Bloomberg

White-coated attendants stand by a white sphere, resembling an early bathyscaphe or a space vehicle from a vintage sci-fi film. At intervals, a hatch in the side opens, a dazed art lover emerges and a fresh one lies down on a stretcher and is slid into the mysterious recesses of the thing.

This is "Bindu Shards" (2010), the most daunting work in an exhibition by the U.S. artist James Turrell ([Gagosian Gallery](#), 6-24 Britannia St., London WC1, through Dec. 10). As a critic, I felt it was my duty to subject myself to this ordeal, and when given a choice between the "hard" and, more relaxing, "soft" version I gulped and went for the tougher option.

What happens after you disappear into the gleaming globe is a powerful experience. It's like being inside a huge, soft-focus kaleidoscope, surrounded by an ever-changing honeycomb pattern of flickering color, accompanied by electronic sounds. It's trippy.

Readers may or may not be disappointed to discover that trips into the inner space of "Bindu Shards" are now booked until the end of the exhibition. More successful as a work of art is the other large piece in the show, "Dhatu" (2010), which you can get into (though there is a line). This is a large white chamber with a rectangular opening at one end.

From outside this entrance, it looks -- as Turrell's works often do -- like a flat, abstract, monochrome painting. Actually, it's just light and empty space. Once inside you're confronted at the further end of the pod by another opening -- apparently into infinity. When the color inside changes, so does the apparent color of the room from which you have come. In reality, this is a standard gallery white cube, though as you look out it seems to shift between green and orange.

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"Bindu Shards" by James Turrell. The work consists of a plexiglass enclosure in which viewers, lying on a bed, get bombarded with colored light beams. The show at London's Gagosian Gallery ends Dec. 10. Photographer: Florian Holzherr/Gagosian Gallery via Bloomberg

Sky Obsession

“Dhatu” makes one of Turrell’s basic points: a lot of what we think we’re seeing is the result of what goes on inside our heads. He’s a remarkable artist, whose work blends several traditions, among them the line of transcendental, sky-obsessed painters from [Turner](#) to [Rothko](#) and the idea of a planetarium or celestial observatory. It would be interesting to see what Turrell would do with the Turbine Hall at [Tate Modern](#).

The Gagosian show is a sign of the ambitious scope of commercial-gallery shows these days

([Martin Gayford](#) is chief art critic for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. His most recent book is “Man With a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a

Portrait by [Lucian Freud](#).” The [opinions](#) expressed are his own.)

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