

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Light show: Dhatu 2010, by James Turrell

### James Turrell trips the light fantastic

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James Turrell is one of the art world's originals. A Californian who now lives on a ranch in the Arizona desert, for his latest London exhibition he has brought a collection of installations involving the electromagnetic radiation we call light. The main attraction will almost certainly be his Perceptual Cell Series, a construction resembling a Second World War landmine, in which lone participants are bombarded with light particles and sound waves.

When I arrive at the Gagosian Gallery to meet the legendary "light artist", his team are still constructing rooms within rooms, light-works, and programmes for the sensory perception machine. It feels more like a science institution than a gallery. Turrell is

sitting facing a pastel-lit “window” radiating an alluring glow of pinkish, diffused light. He calls it The Tall Glass Window exuding “knowing light”.

He's a tall man of 67, with a bushy white beard and gentle eyes and wearing a suit, but I had expected to see him in the lumberjack shirt and cowboy hat he prefers to be photographed in, maybe with a banjo on his knee. As our conversation shifts from the light effects created in meditation to mystical reactions to his work, I realise that he would be more appropriately pictured in a psychedelic setting, on the cover of a Pink Floyd album, say.

Turrell came to wider attention in London when he created a walk-in light sculpture for the Millennium Dome's chill-out zone and he has installed several “Skyspace” viewing structures in the UK, including in Kielder Forest, Northumberland, and at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, which have apertures cut into the roof.

The installations in the new show, Turrell's first appearance in London since Louise Blouin commissioned him to create a piece for her Foundation in 2006, are also interactive creations that challenge the sense of perception.

Raised in California, Turrell was drawn to light from childhood and on graduating (in art, perceptual psychology and maths), he co-founded the pioneering light and space movement.

“I never painted,” he says, “light was always my medium.” Recent developments have been architectural projects to house his light experiments around the world, but his hub is the Roden Crater, a dead volcano crater in the Arizona desert where he lives, which he has been transforming over the past 30 years, carving tunnels and creating chambers, ultimately to create a monumental “naked eye observatory”.

It's not easy to explain Turrell's work, but he stresses that there's no need to understand the science of light or perception; the point is to be open to the potentially transformative

experiences. There's nothing to touch or smell; the light is as nebulous as sea-mist or smoke.

“We all use light to illuminate things,” he says, “but I like the thing-ness' of light itself. So, here you're actually looking at light rather than looking at something that light illuminated.”

This lifelong obsession with light and space, he tells me as we walk around the galleries, was inspired by his father's career as an aeronautical engineer, and his mother's Quaker lifestyle. The aeronautical theme makes sense of someone working with infinite space, but less obvious is the Quaker link until he explains: “My grandmother used to tell me that at Quaker meetings, you go inside — behind the eye — to greet the light'.”

Our first stop is a large, white room housing the Ganzfeld series, where carpeted steps lead you to a soft, diffuse pastel light source. It's like walking towards a sacred altar. “Art has always been in the service of religion,” Turrell says. “I've already made two Quaker meeting houses with Skyspaces for viewing light.” Walking through the arch, we enter a rosy mist — “Once you get in here, you can't see the space and it looks like everything disappears.”

Now for the unnerving Bindu Shards experience (a continuation of the Perceptual Cell series begun in the 1960s) in the largest room of the Gagosian. The visitor lies down inside the white fibre-glass globe standing on stilts, to be bombarded with light.

“I had an MRI scan recently; this is much less claustrophobic,” he confides. As I enter the contraption, he tries to explain how light will insert something across my brain synapses, “then interrupt them so that it starts to reveal patterning that is part of your perception”.

He tells me exactly where to lie so that my head and eyes are in the middle of the sphere. “This is the secret of the bindi spot,” he says, “the spot you see when you close

your eyes and meditate. The colour is only in your mind, there is no thing' in there, you're only dealing with light and space, and that triggers perception.” And panic.

Inside, I smile nervously under a soothing pale blue “sky” close to my eyes. I do yoga breath. What seems to happen is that the blue imperceptively changes tones and suddenly a magical bouquet of floral patterns approaches my eyes, becomes part of them. Distant electronic sounds and strobe flickers scare me but then I bask in the moving, shaking colours and shimmering blue that becomes yellow and comes closer — even though I know there's nothing actually there.

This is weightless imagery, the lightness of being light. When it shifts a gear, I shout “Enough thanks!” and glide back into the “real” world.

It's like an acid trip, I say. “No,” Turrell contradicts, “Mescaline is the one that does the light stuff. You are a Bindu experiencer.” So that's why I feel so euphoric and strangely clean-headed.

“That is what I call the new kind of landscape we are entering,” he patiently explains, “which has no kind of horizon, the landscape we have in space flight. And this seeing space — not even seeing it — it is only in your mind, but whatever it is that has a thing-ness' exists merely as something which triggers perception.”

So does he often go into the chamber himself? He laughs, “Yes, I have to programme it. So I go in there a lot at home, for hours at a time.”

His synapses must be permanently dancing and that perhaps explains his meditative calm and frequent laughter. If you want what he's having, you know where to visit.