

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Hippy craziness carved of light

By Jackie Wullschlager

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Frieze is, among other things, a commodities showcase – demonstrating not only who's who but who belongs to whom in contemporary art. The newest liaison trumpeted this year is an unlikely one: James Turrell, sculptor of that most immaterial substance of all, light, and a devout Quaker, has just joined the stable of Larry Gagosian, empire-building dealer who sells the world's most expensive art works.

Gagosian relishes Turrell's scope and global branding. Turrell, whose art is hardly collector-friendly, wants funds for his lifetime's obsession: the Roden Crater, an extinct volcano in Arizona that he has been converting since the 1970s into an observatory, with openings "to bring the sky right down" to human reach. Photographs and models of this project launch Gagosian's show, leading into galleries that have been dramatically reconfigured to house three emblematic installations.

For those new to Turrell, "Dhatu" (2010), from his "Ganzfeld" series, offers a classic first encounter. A huge luminous pink screen occupying the entire wall of an otherwise bare room resembles from a distance a monumental abstract painting. But a stair leads you literally into the work. As if a solid wall dissolves, you enter a sloping, light-flooded interior: a glowing void, imageless and formless. As you step further in, volume and dimensions recede, colours and intensity of light change and you are in a landscape without a horizon.



'Dhatu' generates neon sequences

creating illusions of depths in works that are nevertheless intangible.

"Dhatu" in Sanskrit means "that which enters into the formation of the body"; "Ganzfeld" in German is "total field": both titles root his works in his earlier career in perceptual psychology. A series of "Tall Glass" pieces – "Knowing Light", "Sustained Light" – cut into the gallery walls, similarly use light as a medium of perception: computerised settings behind glass panels generate neon sequences running through the chromatic spectrum, green shifting to blue to pink to white,

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Turrell has been assigning form and structure to light since the 1960s, and there is a touching, hippy craziness about his desire to achieve what he calls “a heightened reality, a supra-reality ... with effects almost like drugs” in his installations. It didn’t work for me – at best, I felt as if in a fog or cloud, aware of emptiness yet also of the physicality of the environment. But I am a sceptic, and also an art historian – and these works so palpably emerge from the twin idealisms of colour field painting (“Dhatu” is a sort of walk-in Mark Rothko) and American land art. Turrell shares with both a yearning for the 19th-century sublime of vast desert spaces and infinite skies: “Roden Crater” is in this sense American art’s most nostalgic project.

Yet the 21st century has caught up with Turrell. For all his formal sculptural concerns, this Utopian manipulator of light delivers what we know today as an art of spectacle. Early installation and video art – Turrell, Nauman, Viola – was crucially informed by a democratic spirit that threw emphasis away from the artist and on to the experience of the viewer. But participation art inevitably evolved into noughties installation-as-spectacle, tinged sometimes with intellectual grit, as perfected in Olafur Eliasson’s “Weather Project” or Antony Gormley’s “Blind Light”.

There would be no Eliasson without Turrell but Turrell too is now coloured by Eliasson: the philosopher tamed by context into an entertainer. Not yet operating when I visited before the show opened was “Bindu Shards”, his latest “perceptual cell” inviting viewers, singly, to enter an enclosed sphere simulating for 20 minutes the “patterning that is perceived uniquely during the transition from light to dark”. But its high-tech trappings – a stretcher-style test bed that catapults viewers into a futuristic white dome of perception – were in place in a darkened room. It evoked sci-fi laboratory, state-of-the-art hospital, altar of sacrifice and trade fair gimmick, which feels biographically right: Turrell is the son of a pilot and a doctor, both Quakers, and also a 21st-century artist, advertising his wares. Booking slots for “Bindu Shards” look set to go fast – Frieze week’s most chic collectable experience.

James Turrell, Gagosian Gallery, London WC1, to December 10, www.gagosian.com



'Bindu Shards' is a 'perceptual shell' for a single viewer

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