

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Warning: art that will blow your mind

James Turrell's Bindu Shards at the Gagosian Gallery in King's Cross is an optical voyage that will turn your head inside out

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Dhatu by James Turrell; (inset) the Bindu Shards perceptual cell. Photograph: Florian Holzherr

I am writing this in a state of immense wellbeing. If I was asked to take a happiness survey right now, the results would make Britons look like the most blissful nation on earth. Outside, the London sunshine is cool and the trees finally look wintry, but in here, in my head, it is California. And I did not have to drop acid in the Mojave desert to break on through to this other side.

I have just experienced the artist James Turrell's work Bindu Shards. In the Gagosian Gallery near King's Cross stands a white-painted metal sphere that looks like a deep-

sea submersible. Which, in a sense, it is: both take you on a mind-boggling journey. The technical term for Turrell's device is a perceptual cell. It is staffed by white-coated attendants who may or may not be medically trained, but who get you to fill out a waiver form declaring you are not epileptic and have not taken drugs that day ("Yesterday is fine, but today this is your drug") and ask you to choose the soft or hard version of the 15-minute optical voyage.

Opting for the hard version, I am placed on a sliding medical bed, counselled some more and locked in the sphere. And it begins. A relaxed ambient expanse of blue is shattered by high-speed flashing that rapidly becomes an ever-changing pattern of flowers, crystals, galaxies, quasars and nebulae.

Then I see a cityscape of vertiginous skyscrapers, with no earth below. All these forms and volumes that pulse and metamorphosise are defined by colours that change convulsively – the most intensely saturated greens and reds you can imagine, colours that seem solid, then burst into microscopic patterns of oranges, blacks, gold and misty white; all these colours bubble and whirl at breakneck speed, as if you were in a particle accelerator.

But the most important part of the experience is that you do not know what is inside and outside your head. I saw a space, or rather an ever-changing succession of spaces, but these were independent of any actual material reality – they existed only in my head. What the perceptual cell does is bombard you with flashing lights to trigger the mind's eye by exploiting a perceptual phenomenon called the Purkinje effect. The whole of space seems compressed into your skull.

But I can see that sceptical readers will be harrumphing at this point.

One critic has already claimed he had a mental orgasm in the chamber. It would be nice to scoff but I feel that downplays the power of this mind-expanding work of art. Sessions are fully booked, which means we critics are just fuelling the already large numbers of disappointed visitors. The other works in the exhibition, free for all, are almost equally

revelatory. Turrell is the mad scientist of postminimalism, and he's on a roll. But I don't know what to say: Bindu Shards is a pleurably profound work of art and it is a pity to miss it. I suggest you get hold of some powerful drugs.

James Turrell is at the Gagosian, 6-24 Britannia Street, London WC1 until 10 Dec. Tel 0207-841 9960