

The Art of James Turrell

JAMES TURRELL:

Well, I'm known as a light artist. But rather than be someone who depicted light, or painted light in some way, I wanted to have the work be light. And that idea was mainly that I like the sort of materiality of light—in particular, it is this substance that is this grand elixir that we consume as vitamin D, when light is taken through the skin. I really felt to be using light as a material to affect the medium of perception. So, it's really perception I feel to be the major part of this work.

NAT TROTMAN:

James Turrell is one of the foremost artists associated with what's known as the Light and Space movement, which began in Southern California in the mid-1960s. Whereas many other artists created sculptures or objects that housed light or encompassed light, Turrell is interested in the materiality of light as a medium and especially in the function of human perception.

JAMES TURRELL:

There was a time when we literally read paintings, and we had a way to do that. And that tradition is no longer there. And so, people don't, sort of, enter the world that the artists put forward. People are often taken aback by contemporary art. They feel it's kind of in their face in some way, and they are not so willing to submit to it and enter the realm created by the artist. So, for me that's a very important step, to make something that people want to submit to, but there's some reward for having done that. So, the big thing is that you are immersed in this. It's a little bit like stepping into the painting. But not everybody will sit ten minutes in a darkened room before they can begin to see.

CARMEN GIMÉNEZ:

Turrell asks you to really make an effort. You cannot just get there and you get it, no. It's important to look at the piece and to put your head back and to get immersed in that light. You have to give the time to really feel the light. You always have to give the time to a painting too, you know. Because James Turrell considers himself a painter not a sculptor. He's a painter of light. He's painter of space.

NAT TROTMAN:

His father was an aeronautical engineer, and from the age of eighteen he began flying small planes, working on the side as a restorer of airplanes as well as an aerial photographer. And his experiences with light in the sky and with the malleability of perception as it's experienced when you're flying a small plane at high altitudes were very influential on the kind of effects that he would later come to create in his light installations. Among these are the ability to have color and light materialize as a substance in space through clouds or through weather patterns, where you can really feel the physical quality of light in space without there being any object per se.

Turrell creates what he calls an "architecture of space," by which he means structures that are developed to essentially erase themselves, allowing you to focus on the space between the walls and between the structures and experience the materiality of the light and air that fills those spaces.

JAMES TURRELL:

For me, it's trying to orient toward what the perception really is, rather than the object of perception—to actually sort of remove that. Because I have an art that has no image, it has no object, and even very little place of focus or one place to look. So, without image, without object, without specific focus, what do you have left? Well, a lot of it is this idea of seeing yourself see, understanding how we perceive.