

## BLOUINARTINFO



### James Turrell on Art, Life, and His Australian Retrospective

- Nicholas Forrest

American artist James Turrell's retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia demonstrates why he is considered to be one of the most important and extraordinary artists working today. The impressive exhibition celebrates his singular artistic vision and reveals the depth and scope of his unique light-based practice which has continued to develop and evolve over his almost five-decade-long career. The NGA is the sole Australian venue for the exhibition which is on until June 8, 2015.

"James Turrell: a retrospective" is Turrell's first exhibition in Australia and combines works from his acclaimed Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) show with spectacular new, site-specific installations made just for Canberra. Highlights include a classic early projection piece, "Afrum (white) 1966"; "After green 1993" from the artist's Wedgework series; and a specially-designed Ganzfeld which creates a feeling of uncertainty about the depth and form of the space.

Turrell works with a range of mediums, but is best known for his work with light and space. "I make spaces that apprehend light for our perception, and in some ways gather it, or seem to hold it...my work is more about your seeing than it is about my seeing, although it is a product of my seeing," he says. He describes light as "not so much something that reveals, as it is itself a revelation," and describes himself as "not an earth artist" but an artist who is "totally involved in the sky."

Turrell's most ambitious work to date is Roden Crater, a 600 foot tall extinct volcanic cinder cone situated in the San Francisco Volcanic Field near Arizona's Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon. Turrell purchased the spectacular site in 1977, with funding provided by the Dia Art Foundation, and since 1979 he has been turning the site into a monumental work of art and naked eye observatory. When it is complete, the project will contain 20 spaces, some with more than one viewing space.

BLOUIN ARTINFO recently got in touch with Turrell who was kind enough to take time out of his busy schedule to answer some questions about his exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, his use of light as an artistic medium, and the origins of his practice.

**Your exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) is a modified version of your retrospective from LACMA, which you have said is one of your best exhibitions. Did you take any specific considerations into account for the exhibition in Australia and for the Australian audience?**

It is basically the same exhibition. There are other pieces from some of the same series because Australia owns six of the pieces in the exhibition plus the Skyspace outside. We showed pieces that belonged to the NGA and as well as works that were shown at LACMA in Los Angeles. The big consideration was to put in works that the NGA owned.

**Your Skyspace at the NGA, "Within without" 2010, is considered to be one of your most beautiful works. With each of your Skyspaces being site specific, what qualities or conditions influence the specific characteristics of each Skyspace?**

Each Skyspace is unique and it was nice to have the work in this exhibition. LA doesn't have a Skyspace up at the moment so in that way this exhibition is a bit more complete.

The first thing I look for is what sort of skies come. The skies in Canberra are a little more like the skies in Arizona. That is it is high – not quite as high as Flagstaff in Arizona where I am, but it is very dry compared to the maritime sky that you see in Tasmania where I am putting another Skyspace. There is less moisture in the air so you have greater clarity and you get the deeper blue of the sky. At the same time it will be a crisper light that is not quite as soft as you get with the maritime light when there is more water in the air. Each one is different and strangely enough the one in Canberra is more like the one in Flagstaff. We're 35 degrees north and Canberra is about the same South. So it is more familiar to me than many of the Skyspaces near ocean water.

**You say that your work is about perception which has quite a specific perception. But the breadth and depth of your practice would suggest that there are many aspects of perception. Is each of your works a different way of achieving the same outcome or does each address a different aspect of the way we perceive?**

My works address different aspects of how we perceive. Some pieces do it more than others but that is not the total goal of the work. I am an artist so if something looks good to me then that is what I go with, despite how it might meet other criteria.

**In your practice space is just as important as light. What is the relationship between space and light in your work?**

I like to have it feel as though you are looking at light inhabiting space. So with the Aperture work or even the work of the Ganzfeld you do see wall but you feel as though you are looking through something to see that wall – this thing being light inhabiting that space between, not just light on the wall. Generally we usually light objects so we are lighting things. And I like the thingness of light itself. So you feel as though it is there to touch or see through, to see into. I like that quality of light. It is not unknown to us. We see light infusing space and radiating itself off of things and individuals. Certainly we see it that way in a lucid dream. So it is not a light we don't know but we just

don't see it that way very often with our eyes open. Some times when you are walking through a forest and you see a shaft of light coming down you feel the presence of light actually physically there. There are times we do but it's not too often and we generally use light in a very different manner. So I am marking to how we see light with the eyes closed. We of course have full vision in a dream but we don't pay much attention to it in the awake state.

### **What characterizes your work as light and not science?**

It has nothing to do with science. This work in no ways inform science. It could inform a scientist as an individual but it has nothing to do with science at all, just like the atmosphere doesn't either, although scientists may look at it for answers to other questions. Life is light but you could also say that art is light too. If you look at Turner, Constable; if you look at Rembrandt, if you look at Vermeer – Vermeer was more intellectual light than say Rembrandt or Goya or Velázquez. And of course if you look at all of the impressionists; in the history of art you have this history of the depiction of light, looking at all these aspects of looking at light. It is this elixir that we literally take through the skin as vitamin D; this food we eat that is the sort of magical substance that art has a lot to with depicting. So the major difference is that I wasn't so much interested in depicting light as I was more using light itself. Of course that is a nice idea and you can see how I began with it with the early pieces from the 60s. How you form it is very difficult to think about because it is different from using hot wax, molding clay, or working with wood or stone. So light is a different type of substance to work with. You end up making these instruments that allow you to perform it, or play it, or have it work for you.

I am interested in where light goes and how it propagates into the space so you really feel it there. It's very emotional work, and in that way it is very unscientific light. But it's no different to sound. You have to make the instrument to produce it. When someone sits down and plays the piano you don't say "what a machine, what science," you'd say that it is a really beautiful, emotional experience. It's just that we're not used to seeing light done like this with the eyes open very much. So it is a very different take on light but you have to remember that the history of art is also the history of the depiction of light.

### **Do you think that most people who experience your work will see light differently once they have left the exhibition?**

I can only hope so. There is a strange disconnect between a lot of work and the public because generally we have this situation where many people want to see things that they like. And I can tell you that in no way that in no way is the artist doing this work to affirm your sensibility or aesthetic. I'm sort of mapping this territory that I have been discovering and whether you like it or not is not of that much interest. But whether you find it of some impact is important. And so it is kind of sending these messages back from new continents of sight and thought and getting a feeling of this realm of life and light. And I think it's valuable for everyone to know that just from looking at art that the artist is not there to satisfy your aesthetic.

We now have available to us more possibilities today for using light than we ever did. But remember that you still have to burn something to get the characteristic color and the spectrum that you get from light is characteristic of the material that you are burning and the temperature at which you burn it. So it is all something that we can burn. We can burn tungsten, we can burn halogen gases, we can burn neon gas, we can burn and excite the different diodes, and in that light it is a wonderful thing. It is something that were are not doing better than we ever did. But it is still requires a little more working with from the point of view of the artist. If you are a painter you can go down to the local art store and get literally hundreds of colors mixed or you – you don't have to be an alchemist as you once had to be in order to get your colors. So right now it is a little bit odd because we have had to work how to get this out of materials, how to get these qualities of light that we want. But it is advancing as we speak. And it just like what has happened with computers which has become cheaper and more available over the last 15 years. With computers you throw them away every couple of years because the advancements are so great. And that is beginning to happen now with the way we are treating light. We are coming to a new time. It is quite a surprise; people generally take blue paint and mix it with yellow paint to get green paint. But if you take blue light and you mix it with yellow light you only get white. So the rules are completely different but that is the territory to which we

are now moving. And so for the first time we are learning the spectrum – which is not the color wheel because the color wheel has just to do with mixing paint.

**So the future potential of light as an artistic medium is what motivates you to continue focusing on and exploring light?**

It is a lot. I just like it as a material with which to work the medium of perception. So it is a material that I choose to use. Some artists use paint, some use bronze and are able to get an amazing sensuousness out of bronze which is a pretty hard metal.

**When did your interest in light begin and how did it develop into a career who uses light as his primary medium?**

How it developed into a career is another thing. But the interest was always there. You see that small children will follow lights and be directed by them. And in that way I never lost that. I have always had that interest in something that was glowing or burning. You have kids that like to play with firecrackers, people become fireman or whatever and they follow those things when they are young, which I did myself. Making a career out of it was another thing because I had a vocation in aviation and I used that to support my art habit. Because it was a long time before I could sell blue sky and colored air. But it is possible to do if you stay at it and this work is witness to that. I restored antique airplanes for quite a few years and it wasn't until 1989 that I had as many artworks in museums as I had airplanes in museums, which is interesting. And that is when I felt my work was being noticed.

**Do you find that people from different countries from different regions of the world react differently to your work depending on the sort of light that they are used to seeing in everyday life?**

I think that is really true. Also what their expectations are. I had trouble with that in my country because people were used to paintings and sculpture, work that was framed or on a pedestal. In the years that I have been working this has been completely changed, which is great to see. But that still leaves any artist with the question of what to make. And as you have more alternatives you can look different ways but you still have to make something that engages people. So if anything it has become more difficult for artists to figure out what to do. Before it was much more prescribed. Watching how China and Russia have come to contemporary art and seeing how contemporary art has opened up these countries is amazing. We are in a different time now. And I think that this is wonderful. I have to say that Australia is really putting itself on the art map and has become quite an important venue that has been accomplished since the making of the NGA and before. People have really concentrated on putting Australia on the fore with the art world and I think that is really terrific.