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MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART

Interview with James Turrell

Amarna, 2015, James Turrell

Next month, an extension to our gallery, called Pharos, will open, housing four new works by James Turrell, as well as works by Jean Tinguely, Charles Ross, Richard Wilson and Randy Polumbo. Read more about Pharos here.

Elizabeth Pearce: Do the four pieces of yours in the Pharos wing correspond with particular kinds of perceptual phenomena that you want to explore? Or do you take a more holistic approach?

James Turrell: Both. I want them to cover some of the spectrum of my interests over the years. It’s not a retrospective but there is a bit of that, because we are sampling from the different kinds of work that I do. The pieces all work differently with light. The one that’s in the sphere, I’m very happy with.

EP: The Perceptual Cell. Is that an intense and jarring experience?

JT: I don’t find it jarring but some people do. You have the same experience in dreams. It relates to the presentation of the colours. In the Tibetan or Egyptian Book of the Dead, there is this place in the process of waking up in the dream state, as we would call it, after passing away on Earth. That’s what I would call the bindu shards, or let’s say the pieces of this illusionary world that we live in. So for some I guess it can be jarring. But the big thing is that whenever you begin meditation, your mind just keeps going on, even though you’re trying to settle down and focus. You’re wondering, ‘Where did I park the car?’ and, ‘Who’s going to pick up the kids?’ The Perceptual Cell completely erases all that. It can happen in about ten minutes, which is often as long as it takes you to settle down to meditate. So this is kind of a premeditated space. It has the quality of taking away the verbal thought that the mind likes to engage in continually.

EP: Does it still relate to your overarching intention to compel people to see themselves see, to be aware of their systems of perception, and to reflect on themselves as creating their experiences rather than just passively receiving them?

JT: Certainly. All of that. And in a way that does it whether or not you’re ready. It is an invasive space. You can’t even stop it by putting your fingers over your eyes—you have to put your palms over your eyes. But we sense light in so many ways, not just through the eyes, but also through the skin. It’s possible to teach you to distinguish five different colours on the back of your hand, on your forehead, and on the back of your neck. I can give you a colour, tell you what it is and keep doing that for about fifteen minutes. After that you’re able to tell me what the colour is that’s on the back of your neck.

EP: I understand that you’re not interested in giving people a science lesson about how the mind works and how the eyes work and how we perceive. But is there one thing that you really wish people understood about how we make sense of the world?

JT: First of all, to treasure light. We treasure physical things, collect them, pay a lot of money for them, even trade them, but I’m interested in this other kind of treasure.

EP: Is it true that light actually behaves differently according to whether you’re looking at it or not?

JT: That’s something for science to tell us. I’ve always felt that to be true. But that’s my belief. There’s a difference between believing and knowing. It would not be unexpected to me if we found out that it was true as well. Generally I’d rather be on the knowing side of these things. Does light pass through a diffraction grating that is different according to whether we are looking at it or not? It’s hard to make an experimental design to test that.

EP: I asked you before about the idea of ‘seeing yourself see’. Would you say that the desire to generate that kind of awareness is something that coheres your work in general?

JT: That’s something that I’d like to impart. It doesn’t necessarily happen, because not everybody has the same interest that I do. If you want big, rusty steel, I’m not your guy. But there are people who like that better than what I do. I can’t be all things to all people, but I hope I’ve given light this physicality, so it has as much a stance as any material.

EP: ‘Seeing yourself see’ taps into something that’s very important to us at Mona, which perhaps is not exactly the same way as you mean it, but it’s the great human project of self-knowledge, and the humility that brings. Of course, the irony is that you can only achieve greatness when you have an understanding of your limitations.

JT: Not only understanding our limitations but also how amazing we are, too. The big thing is that we tend to feel that we are just receiving this big world outside, and we’re little aware of how much we are creating it. When I was in Ireland and they told me how the Irish think about reality. They said, ‘Reality is just a state of mind that’s caused by the lack of alcohol.’

EP: Well, that’s another worldview. You said earlier that you’d rather be on the side of knowing rather than believing. So you’re not one of these people who thinks that all worldviews are equal? You do believe that there’s objective truth and objective reality, and that you can access them using particular tools?

JT: Well, as you say, not all worldviews are equal. There are people who are definitely flat-landers, who believe the world is flat. I don’t hold that view to be equal. But it’s a stage people have gone through, that we have gone through. I think it’s very interesting to know that we have been greater in the past than we thought. For instance, the antikythera mechanism is this sort of analogue computer that was brought up from the bottom of the sea off a Greek island called Antikythera. There was a Venetian—they think Venetian, perhaps Greek—ship that was brought up with amphorae on board, so they could date both the wine inside the amphorae and the wood. It was at least twenty-one hundred years ago. So before Christ. The mechanism gave the present positions of all the observable planets, the phases of the

moon, and also its orbit. They knew that they were elliptical. And they had the geared computer to give all of this information, on a device that gave longitude far before we had it here. All that knowledge disappeared until—we didn’t have longitude until the 1800s. This is sort of shocking, a big paradigm shift, and it set science kind of on its ear as far as what people thought we knew then. The knowledge that we once had that we lost. When consciousness moves it’s almost like a light. You shine it here. Then you move it. Maybe you can expand it, but if you expand that light it dims.

EP:I guess that flies in the face of the idea of human culture as a march of progress?

JT: As a straight line, yes.

EP: Away from the darkness of ignorance, into the light of knowledge.

JT: We may be moving into these dark ages again, with what’s happening with the application of religion to daily life. There are some places where we’re not headed in the right direction and this is literally a war. It’s a battle we’re waging all the time. We can have technology going on a curve that’s really headed up, and a social organisation headed downwards. Societies are really changing at that. We’re not doing as well with educating the youth. We’ll have the same lost technologies and lost knowledge begin to happen. It’s always on that edge.

EP: What role does art play in correcting or worsening that situation?

JT: It could be both. The nice thing about art is it’s sort of a gentle nudge to remind us about the reality that we construct and live in.

EP: I guess you could argue that one of the things that underpins all sorts of wrongdoing in the world—which may be increasing as you say, leading us back towards darkness, ignorance—is what Joseph Bronowski called ‘monstrous certainty’. The illusion that your own worldview is the only one, the right one. Once you have a sense of creating reality, rather than just passively receiving it, that can dislodge such a dangerous illusion. We are all prone to believing our own position—whether we are religious or not, whether we are aware of it or not—is somehow divinely sanctioned.

JT: Yes. But we are all part of the divine. I guess that’s a belief of mine. But remember that it’s a belief, as opposed to a knowing. I think we have really challenged ourselves recently with what we’re taking on in all the world because I don’t believe that what’s happening from the Middle East in terms of pleasing Allah is actually doing wonderful things. Remember, [extreme] Muslims are not apologising or trying to change this. We’re in cultural conflict and how we do this... I mean, we can lose our own humanity in trying to take this on.
EP: How do we take it on without losing our humanity?

JT: First of all we can’t lose the sense of humour. Secondly we have to do without compromising our own morality. That’s very important. Art, I think, is very much involved with that. It sort of holds a mirror up to ourselves. It also challenges us in many ways to expand our world of tolerance.

EP: We were talking about progress before in the terms of the Enlightenment—as a movement forward, whether or not that is an accurate description of what is occurring. The difference between science and art is that one aims to progress, and the other does not, is that correct? Art is cyclical by nature.

JT: It is. It’s a bit of a watch guard. It kind of barks every now and then when we begin to stray off course, and tries to—well, I don’t know. That’s hard to say because that would be giving art purpose and intent. But certainly, art holds reality up to us in terms of showing us how we’re doing. The first thing I want to let everyone in on is that satisfying your aesthetic criteria is the last thing on any artist’s mind. If anything, they would love to challenge it, tweak it and show it to be completely banal and uninteresting.

EP: If that’s the last thing on every artist’s mind, what’s the first?

JT: To create something that is an exciting challenge. They are out on the edge. If you’re trying to change the world, the only way to have any purchase on that is to have the fulcrum outside the mass. The further outside you are the more it takes to make any effect. So you’ve got to move that fulcrum in. It has to still be outside it, but not too far outside.

EP: You have to be ahead of your time, but not too far. In your daily working life as an artist, is your duty only to your own creativity? Or do you see yourself as having some kind of duty to your audience or society generally?

JT: That’s hard to say. I think that each artist takes that on differently. I remember when Jasper Johns bought my first piece. I had dinner with him. He asked me, ‘What can I do for you? How can I help you?’ and I said, ‘I guess you could give me your address list.’ He laughed and then he said, ‘I’m happy to give you my address list, but let me tell you this. Many of the people who like my work will think what you do is the death of what I do. You’re going to have to get your own audience, that’s your responsibility.’ I felt so embarrassed having asked him for it.

EP: The difference was that he’s a painter…

JT: I’m doing this thing that doesn’t want to be an object, a thing. People were really liking the thingness of a painting. You had a treasure. What I was doing, some people interpreted as the complete negation of that.

EP: I might have said, in my ignorance, that the divide might be between people who think art should basically terrorise you and rock your world and shake you to the core and make you question everything you know, versus people that think art should be kind of uplifting and cohering and confirming and make you want to contribute to society. I would put you on that affirming side, but maybe that’s not how you see yourself, I’m not sure.

JT: I think so. It’s hard to tell sometimes because people come to your work with very different things in themselves that you cannot change, and your work might just do nothing to them too.

EP: You indicated before that you quite neatly separate your beliefs from your knowledge. Can you always tell the difference? Or, at least, do you believe that you can?

JT: I’m not sure about that. But it is important to have that separation. That comes from experience. We do act on certain things, in comparison to others, where we’re not ready to act. These things can have to do with love, perhaps.

EP: On that spectrum where do you place… Is it invasive for me to ask about your faith, your Quakerism?

JT: No. It’s something I had as a youth, but that was just how I was brought up and inculcated. Then I served my time as a conscious objector. I [trained as a pilot] and came back [from flying humanitarian missions] to help others to get out of the [Vietnam] draft. I got arrested for that because I was a little too active in my help. After that I felt Quakers were very naive in their viewpoints, and I was away from it for about twenty-five years. Then I came back to it when a friend, who is an astronomer, encouraged me back, because as someone with a scientific mind, he had nothing for the bullshit of organised religion. On the other hand he somehow felt he looked into the face of God every night in looking at the universe. So there was something profoundly moving in how he came to his faith and I was convinced again to come back to it. But on the other hand I just want to say that these organisations of man that result in these religions make these different dogmas that I think will only work for a while for everyone.

EP: Is it about use? Is it about what’s useful to you? Is it about finding something that helps you be more peaceful or be a better person or be a part of a community?

JT: I don’t look at it that way so much as it is trying to work on the betterment of your soul or your self, and learning how to better greet the reality that’s created by others and yourself. In that regard I enjoy the Quakers because yes, they are unfathomably naive because they don’t want to go to war. How can it possibly work if you don’t make war? How can cultures work?

EP: So you think you were wrong to resist conscription?

JT: No, I don’t. But I think it was not worthwhile to pay someone else’s price for my belief.

EP: Okay. Please continue what you were saying. Quakers are naive?

JT: But I actually enjoy that. They refuse to get involved in war, are not even interested in talking about it. It’s totally naive but fine. But also they’re sort of a religion without dogma. You can go to meetings for years and have no idea what these people believe.

EP: I went to a Quaker school. I went to the same school that David’s daughters went to [The Friends’ School, Hobart].

JT: It’s the biggest Quaker school in the world. It was made for all the women prisoners who were sent down to Tasmania. The Cadburys were part of doing that. The Cadburys are a big Quaker family in England.

EP: You’d think I would know all about that, right? I wish I’d paid more attention when I was there. When we went to meetings I’d giggle in the silence like everyone else. I’ve been through my strident atheism phase, and I feel a bit more warmly towards religion—tentatively warm. Especially low-dogmatic religion... But then again, I think that might be a cop-out, because if you’re prepared to consider the benefits of religion you open the door to dogma, no matter what. I don’t believe and I very much doubt I ever would but I wonder if I’m missing something by thinking of it strictly in those terms. Maybe, maybe not. I’m prepared to at least ask myself the question. At Friends’ we had Quaker teachers and non-Quaker teachers, but the Quaker ones were different. They had this Quakerness to them. Obviously Quakerism can mean so many different things in different times and place. Is there an essence to it?
JT: Yes. You are a seeker and it’s your business alone. You are with others trying to find the same thing. That’s helpful at times. They’re not very ordered about it. That is, we don’t know exactly how to find what we’re looking for. That admission is enough to make me interested. But it’s your journey. It doesn’t matter how you take the journey. You can have a Rolls Royce or you can have a Volkswagen—the main thing is that you take the journey. It’s not just about the pride of the thing that takes you there. We want to have the nice house, we want to have the nice car, we want to have all that, and all that’s fine, as long as you use it to make the journey. I came back to it because it was comfortable for me but also know I was raised that way, and that inculcates certain ways of being. But many people come to these things as they get older, and closer to the realisation of the illusion that life is.

EP: The idea that the world is not one we receive, but one that we create—is that borne out of your Quakerism, or does it speak back to it in some way?

JT: For me it comes out of that. For others it could come out of Buddhism or elsewhere. I flew for JARS—Jungle Aircraft and Radio Service—and they brought supplies mostly in Central America to Catholics, sometimes the Mormons, and to Los Amigos (the Friends). There I witnessed the strong conviction of monks, especially of the Catholic religion. Their dedication to their flock was immense. I was in that region when I heard about the six Catholic nuns and the two priests that were killed by Opus Dei, a right wing Catholic organisation, because they were taking care of their people in a way that was threatening the power structures. Of course in America people don’t think much of Catholicism, because of all the priests that took on the little boys. So there are people who went away from something that, if done properly and done well and fully, was something I respected amazingly. I came to understand that these people really gave their lives to their flock and it was really amazing. So I look at it differently than I used to. I used to have a hierarchy of organised religions. That’s kind of crumbled, I have to say, because there are people in all of these religions that really do have a true calling and that I really think are giving their all. That’s something that has changed in me. As I said, the vehicle that takes you there, Cadillac, Volkswagen, whatever, does not matter.

EP: Can you tell me a bit about Plato’s Cave—why is that idea important to you?

JT: Plato was making an allusion to the—not inaccuracy, but the fallacies of perception. This light inside us is almost like the light in a cave, where you see reality upside down and backwards, projected on the wall. We tend to shy away

from seeing the brutal reality of self with any kind of penetrating vision. But we can take it if we look indirectly. It’s just like if you look at an eclipse—it’s best not to look directly, but through an opening and have it projected, because then you can actually see it without being blinded. This idea of the representation of reality upside down and backwards on the cave wall—which is actually how we see in vision—is amazing. When you study psychology they give you these inverting lenses, and see everything upside down, but your mind just takes that and flips it. The strange thing is that when you take them off the world is upside down and you have to go through the same thing again to reverse it. But here we have this limited vantage. I mean, obviously not all of reality comes into the cave. Not all reality comes through the eyes. We attempt to assemble it through our senses. They talk about the feeling of the elephant from each end. You can be at different ends of the elephant and you have a very different perspective of what the whole is. But we go ahead whether or not we know the whole or not. We assume it. These great assumptions that are made are startling. It’s just like in a marriage. There are so many assumptions that each person is making that we haven’t talked about with each other. Some of the greatest assumptions that ever happen, happen in these relationships, when two people each have a different dream, each have a different way of thinking. It is something to come to know the whole much better. And you do that over the course of a life.

EP: In the version that I read of the story of Plato’s Cave, the subjects didn’t like being taken outside the cave to see what reality actually was and they kind of went screaming back inside.

JT: Yes, that’s true. We’re used to a smaller, regulated dose.

EP:I guess the important thing is to know that you’re in the cave in the first place, even if you don’t want to leave it.

JT: Well this is the thing about David. David likes a bigger dose of reality than many people.

EP: That is so true and that’s why he is incredibly enlivening to be around but also can be painful. Being dragged out of the cave can be painful.

JT: We do all get dragged kicking and screaming to where we always wanted to be. We often shut the door to an opportunity and then go out the back door that was always there.
EP: It sounds to me that you probably have learned a few things about relationships and marriage over the course of your experiences. You have said that your Roden Crater project has taken an enormous personal toll on your life and relationships.

JT: Yes. A lot of it has to do with one’s selfish pursuits of one’s own interest. This can be difficult in a relationship, but if it’s well known then it works better. I don’t have a lot to say there or a lot of great advice to impart, other than just don’t do anything with a small spoon. Do it fully.

EP: Do you think that a necessary condition for making a significant contribution as an artist is to have the kind of focus and ability to shut out competing demands?

JT: I think it helps a lot in terms of you realising that goal. As to whether you are a person who someone can live with is another matter. Or even be friends with. David likes to stir the pot and he stirs up everything, everything that’s in there comes to the surface. It’s exciting. It’s exhausting. Even for the people who work here, they can be completely taken under by the cause, but then they need to escape and get away from it for a while. But on the other hand you see what it does to a culture. It’s completely changed here. I’ve seen that in the times that I’ve come down.

Pharos build, 2017, Mona

EP: David said—in his characteristically pseudo-grandiose, self-immolating way—that this new wing, Pharos, is an ambivalent statement about his own legacy. Do you think about your own legacy?

JT: I don’t think a lot about that. That gets decided by others.

EP: Really? You don’t think about it at all?

JT: I don’t think it’s my business. I mean, I am about creating legacy in as much as... You know, it’s like landing on a continent that hasn’t been that explored and wanting to explore it and send back this journal, this telemetry, this knowledge that describes this place. It’s a large place. I’m exploring it and sending things back and having this become part of everyone’s everyday world. That might make a difference I suppose, but it’s not as though I’m trying to create a particular legacy.

Pharos build, 2017, Mona

EP: Just to go right back to the ’60s when you first started projecting light onto the walls, when you were finishing art school. I gather that you were experimenting, but did you have a clear intention about what you were trying to achieve? And if so, has it stayed constant after all this time?

JT: It has. I was very interested in making a materialized light. I wanted to feel like it was there. My first show was criticized as being just light on the wall, which in fact it was. That idea to try to treasure light… Like we do with sound, with music. I wanted to do that with light. The main thing was to go explore this place I felt was unexplored. Art has been so much about light—whether you think of Turner or Velasquez or Vermeer or Constable. All the Impressionists. Art has been about light in many ways. I just wanted it to be light. That was a big intention for me.

EP: Your early ideas were prompted by looking at slides of famous paintings in art history class, and noticing how the projector affected the image?

JT: Yes. I lived in California, so we didn’t have a lot of the paintings from art history to look at in person. They were all projected on the screen. When they were projected in light they looked a lot more luminous than when I saw them in person. They were sometimes very dull with varnish. And also—I remember that the Mona Lisa and Who is Afraid of Yellow by Barnett Newman were projected at the same size—one is a huge painting, the other a rather small one. I remember seeing the actual paintings and being disappointed that they weren’t very luminous, and that they were tiny. But I did enjoy the fact these things were projected. It was a reality that was familiar to me and I could easily take advantage of.

EP: Has enjoying the work of other artists been a big part of developing your own work as well?

JT: I’m definitely an art fan. There was a florescence in the time that I came up as an artist. Things were at one time in the frame and on the pedestal and that’s completely changed in the time I’ve been doing art.

EP: You like art that you can kind of submit to, is that right?

JT: Not quite. I think that one should submit to art. We go to the dentist and we sit there and literally submit. You put your head back, open up wide. We do this with doctors, and when we get a massage. I think the big thing is to submit to art, enter that realm, and enter it not only with joy, but certainly unafraid, because it’s an area to be explored and someone has actually done this for you. As I said, don’t go there thinking you want to be satisfied with what you like. Hope that what you like gets challenged, maybe even destroyed. But submit to it, yes. We submit to all these other things in life that have to do with our health or wellbeing. This does too. Liking it or not liking it is beside the point. Do you like what astronomers are doing? I don’t know. We are finding out some shocking things about this solar system that we’re in. I mean, first of all there are a plethora of planets out there. Sedna takes 11,000 years in its orbit around the sun. It’s pointing perhaps to how perihelion is oriented to things that are pulling it out there, and maybe there’s this other planet that we can’t see because it’s so far from the sun that it doesn’t reflect. We’re entertaining these thoughts right now of a large planet, this Planet X, that may be the size of Earth, or even the size of Neptune, that we have never known about. We thought we knew all about this planetary system. We’re finding out that actually, Jupiter has an atmosphere, and it even has ice volcanoes. What’s changed has been like a gold rush for astronomy, cosmologists, and related fields. It reminds me of what was going on in the ’60s in art. It was such a change. Everybody was interested in what everyone else was doing. Hubble—that changed careers. There’s post-Hubble and pre-Hubble. It’s just like what happened with plate tectonics. People didn’t believe it and then there was even a Geology Department at Harvard where all the older guys that had tenure didn’t believe in plate tectonics. So Harvard had to hire a new Geology Department next to it that did. It turns out plate tectonics is how it works. But those shifts in paradigm don’t always come easily, and you see this with art. You have artists that are hot, and then they go out of fashion and you start to see them as a historical artefact. Culture that’s being worked on doesn’t always accept being worked on, and is not always happy with what it comes up with as its art, but the only place you’re going to get art is from artists. You’re not going to get art from scientists unless they throw over and become artists. So, as the society, you have to select for your art from that which your artists make.
EP: Why did you choose art, not science?

JT: In the psychology of perception there are all these different demonstrations, such as if you stare at this one spot, this other spot disappears, because it’s in the blind spot of the other eye. Often they will do things where you have something that is either a strobe or something that’s moving, like a 78 record, and it can create colour. Sometimes you’ll see red and green, and all these different colours that actually aren’t there. They have these demonstrations of these things but they didn’t do anything with them. It’s just like there’s the difference between the theory of mathematics, and doing something like getting to the moon, which is more of a technological use of science. Art uses anything that works. If it works, you use it. You don’t have to be doing anything particular with it in terms of a great paper or even a demonstration of something. Art is not experimenting. You don’t look at a Picasso and say, ‘That’s a nice experiment in paint.’ It still might be apt to say that I’m experimenting with light, but I’m also making a statement, and it stands as a statement. So what art is about is much more of interest to me than what science is about.

EP: Plato’s Cave reminds me of something that I read in this book by a guy called David Deutsch. He talked about how if you just stand and look at the stars, just you and the cosmos, nothing else, you will not see things how they really are. In order to really see the stars, you have to place between you and them a whole chain of theories, instruments—really, on a metaphorical level, the whole history of human cultural achievement—and that will augment your view. You will really see. I like this, but I also feel that there is something to be said for just standing and looking, as well. You can really see that way as well, in a different way. I guess the best thing for self-awareness is to be able to tell the difference.

JT: Yes. You can apply yourself diligently to knowing, but the first sight of everything is so important. That’s where art steps in. It gives you that shock—that this is something that you needed to see. That can lead you to start seeing in depth.