

JAMES TURRELL MUSEUM
THE HESS ART COLLECTION AT COLOMÉ

JAMES TURRELL: Heavy on Light



Let There Be Light; and There Was Light
Genesis. I, 3

The James Turrell Museum of the Hess Art Collection at Colomé is disquieting. There is nothing on the walls, no sculptures rise from the floor, no mobiles hang from the ceiling. Just light! Never has so much been made of apparently so little. Viewers come and go in what the artist calls 'the glazed-eye state'. Light is a tricky substance, if it is a substance at all.

Waves and particles of the ephemeral electromagnetic radiation permeate our lives. James Turrell (1943) gives us the artist's side of the equation: light plus technology equal enlightenment, or at least a deeper awareness of our human condition.

The building itself is a solid representation of contemporary museum architecture, set at the center of ever-expanding concentric circles conformed by the nucleus, the Turrell Museum itself, the vineyards that surround the 1,700 square meter landmark building in lush green, the beiges of the adjacent arid crust of earth, followed by the multicolored grays of the Andean foothills spreading West before the majestic peaks of the Cordillera itself.

Donald Hess, the enlightened entrepreneur who looked for a challenge and a story, not just an easy business model, when establishing his boutique hotel and winery in Argentina, has converted Colomé, Argentina's oldest wine producer and highest vineyard, into an ecological paradise. Hess, in a

signature expression of human ecology, has made a functioning community out of a dysfunctional group of several hundred struggling survivors, descendants of the original grape-growers from centuries before. The Hess formula, combining award-winning wines with museum-proven contemporary art, adds pleasure to his and his family's life and an extra dimension to his sales pitch: fine wines and great art at special venues all over the world: Argentina, Australia (coming next), South Africa and California.

At Colomé, nature is omnipresent; nothing interrupts its timeless display. Hess was so inspired by the setting that he invited James Turrell in 2001 to design and coordinate the project for a structure to house nine of the artist's foremost creations. The museum was inaugurated on April 22, 2009, after eighteen months of construction and installation. The museum is now becoming a "must" on the international art circuit.

Enlightenment is a special grace few people can handle: light itself is a powerful source of illumination, in every sense of the word. We tend to take light for granted. We either have it or we don't. It's either everywhere or nowhere. Nor do we stop to think much about illumination, natural or artificial. It's either bright like an airport or dim like a romantic restaurant. Light plays an important role in suggesting moods, in making us feel safe or edgy. It can inspire and it can threaten. A torturer can use too much light as an instrument to debilitate a prisoner's willpower. The military teaches its recruits to "see" in the dark. Night vision is a form of visually heightened awareness which can save lives, or facilitate eliminating them.

But for most of us, light is a matter of waiting for the sun or clicking a switch: automatic reactions to everyday needs. The dimmer gave us a certain degree of control over the intensity or volume of light in a specific space. One can determine a luminous mood to accompany a musical one. Polarized windows and sunglasses allow us to reduce the potentially damaging rays of sunlight. We can consciously exercise a degree of control over the light that envelops us.

Light has always been a relevant factor in art. Artists paint light in ways that highlight the portions of pictures they wish to emphasize. As illumination developed into a technology, artists and museum staff developed better and better ways to spotlight works of art. Many theories arose concerning the benefits and dangers of focusing more and more light on art works. Some artists even include sources of artificial light within their work. An unseemly cable might wind up

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the wall to an object, producing movement and/or light. Kinetic artists in the Sixties devised merry-go-rounds of kaleidoscopic nature, in which plastics and metals wiggled and reflected, shimmered and shone. Shadows could insinuate chiaroscuros, just as a rainbow produces chromatic fireworks.

But it never occurred to an artist to work with light as his principal raw material. Light is elusive, ephemeral, and impossible to package: how could it be presented in a gallery showroom, in a museum space, in a collector's home? No one ever gave the question much thought.

Then James Turrell came along, and light became paint and a brush, paper and pencil, his sole tool. He contrived ways to exhibit light, to give it content and meaning, to contextualize it, to contain it or let it flow freely through space. Displaying light requires greater spatial dimensions than an engraving or a classical sculpture. Light is expansive and can be focused or not: it may be limitless. It can be diffuse or pinpointed.

Turrell's origins as a Californian Quaker gave him a firm set of principles on which to build. As an adolescent, he lived in a ground-floor apartment on a busy Los Angeles thoroughfare. The street-front window to his room was covered with a piece of black-out cloth, which he usually kept closed in daylight and occasionally at night. He became intrigued how the rays of light would find tiny holes through which to enter his room and how they behaved once they were in there. He was lightstruck: fogged by accidental exposure as the dictionary says.

He began to experiment, making different sized holes in the curtain, finally reproducing the night sky of stars and planets with pinpoint-sized holes. This exercise awakened his obsession with the phenomena and characteristics of light. He worked the subject into his studies at Pomona College and his graduate art courses at the University of California at Irvine. By 1966, at 23, he had his own studio in the defunct Mendota Hotel on Ocean Park in Santa Monica. He sealed off two rooms from all exterior light, installed false walls, painted everything in sight white and started projecting the light that led him to his illuminating career.

Turrell plays with all of its potential and gently lets us descend into its depths. Fathoming light is similar to the process of a diver decompressing as he arises from the depths of the sea: you can't rush the process. Turrell sets us loose in a timeless dimension where our physical parameters lose their control of space. James Hall wrote in London's "The Independent" that

Turrell's work is "as much a theatre of cruelty as it is a theatre of contemplation". He referred ironically to the dangers of losing one's way after an overdose of light.

Turrell thrusts us into an enclosure that we intuit has walls or constraining limits, but we can not consciously see them. Our perception is of altered fields of color that confuse our preordained conceptions of visual boundaries. Besides being bathed in the beauty of pure color, a sensation that pervades our consciousness, we become aware of our inherent limitations and our susceptibility to take for granted what we believe we are "seeing". And beyond "seeing, "being". Turrell's light works confirm that we humans are not capable of feeling comfortable without self-proscribed limits. Finding ourselves before the possibility of limitlessness produces anxiety. We are before the dark side of beauty.

Turrell's most important legacy to viewers: don't always believe your eyes because they are just the windows of your mind. Open your mind to the dimensionless surroundings that await one with a dose of enlightenment or with exposure to the limitlessness of expanding light. Let the physical boundaries we know dissolve and stretch...

Each of Turrell's sleights-of-light offers a different facet of the unknown. Unfortunately you can't take it with you, you can't photograph it, nor can you hang it on your wall. Now you see it, now you don't. These cubes of colored air come and go inside the walls that retain them: only in your mind's eye, in the brief flash of a dream, in a Technicolor memory chip can a hint of their omnipresence occur. Is the sea the same color at night when there is no daylight? When the sun vanishes and all is dark, is the sky still blue? Color too comes and goes, and one color can alter the intensity of another, enhancing or diminishing its magnitude. Turrell has mastered the science behind these phenomena, and after years of experimentation has developed computer programs to wield light as he pleases.

"Sky Space" is the most ambitious of the works on display. The 'environmental' piece is an interactive work that commands the viewer's vision to focus on a wall of ever-changing colors for forty minutes. The experience recalls instants at an occultist's office, eye tests for drivers' licenses, moments of meditation, the afterglow from concentrating too long on the sun: as well as a peaceful passage through a never-never land of dancing colors. The proposal is simple enough, lie down on a blanket within the limits of a five-meter black marble square in the middle of a room rimmed

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with built-in cement seats and look skyward through a similar-sized square hole in the roof – just you and your eye and the sky; and that hole to the great beyond. The effect of this séance with the sky depends on the precise instant of the sunset, so viewing time changes every day.

The first impression is a pale blue sky. Pastel tones predominate as the sting of the sun's rays evaporates. Little by little, Turrell tricks us into thinking that the sky is changing color, tone, density as he varies the shade of color that surrounds the actual sky space beyond the ceiling, painting the solid surface with a uniform layer of gradually suffusing color.

The eye begins to enjoy these clever deceits and calls for more. The mind gradually stops questioning the process, abandoning any attempt to determine the whys and wherefores of cause and effect, the rational reasons for the visual responses. Acceptance of harmony, beauty, and peace of mind takes over, and we slip into an unquestioning state where this massage of color tones releases us from our preconceptions and our arsenal of self-evident nuggets of truth, which so often lead us astray.

But Turrell is not a New Age Guru of meditation and manipulation. He doesn't preach, he's not peddling magic formulas. He just wraps us up in his light in a way that satisfies his artistic curiosity. It's his pilgrimage, not ours. And nature provides the rainbow.

Half a dozen viewers lie in stillness, a shoe scuffs the stone surface, a stomach gurgles, a sigh resonates, but silence is almost pervasive as each one of us follows his own path through this jungle, this desert, this sea, this garden of color. As blue fades into black, we focus on a single emerging star that reminds us that we are one with the heavens, and that light travels at a different speed than we do. We remember that even stars are born and die, with limited lifetimes to spread their illumination for everyone everywhere to see: a dot on a backdrop of infinity, a span of time whose measure we cannot fathom.

The experience is intensified because it occurs in such an inaccessible place. Distance, discomfort and expense are determining factors. Argentina is off most people's radar. The northwestern province of Salta is off most Argentines' radar, and Colomé is off most *salteños'* radar. If you don't read certain international financial newsletters which tout Salta as a coming off-shore Shangri-La, there is no reason for anyone to know about this paradise.

At least four hours in a 4 x 4 separate the airport of the provincial capital from the James Turrell Museum.

A two-hour flight separates Salta from Buenos Aires, and then an overnight flight to anywhere else. When Turrell learned of the logistics involved in arriving to the site that Donald Hess proposed, he hesitated and then declared: "I suffered a lot making these pieces. It's probably a good thing that the viewers suffer too."

Getting to Colomé provides its own sound and light show. As the sun moves across the sky, the colorful rock formations that rim the road take on different hues, different shades of the encyclopedia of colors that the Earth offers us. Shadows dance, contract, expand, creating ominous corners, curious figures of dark on lighter surfaces. The clouds add yet another dimension, frolicking across the sky. All are preliminaries to the main event: Turrell's display of total immersion in the astonishing subtleties of light. As one critic wrote, "He makes it possible for us to see light as *light* rather than illumination on objects." We arrive to Colomé predisposed to experience the sublime.

Light works at the museum:

1. Alta Green (1968), Cross-Wall Projection Pieces Series



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The earliest Projection Pieces were done in 1966, formed by light projected across a corner from a slightly modified quartz halogen projector. The effect of the Projections is to produce a rectangle of light across a corner of two intersecting walls in such a way that from a distance the form of a green pyramid shape touches the floor, yet in some manner it is still attached to the corner of the space. The effect is that of objectifying and turning physically present light into a tangible material. As the process evolved, Turrell began to use xenon projectors which allowed the size of the projections to be larger and more focused, giving the image a sense of solidity. The intensity of the sensation produced in Alta Green is provided by these new, more powerful projectors.

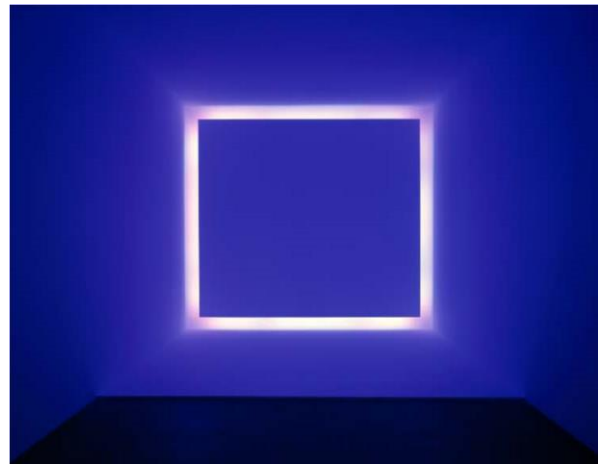
2. Lunette II (2005), Structural Cuts Series



In his Structural Cuts pieces, the work of art emerges from sculpting the light in the sky by using direct processes of perception. The first version of Lunette was installed at Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo's villa in Varese, Italy in 1974. Similar to Lunette II, the semi-circular cut replaces a lunette window at the end of a barrel-vaulted hallway. Interior ambient illumination is provided by hidden neon-argon tube lighting placed on top of a ledge located at the springing of the barrel-

vault. Lunette II is an echo of its predecessor: a long corridor enveloped in a series of different volumes of colored light, integrating tones of red, green, violet, blue and finally black. The feeling is eerie: one is surrounded by uncontained, dimensionless color. The viewer loses any sense of place, finding himself adrift in sequential waves of light.

3. Penumbra (1992), Windows Series



This work is placed in a small room with a superimposed set of smaller walls. The light comes from the space between the walls and illuminates the interior room, placing the viewer in a light bubble that defies definition. Once again the viewer must adjust the parameters of visual receptivity and let the light set the rules.

4. City of Arhirit (1976), Ganzfeld Series



The space is bathed in red, green, violet, blue and finally black light. One has no sensation of the walls at either side. The feeling is of a ceiling-less area with a black path on the floor and a red square of light at a height of eight feet. The term 'Ganzfeld' comes from

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perceptual psychology and refers to a totally homogenous visual field. Turrell adapted a perceptual approach to art making, after first coming into contact with visual fields at Pomona College.

City of Arhirit was first exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, as a series of four linked chambers that made use of homogenous visual fields. The room-sized spaces opened off the side of a narrow corridor, and, from positions along this passageway, each room seemed to be filled with a haze of light. The ambient illumination appeared to fill the space with an almost physical pressure. The externally produced light reflected the color that resonated in the area surrounding each external aperture. "Each room was lit by outside light that entered through a small window behind the viewer. The light was controlled in passing through this window so as to create a homogenous field of pale color in each of the rooms. The interior light varies, depending on the time of day, the day of the year, and the atmospheric conditions," Turrell declares. The viewer's response to the light in each room is influenced by the afterglow of the color of the light in the previous room, as well as the amount of time spent assimilating the light in each space.

5. Spread (2003), Ganzfeld Series



This 400 square-meter walk-in environment of blue light was made especially for the Museum at Colomé. Viewers remove their shoes to climb in search of the source of the light. Nine steps form a wide staircase: at the tenth step, one enters a cube with a tenuous blue light. Viewers feel they are floating as they approach the blue along a slightly inclined surface. The seemingly limitless blueness draws one like a magnet. An alarm sounds if anyone gets too close to the source. When another version of the piece was shown at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1980, a man went to close and fell off the edge, breaking his hip. On descending the steps, the doorway out, which might be confused with a movie screen, is rimmed

with yellow neon light. Looking back in, the effect is that one is looking at a large blue painting.

6. Stufe (White) (1967), Cross-Wall Projection Pieces Series



This is Turrell's first light work. A light in the form of a cube crosses intersecting walls at an angle, leaving a pattern on part of the walls. The viewer is unaware of the origin of the beam of light. The phenomenon is disconcerting, even mystical. See No. 1. for further description of the process.

7. Slant Range (1989), Arcus Series



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In the Arcus Series, Turrell transforms the space into a setting in which light becomes three-dimensional and space is an illusion. The effects of the tungsten, ultraviolet and daylight mix reveal light's ability to be a changing presence in our lives. This effect is achieved by hidden ultraviolet fluorescent fixtures recessed around the inside edge of the aperture. A narrow split at one side of the enclosed space allows sunlight from windows located behind the space to enter the chamber. Slant Range was first made for Turrell's exhibition at the Musée d'Art Contemporain at Nimes, France in 1989.

8. Wedgework II (1969), Wedgework Series



The motivation behind the pieces in this series is to create partitions of light that traverse the spaces of interior rooms, generating wedge-shaped subdivisions along their diagonals. Reminiscent of light streaming through the cracks in old barns or the beams of light falling through the canopy of a forest, Turrell's version is more closely controlled and more mysterious.

9. Unseen Blue (2002), Skyspaces Series The world's largest Skyspace. Refer to description in text above.



Prints:

1. First Light (1989-90), a series of twenty prints made by Swiss engraver Peter Kneubühler.

This series of black on white aquatint prints using the intaglio process was made after the light pieces they refer back to had been developed. First Light reproduces the bright state of light as it comes into contact with the flat surface of the wall. The haunting volume that the works project is enhanced by the light emitted by ERCO lamps, which have a double filter and a special lens for diffusing light. The effect makes the color black appear to have volume as it emerges from the white background. Conceptual in essence, these works are based on the ground-breaking Projection Pieces. (see : 1. and 6.)



2. Still Light (1990-91), a series of eight prints made by Swiss engraver Peter Kneubühler. The aquatint process provides the purest, most lightcatching form of etching, where line is replaced by the subtle over-all tonal effects that the light permits. A series of geometric forms are set on gray backgrounds in a more visually contextualized, less dramatic presentation than established in First Light. In contrast to the sharp definition of the First Light series, the Still Light prints evoke the misty atmospheric quality of the projection.

Turrell's most ambitious effort is a land art project located at Roden Crater near Flagstaff, Arizona, within an extinct volcano. The artist has been transforming this piece of mountain into a sky laboratory and naked-eye celestial observatory for the past 34 years. After nine years at his multiple cubes of artificial light at the Mendota Hotel, he went straight to his volcano, a heady transition, even for an artist willing to follow the light of his guiding star.

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Craig Adcock describes the thrust of the mindboggling plan. "Turrell's Roden Crater Project is an interactive sculptural environment: its subject matter is light and space. The way this subject matter is engaged both on the exterior and in the interior of the ancient cinder cone engenders contemplation. At its most profound levels, the completed project will allow us to stand in the present and look into both the past and the future. Light, in one of its aspects, is time. The crater will focus our attention on infinite reaches that are both geologic and astronomical

The Turrell experience obviously goes beyond just the art works in themselves. The viewer is taken on a journey to an unknown world with no recognizable coordinates. Silence and a sense of isolation are constant companions. Dimensions are distorted and distances cannot be judged by usual parameters. Turrell says, "In a lucid dream, you have a sharper sense of color and lucidity than with your eyes open. I'm interested in the point where imaginative seeing and outside seeing meet, where it becomes difficult to differentiate between seeing from the inside and seeing from the outside."

Anyone, literate in art or not, can see what Turrell is getting at and where he wants to take his quest. A viewer can learn a lot about himself, if he is willing to do so, just by spending an hour or two at the Museum. You will come away with a few answers and a whole new set of questions to ponder, maybe even with the light to enlighten, or at least lighten, your way.

Edward Shaw Tunquén January 2010

For images and additional information, please visit:

www.bodegacolome.com

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View of the James Turrell Museum at the Bodega Colomé, First Light series, 1989-90, The Hess Art Collection. Photo: © Florian Holzherr, 2009.

James Turrell at the Roden Crater. Photo: Florian Holzherr, 2005 © James Turrell