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Artist James Turrell lights up the Spencer Museum in Lawrence

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Dressed all in black, with a mane of white hair and a glorious bush of a beard, James Turrell looks like a hip Santa Claus. And for the 800 people in the overflow crowd at the Spencer Museum in Lawrence last month, the presence of the 70-year-old artist was indeed a gift.

In marked contrast to the bombast that dominates the international art scene, Turrell is a rarity: a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award winner whose artwork is revolutionary, inimitable and still evolving. He was thoughtful, modest and humorous as he addressed myriad questions from the audience.

Besides the free public talk, Turrell was in Lawrence for the re-installation of his classic 1968 artwork “Gard Blue,” lent by University of Kansas alum Mark Booth and his wife, Lauren. Also on exhibit are holograms Turrell recently created, and this is their first public venue.

“Gard Blue” is one of the earliest of Turrell’s innovative artworks, created when he began abandoning objects altogether in favor of ambient light projections that define space. In the Spencer’s piece, a field of glowing blue light in a small room emanates from what Turrell calls a “cross corner structure,” immersing the viewer in an arena that is both real and illusionary.

“I think this piece is significant,” Spencer Museum director Saralyn Reece Hardy said in a recent interview, “because it’s one of Turrell’s early works, and it has an elegance and simplicity. It represents what’s extraordinary about Turrell’s art, which is that the viewer plays a central role in everything he makes.”

If “Gard Blue” transfixes the viewer, the holograms affixed to the walls surrounding the central installation visually insist that one move over, around and under them in a never-ending dance as they change shapes. “I think they look like aquariums of pickled light,” the artist says.

Turrell has been in the public eye since the 1960s, when the Los Angeles-based artist controversially began fashioning his installations of light. In his talk, Turrell recalled how at first his work was excoriated by New York critics such as Clement Greenberg, who accused him of being merely “theatrical.”

“I saw nothing wrong with being theatrical,” Turrell bemusedly recalled. “After all, I’m from Los Angeles, and L.A. is what New York wants to be on its day off. Europeans immediately grasped that the art being made in L.A. then, with artists using commercial materials, was the first real American art, while the work coming from the East Coast was still of European origin.”

Turrell writes in his newly released retrospective catalog: “I am involved in the architecture of space. I use form almost like the stretcher bar of a canvas. I am interested in the form of the space and the form of territory, of how we consciously inhabit space.

“I’ve always wanted to make a light that looks like the light you see in your dream,” he adds, “I like to have this kind of light that reminds us of this other place we know.”

Turrell now lives in the Arizona desert and travels around the world fabricating “skyspace” commissions, architectural works of all sizes, materials and shapes that allow light to penetrate their interiors. He has completed 82 skyspaces in 26 countries and is working on more. For the last few decades his work has been on and off the radar of the mainstream art world. He had not exhibited in New York since 1980, nor had his work been visible in many public spaces. But there’s little question he is the artist of the moment now.

This year he simultaneously orchestrated three major one-person exhibitions — at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and the Guggenheim Museum in New York — where people waited in line for hours to see both old and new light installations. The timing of Turrell’s show at the Spencer was a happy coincidence, according to director Hardy.

In 2014 and 2015, Turrell's retrospective that originated at the Los Angeles museum will travel to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

Turrell is most famously known for a monumental, multifaceted skyspace that few have seen: Roden Crater, an extinct volcano in the Arizona Desert that Turrell bought in the 1970s and has been transforming into a naked-eye observatory ever since.

An avid pilot, Turrell spent seven months in 1974 flying above the Western states looking for the ultimate environment for the ultimate skyspace. When he decided upon the Roden Crater, he had to buy the land surrounding it along with the volcano. Suffice to say, it was seen by many as the ultimate boondoggle as well.

"It cost me two marriages and at least one relationship," he noted ruefully in a 2001 PBS interview on art and spirituality.

Recent photographs of the interior spaces that Turrell has created at Roden Crater are spectacular, however, and even in its semi-finished state it is astonishing, much like a contemporary variant of such ancient and mysterious sites as Mesa Grande, Stonehenge, and Machu Picchu. And like visitors back then, ultimately viewers will be able to travel to the crater and witness celestial events. Because there is no contrast with the depth of sky in Turrell's works, there is no feeling of separation from the incoming light. "You end up feeling one with the universe," the artist notes.

Turrell grew up a Quaker, and he talks about going to the local Quaker meeting house as a child with his grandmother. She encouraged him "to go inside to greet the light," one of the meditative practices of Quakers. Turrell has actually built a Quaker meeting house with a skyspace opening.

"I have always been very interested in religious traditions," Turrell said in an interview after his talk. "I've built a Catholic chapel and Tibetan Buddhist temples with skyspaces."

When he was young he studied the works of the "sleeping prophet" Edgar Cayce. As a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, he flew nuns and lamas from Tibet during the diaspora and studied their centuries-old manuscripts.

"There is a paucity of spiritual richness in our culture, and we need to raise the bar on that," Turrell insists. "Art and light can be used for healing. Reality is just a consensus, and we can change reality."

Blue light special

"James Turrell: Gard Blue" continues at the Spencer Museum of Art, 1301 Mississippi St., Lawrence, through May 18. Hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesday, Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; noon-4 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday. For more information, call [785-864-4710](tel:785-864-4710) or go to SpencerArt.KU.edu.