



James Turrell: On 'Gard Blue'

By [LAURA SPENCER \(/PEOPLE/LAURA-SPENCER\)](#) • SEP 16, 2013

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James Turrell at Rodin Crater, outside Flagstaff, Arizona. Copyright James Turrell.

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5:16

An edited excerpt of a conversation between artist James Turrell and collector Mark Booth. Recorded September 15, 2013 at the Spencer Museum of Art.

It's been a summer of light for the arts world – and for artist James Turrell.

Three major exhibitions of Turrell's work opened within the same month at the Guggenheim Museum (<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view/james-turrell>) in New York, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (<http://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/james-turrell-retrospective/>) (LACMA), and the Museum of Fine Arts (<http://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/james-turrell-retrospective/>) in Houston. According to the New Yorker, the shows provide a "belated burst of celebrity" for the artist.

In mid-September, an early work, *Gard Blue*, also went on display at the Spencer Museum of Art (<http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/>) at the University of Kansas.

Light as medium

James Turrell is considered one of the leading artists in a movement called Light and Space, that originated in the late 1960s in Los Angeles. And over the last five decades, he's continued to push the boundaries of light and color.

"You know, there's truth in light," Turrell told NPR's Edward Lifson (<http://www.npr.org/2013/09/07/219367766/james-turrell-experiments-with-the-thingness-of-light-itself>), while they walked through his retrospective at LACMA. "I'm interested in the thingness of light itself, so that light is, is the revelation."

To date, he's created 82 (out of an anticipated 100) "Skyspace" art installations in nearly 30 countries, including 21 in the United States. It's a room, a contemplative space, with a hole in the ceiling opening to the sky. When activated, LED lights alter the way viewers perceive the color of the sky.

Another ongoing project, called Roden Crater (<http://roden crater.com/>), is an extinct volcano near Flagstaff, Arizona. Turrell started working on it in 1979, creating tunnels and rooms for a "naked eye observatory."

On 'Gard Blue'

From 1966 to 1974, James Turrell's studio at the Mendota Hotel in Santa Monica became a hub for gallery owners, artists and curators, as he explored projected and natural light. It was during this time that Turrell created a projection work, *Gard Blue*, now on view at the Spencer Museum.

In a public conversation at the museum on September 15, collector Mark Booth asked the artist, "When would you say that the art world understood what you were up to? When do you think you started to move from an artist who was creating these new ideas, to being more established?"

"Several weeks ago, I think," Turrell replied, to laughter from the audience. "I'm one of those artists that keeps being rediscovered."

Public Conversation Highlights: James Turrell

On creating *Gard Blue*

I started out looking at the wall as the picture plane... it was like Plato's Cave (http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Allegory_of_the_cave.html). Book VII of *The Republic*, he talks about the cave and its relationship to perception...

I first started with this idea of the cave...it's like perceiving reality upside down and backwards. The cave wall I took as the analogy of the rooms that we occupy, that we're housed in, as something that is embodied in us. So I would project on the walls of the spaces we're in.

The thing's that most interesting is that you could put just a shape on the wall of light and it wouldn't lie on the same surface as the wall. It's either slightly in front of it, or almost seems to make a hole through it. This shows that it's a very plastic and malleable medium. That excited me.

On the color of light

It looks like the light gels up and it's almost like a fog to touch. These little, simple qualities were something that was remarkable to me...This began to look like how we see light in a dream, in a lucid dream, where the colors are very intense, where they radiate off things and people. And where light defines the space, as opposed to concrete physical structures creating the space.

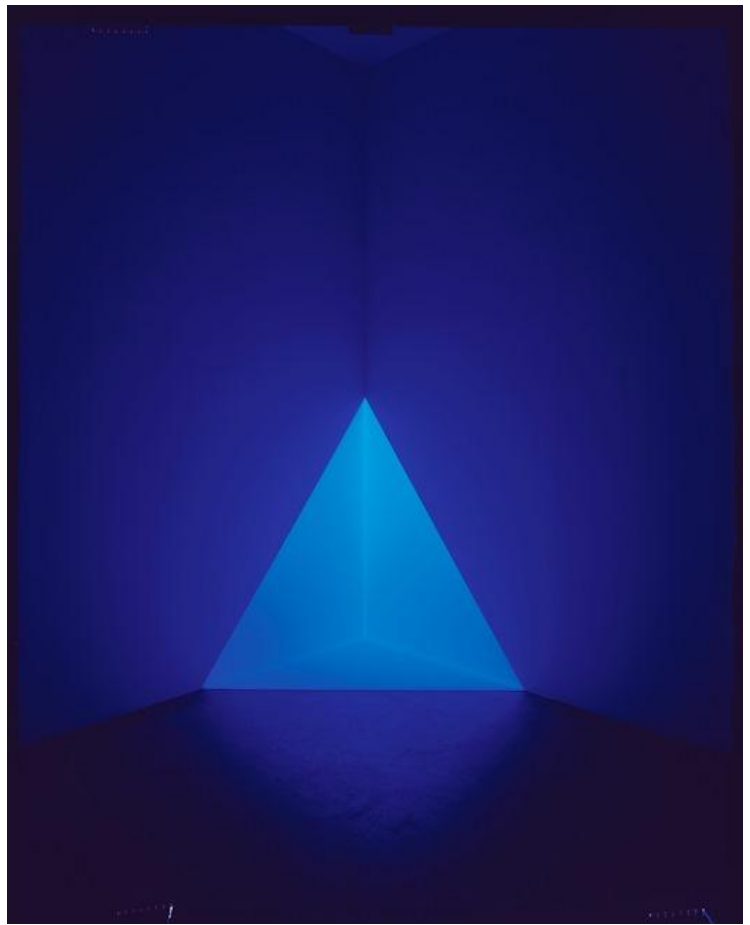
On art and perception

I've always felt that I did an art that takes place between the actual limits of our perception, like some of the dark spaces right on the edge of actual seeing, and then the prejudice perception that we have - that is how we have either learned as a society to perceive or have come to perceive without knowing. Artists are always putting their audiences up against what they have decided.

James Turrell, *Gard Blue* (<http://www.spencerart.ku.edu/exhibitions/gard-blue.shtml>), September 15, 2013 - May 18, 2014, Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, 1301 Mississippi Street, Lawrence, Kan. 785-864-4710.

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Gard Blue, 1968. Copyright James Turrell.

CREDIT FLORIAN HOLZHERR / COLLECTION OF MARK AND LAUREN BOOTH/COURTESY SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART

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