

Do you see the light? Take this question any way you like. It's both rhetorical and literal. And in the case of the work of northern Arizona artist James Turrell, it's both. His work illuminates, so to speak, on many planes.

Visitors strolling through the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York last fall encountered one of Turrell's magnificent glowing compositions. As their eyes adjusted to the darkened room, the visitors discovered a translucent wall of vibrant red light, stretching diagonally from a far corner to the edge of a second plane, perpendicular to the side walls and defined only by a frame of intense light.

Filling a wedge-shaped slice of the gallery, the radiant red glow seemed both ethereal and almost palpable. The installation, titled *Crosscut*, was one piece from Turrell's Wedgework series. And like much of his work, it challenges your perception, blurs boundaries and transforms a finite space into an elastic chamber of wonder.

"All art depends on the return of light to the human eye," says the trim, bearded 56-year-old artist. "In my art, perception is the object."

No one has gone further in exploring the aesthetic potential of light. In Turrell's compositions, light takes many forms: translucent and opaque, distinct and indeterminate, gaseous and solid.

He began practicing his brand of sensory alchemy more than 30 years ago, as a pioneer in what became known internationally as the Light and Space Movement. Inspired in part by Southern California's brilliant sunlight and sprawling landscape, he and other area artists began making light and space more than the context of their art; it's the content and focus.

Photo from Skyscape Foundation

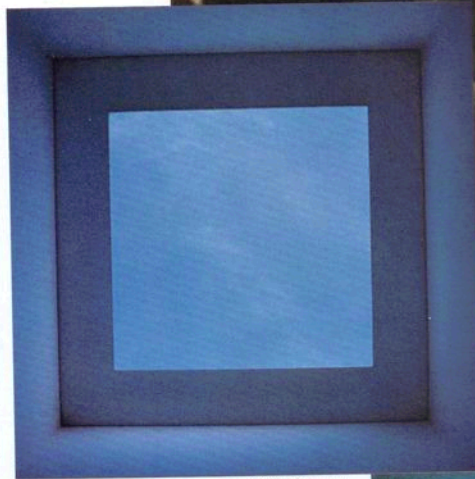
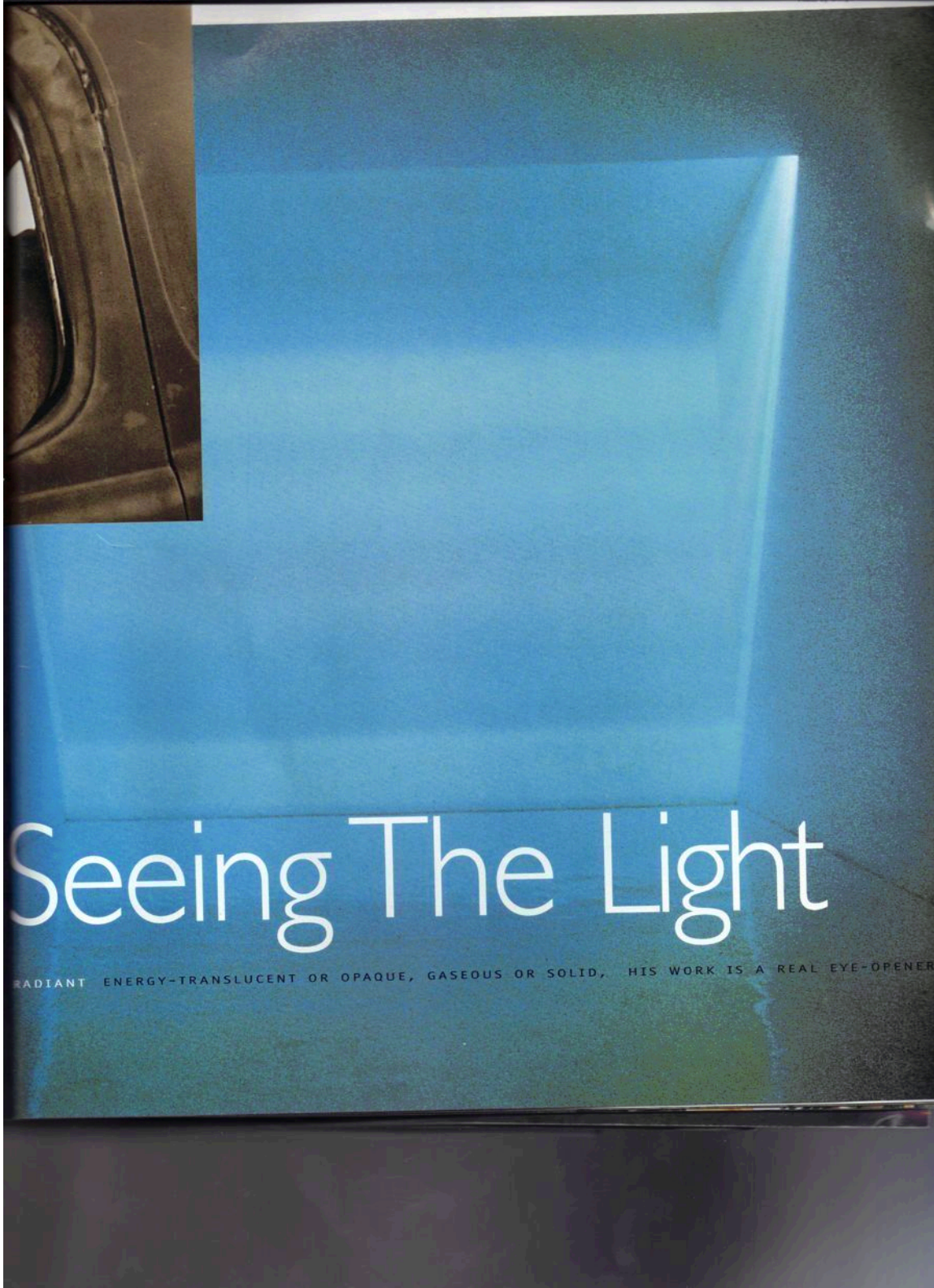


Photo by James Turrell

above:
The installation
the magazine
Turrell's
start another
new series

ABOVE:
Built at the Via
Panza in Varese,
Italy, *Skyscape* is a
structural cut in
the ceiling. Yes,
those are clouds.

GALLERY PATRONS WORLDWIDE ARE DISCOVERING ARTIST **James Turrell's** COMPOSITIONS



Seeing The Light

RADIANT ENERGY-TRANSLUCENT OR OPAQUE, GASEOUS OR SOLID, HIS WORK IS A REAL EYE-OPENER

Creative Minds



BELOW:
The luminous Roden Crater emerges as Turrell's most magnificent work. Still under construction, the "naked eye observatory" will become an entire natural gallery devoted to Turrell's experiments.

RIGHT:
In *Airmass Sequence no. 13*, artificial light, located behind the benches at the bottom of the room, converses with the natural light of the setting sun. The result is a complete transformation of light intensity.



by James Turrell



Turrell is a visionary experimenter, continually grounding theory in experience. He is as comfortable rebuilding vintage airplanes as discussing perceptual psychology — his college major — with scientists who study sensory deprivation and other effects of space flight.

He is considered a descendant of the early American luminist painters, known for their glowing views of a still-wild continent, and of transcendentalists like Emerson.

His earliest pieces were projections of brilliant light in sharp-edged geometrical forms. Projected in dark rooms against corners, the light produced vivid three-dimensional volumes. Against walls, the flat images seemed to hover in space. He also began making Shallow

Space Constructions, in which radiant backlighting shines through cuts in an interior partition wall, accentuating the wall's solidity while dematerializing the surfaces around it. In the Wedgework series, he angled the partition wall to create what viewers perceive as glowing, spectral wedges of light.

Many of these early works first appeared in the calculated darkness of his studio, then located in

the former Mendota Hotel in Santa Monica.

"There's a Starbucks there now," he notes wryly.

During the late '60s, he began making the studio itself a light-and-space environment, a camera obscura with multiple "lenses," masking windows and other apertures controlled by the artist. The interior walls registered ever-changing light from exterior sources such as the sun, moon, streetlights and passing cars. Although the art always concluded with viewers sitting in total darkness, he says, "No one ever saw it as total darkness. Even in a pitch-black space, the eye perceives light and color. Remember that when we sleep, we dream vivid images of light and color with our eyes closed."

The mystery and subtlety of vision has been a life-long preoccupation for Turrell. "Man is a twilight creature," he says. "When light is reduced the eye opens and

light becomes almost tactile — it's as if we're feeling with our eyes."

Spend time with a Turrell piece, and the phrase "the mind's eye" takes on new meaning. His varied Space Division Constructions center on thin-edged apertures into adjacent spaces. Painted with titanium white paint, the spaces glow with light from various sources — fluorescent or neon lights, ambient light, even color TVs — and take on a gauzy depth and density that paint could never duplicate.

The works are alive with energy. Many viewers are amazed to discover that scrim doesn't cover the light sources. The aperture shifts to the ceiling in Turrell's Skyspaces, which are most dramatic around sunset, when the sky appears as a velvety plane of indigo fading to black.

Heady stuff, but not without wit. This is, after all, the man who in 1992 created an installation of pink chairs under old, helmet-style hairdryers that enveloped the heads of museum-goers in intense hues of light.

The artist's most ambitious project is a skyscape of cosmic proportions that he's been working on intermittently since 1974. Using money from a Guggenheim fellowship, he spent seven months flying his single engine plane over the western U.S. searching for the ideal site. He found it on the edge of Arizona's Painted Desert at Roden Crater, a dormant volcano. After moving thousands of cubic yards of earth to reshape the eroded rim, Turrell began building an array of structures that will allow visitors to experience heavenly events. In one chamber, angled tunnels will project images of the sun and the moon onto a central stone wall. Another design, based on the layout of a Hopi kiva, incorporates a lens in the ceiling that will project cloud patterns and moonlight onto the floor. The first phase is expected to be completed by 2000.

"This is difficult work to take to the world," he says. Museums and galleries balk at the painstaking construction and volume of space required by big interior installations; large-scale landscape works are even more problematic.

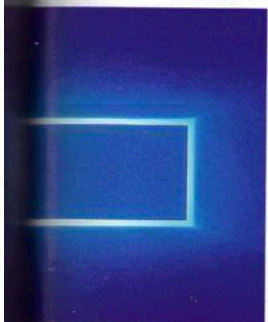
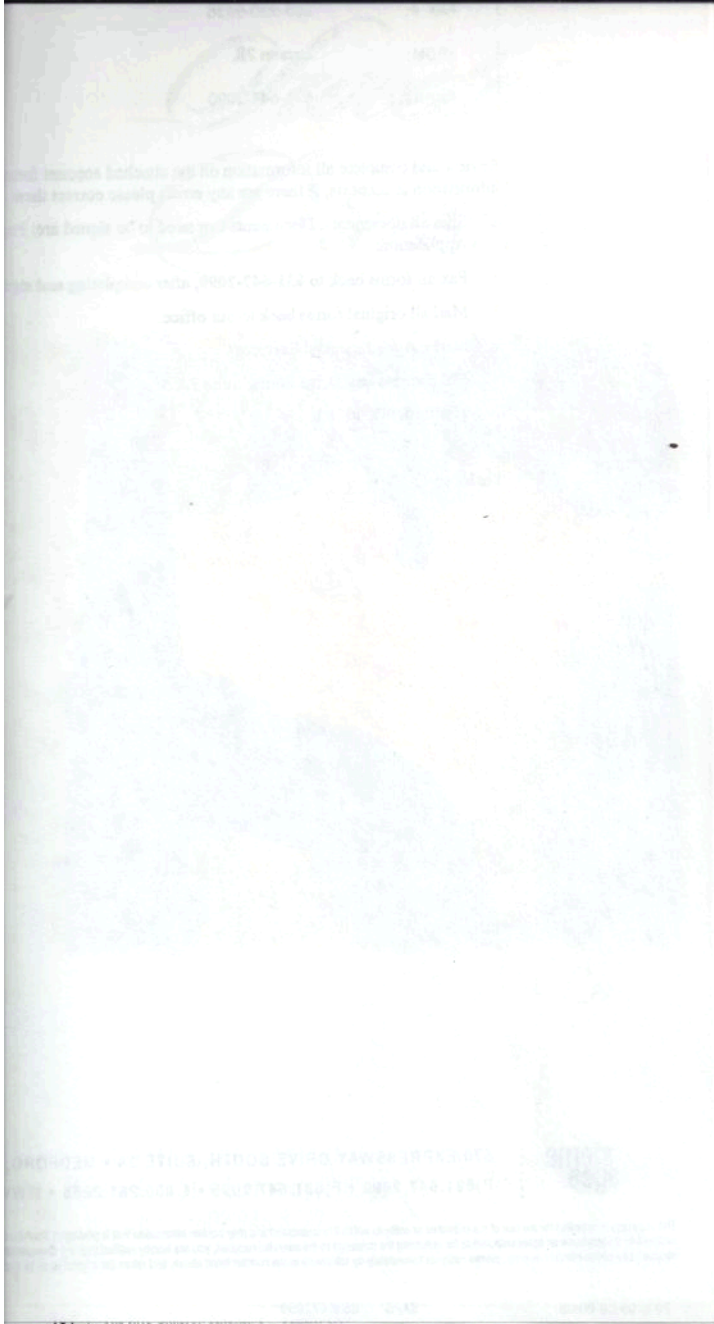


Photo by Filip Dier

LEFT:
Rayzor, otherwise known as a "shallow space construction," employs a 8.5' x 11' cantilevered panel which is "suspended" in front of a hole in the wall. In all of Turrell's work, artificial light sources are hidden from the naked eye.



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More manageable are Turrell's Perceptual Cells, which typically envelop the viewer in intense fields of light within a small, sound-proof enclosure. "They're not claustrophobic," he explains, "because the light helps the mind build a bigger space, just as we can experience a huge concert hall while wearing headphones, or lose ourselves in the larger world of a novel."

Turrell's art has been exhibited widely in this country and abroad, most recently at museums in Poland, Austria, England and Japan. Permanent installations of his work are on view at New York's P.S. 1 and museums in Nashville, Denver, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Jerusalem and Hannover (Germany), among others. The artist is busier than ever, recently planning a project in a San Francisco train station, and another on the Cornish coast. The Skyspace in England was designed for viewing a solar eclipse that will occur this August. He is constantly in motion, visiting international art venues or bouncing along the rough roads between Roden Crater and his home in Flagstaff, Arizona, in his 1949 Dodge pickup.

If traditional art is a window into the artist's reality, Turrell's is a window into the viewer's reality. It reminds us that the way we've learned to perceive — from reading perspective in a painting in order to see it in three dimensions, for example, to viewing a flickering TV as a seamless stream of images — is not the whole picture. "Most of us have forgotten how we learned to see," the artist says. "We construct the world with our observations." By heightening perception and triggering a deeper form of seeing, James Turrell encourages us to expand our world, and see it anew. ■