

James Turrell



James Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943. His undergraduate studies at Pomona College focused on psychology and mathematics, but he later received a master's degree in art from Claremont Graduate School. Turrell explores light and space to "create an atmosphere that can be consciously plumbed with seeing." Whether harnessing the light at sunset or transforming the glow of a television set into a fluctuating portal, Turrell's art challenges audiences to see themselves seeing. For the past thirty years, Turrell has been transforming an extinct volcano near the Grand Canyon into a celestial observatory. Working with cosmological phenomena that have interested people since the dawn of civilization, Turrell's *Roden Crater* links the actions of people with the movements of planets and distant galaxies. Turrell's fascination with light is ultimately connected to a very personal, inward search for humankind's place in the universe and is influenced by his Quaker background. The recipient of several prestigious awards including Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships, Turrell lives and works in Arizona.

Before Viewing

Light is the focus of James Turrell's work. Ask students to describe their favorite kind of light and to tell what is it that they like about it. Where does it occur? Is it indoors or outdoors? At what time of the day and at what time of the year does it occur?

After Viewing

To Think About and Discuss

- Light is often used as a **metaphor**. What are some of the ideas it is meant to represent? What have you read that featured light as an important element?
- Describe how the light in the room in which you are sitting affects you.
- What role does light play — if any — in places of worship?
- Turrell has spent more than thirty years working on *Roden Crater*. What do you think he is trying to achieve? How has this project affected his life? Do you think it is worth the time and money he put into it?

To Do

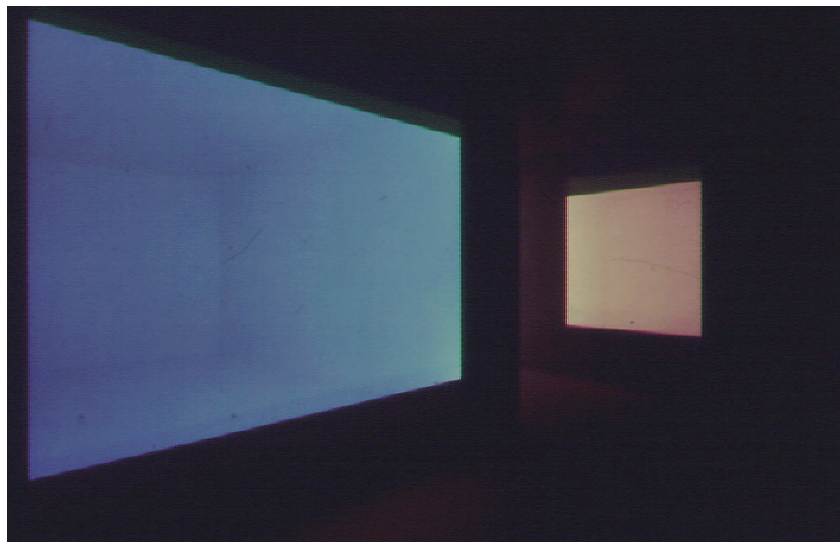
- Watch the sun come up one morning (or go down in the evening). Write a poem or create a piece of art that expresses the experience and describes the changes in the light.
- Design an architectural plan for your classroom, bedroom or some other room that would provide you with an optimal viewing space for observing changes in outside light

(e.g., covering some windows or creating pinholes to isolate the light).

- Compare the effects of different kinds of light (e.g., candlelight, fluorescent light, skylights, oil lamps, incandescent light) on a particular space. Write about it.
- Visit several houses of worship in your community and analyze what features give them a **spiritual** feeling. Try to select buildings that represent different architectural periods as well as those that serve different religions.
- Talk with an architect about how he or she would approach designing a spiritual space. Similarly interview lighting experts from theaters, museums, engineering or architectural firms.
- Compare and contrast Turrell's approach and philosophies about light, architecture, the sun and celestial events with the role of these ideas in such indigenous cultures as the Mayans and Aztecs and such locations as Chaco Canyon and Chichén Itzá. Research the monuments of other cultures that mark astronomical events.
- Make a preliminary drawing for a work of art in which you capture or utilize light as a basic element of your composition. Consider whether you are using light as a metaphor and, if so, what it represents.

Images on the Web

- To learn more about the *Roden Crater*, see www.RodenCrater.org
- *Gasworks* and *Afrum-proto* at www.soum.co.jp/mito/art/95/turrell/release-e.html



James Turrell, *Kono*, 1984. Argon light and helium light. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.