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Dr. Craig Adcock, University of Iowa

James Turrell: Skyscapes



James Turrell with Dr. Craig Adcock at Roden

Informed by his training in perceptual psychology and a childhood fascination with light, the American artist James Turrell began experimenting with light as a medium in southern California in the mid-1960s, creating artworks that engage viewers with the limits and wonder of human perception.

Turrell's work is all about the most fundamental materials: space, time and light, and is usually focused on permanent installations. His most famous works are the Skyspaces. A Skyspace is a room with a hole in the ceiling (oculus) that allows one to see the sky above, with nothing in between. At specific times during the day – at sunrise and sunset – a hidden strip of LED lights color the room, moving through the full color spectrum. During the day, the oculus simply frames the sky; during the light show, filtered through a cloud of colored light, the view of the sky is altered.



*Skyspace at Crystal Bridges
Museum of American Art,
Bentonville, AR*



Turrell has created more than 80 Skyspaces. The simple act of witnessing the sky from within a Turrell Skyspace, notably at dawn and dusk, reveals how we internally create the colors we see and thus, our perceived reality.

In 1977 Turrell began a monumental project at Roden Crater, an extinct volcano in northern Arizona. Continuing the practice begun in his Ocean Park studio, Turrell has sculpted the dimensions of the crater bowl and cut a series of chambers, tunnels and apertures within the volcano that heighten our sense of the heavens and earth. While Roden Crater is not yet open to the public, Turrell has installed works in 22 countries and in 17 US states that are open to the public or can be viewed by appointment.

Turrell's medium is pure light. He says, "My work has no object, no image and no focus. With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking. What is important to me is to create an experience of wordless thought."

Professor Adcock received B.F.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Colorado and a Ph.D. from Cornell University. He specializes in 20th-century American and European art, but has taught courses in many other areas of art history. Adcock was a Whitney Halstead Visiting Scholar at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1991 and has received grants and fellowships to support his research, including fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies; the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; and the J. Paul Getty Foundation. His books include James Turrell: The Art of Light and Space (1991); and Marcel Duchamp's Notes from the Large Glass: An N-Dimensional Analysis (1983).