

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

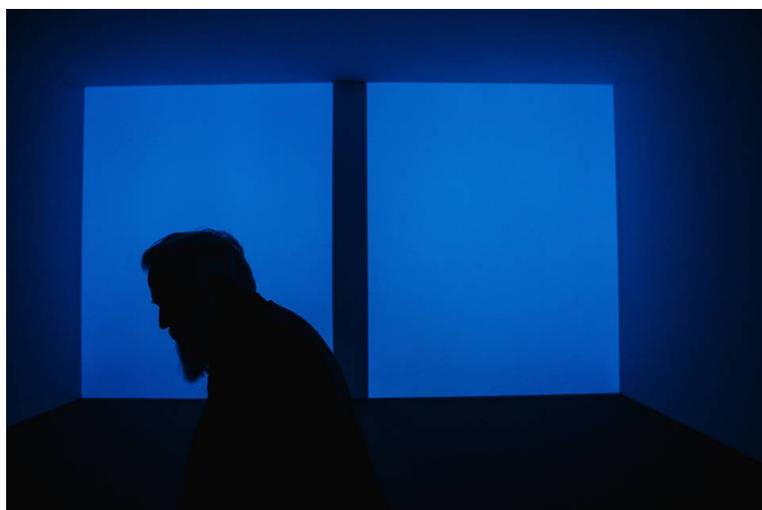
This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-master-of-light-revisits-his-early-experiments-1462834661>

U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

James Turrell Revisits His Early Experiments With Light

The artist's early works are on view in '67 68 69,' a two-part exhibition at Pace Galleries



'Orca, Blue' (1969), one of James Turrell's early works on view at Pace Gallery. *PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

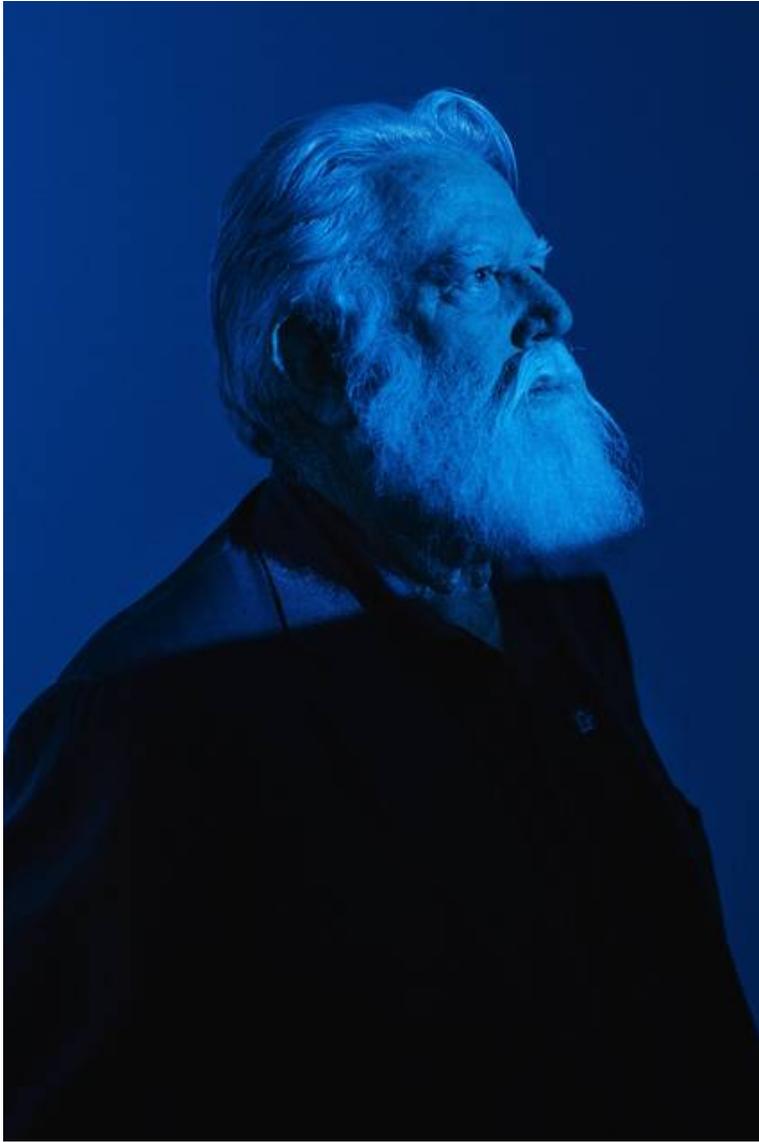
By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

May 9, 2016 6:57 p.m. ET

For the artist James Turrell, light is a material as pliable as paint or clay—and a vital element fit for veneration.

He started working with it in the 1960s, first by playing with levels of illumination in darkened rooms and soon, with the aid of lenses and electricity, by transforming beams of light into sculptures on the wall.

The mesmerizing results of his earliest stages are now on view in “67 68 69,” a two-part exhibition at Pace Gallery devoted to projection works that mark the start of Mr. Turrell’s luminous five-decade career.



Mr. Turrell, 73 years old, at the Pace Gallery in Chelsea. *PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In the gallery's Chelsea space, four immersive light installations are accentuated by schematic drawings from early periods of experimentation. Uptown, at Pace's East 57th Street location, another pair of projections are accompanied by reflective hologram works on glass made in the past two years.

All together, the work shows an artist devising ways to seemingly—and convincingly—turn empty spaces into tangible forms.

Mr. Turrell, now 73 years old, traces his early appreciation of light in part to being raised religiously as a Quaker.

“Going inside is what Quakers are known to do,” the artist said. “You go inside in meditation. You go inside to greet the light.”

From there, an interest in the peculiarities of human perception drove a line of work in search of answers to questions about what we see and how we understand it.

“Light is different than we normally see it,” Mr. Turrell said of ways the eye and mind can be tricked or misled. “There are glimpses, when you see light and it has its own presence.” But more often, we tend to take light for granted or look through it rather than at it, the artist said.

Early on, he studied the science of optics and perceptual psychology—and started making art with an eye toward seeing in new ways.

At the Mendota Hotel, a building in Los Angeles that he repurposed into a spacious home and studio, he blacked out windows and devised different apertures to let in trace amounts of light from outside.

“I made openings so that streetlights and car lights were directed into the studio,” Mr. Turrell said. “I had 10 different places you would go to sit and look.”



'Afrum, Pale Pink' (1967) PHOTO: MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Around the same time, he started working with projectors, trying to make blocks of light appear to be three-dimensional. The earliest effort, “Afrum” from 1967, is represented in Pace’s Chelsea

gallery in the form of a pale pink cube that seems to hover and project out from the corner of two walls.

“It looks like a square at a certain distance, but it changes shape as you go toward

it,” Mr. Turrell said last week while installing the show.

In relation to the position of the eye observing it, the artwork morphed into different iterations of angles and lines.

“The science of light and magical understandings of light are very key to his process,” said Pace Gallery President Marc Glimcher.

Another piece, “Juke, Green” from 1968, appeared to be a triangular wedge leaning against the wall when in fact it was just another flat plane of light projected to Mr. Turrell’s exacting specifications.

So convincing is the effect of such pieces that, after an incident at a Whitney Museum show in 1980, Mr. Turrell was sued by a woman who leaned against what she thought was a wall, only to fall through it to the ground.

“The suit said the effect of the art caused the injury to happen,” Mr. Turrell said, “and that I should have known because I had studied perceptual psychology.”

The early projections mark the start of a body of work in which Mr. Turrell has surveyed light in a wide variety of ways.

His series of more than 80 “Skyspaces” in different locations, including MoMA PS1 in Queens, center on openings in a ceiling and subtle light projections from below to make the natural sky appear just a few feet above an observer’s head.

For his 2013 piece “Aten Reign,” Mr. Turrell used slowly changing colored light to reconceive the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum as a sort of amorphous cloud rather than an earthbound work of architecture.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Have something to say about an article in Greater New York? Email us, along with your contact information, at gnyltrs@wsj.com. Letters will be edited for brevity and clarity. Please include your city and state.

And with “Roden Crater,” a continuing project since 1979, Mr. Turrell has worked to transform an extinct volcano in Arizona into a cosmological observatory oriented toward light from the stars.

At the core of it all is a decadeslong investigation into light as a material with more to offer than the human eye and mind can sometimes sense, Mr. Turrell said.

From the start, his medium has remained the same: light of a kind that can be projected into the corner of a room or, the artist noted, also back at us from the distant outer reaches of the Milky Way.

“That’s part of the territory our life can extend into,” Mr. Turrell said. “It was a while before I could sell blue sky and colored air, but it happened.”