

James Turrell - Perceptual Art

Artists have continually used new techniques and new media to represent a viewer's experience of the world. James Turrell moves even one step closer to depicting the experience of the viewer, focusing not on their mental impression of a scene, but on the mental impression itself, not depicting an impression but creating the impression which is itself the subject of the work. He induces introspection, causing the viewer to look at their own viewing process,¹ creating completely non-vicarious art,² by using real light and by playing on several perceptual principles.

Many artistic techniques developed alongside the changing goals of art itself, also using new ideas about perception. As the role of art and its desired effect on the viewer changes, new techniques emerge, and with new media and technology artists can communicate an increasing variety of messages. Ancient art often served as a record of events and thus focused on canonical views to represent important information rather than depicting realistic scenes, yet the ideals of artists in the Renaissance, who sought to create perfect representations of reality, along with the new mathematical focus on linear perspective, aimed for mathematically possible images.³

Along with changes in modes of representation, art has varied through a range of different ways of acting on the viewer's mind. Ancient Egyptians would, through familiarity, recognize the stylized depictions used in their art, understanding that the strictly prescribed images symbolized

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1. *Mapping Spaces, a Topological Survey of the Work by James Turrell*. New York: Peter Blum Edition, 1987. p. 48
 2. Turrell, James. *Air Mass*. London: The South Bank Center. 1993. p. 25
 3. Solso, Robert L. *Cognition and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. chapter 8.

specific objects and scenes. The nearly photorealistic but idealized images in the Renaissance instead tried to mimic the way the eye literally sees the world, imitating its depth. They act on the eye as a scene would when viewed from a fixed viewpoint, requiring nearly the same mental tasks as looking at reality. However, the viewer knows it's a picture plane as soon as they move and disrupt the illusion of depth. Therefore the goal of the art has varied from suggesting an occurrence to the mind symbolically to closely approximating the experience of viewing a scene.

More recent artists have gone beyond the goal of perfectly depicting a scene, to depicting a mental image or impression of a scene. Using techniques such as Cubism (Picasso) or slightly altered perspective (Cezanne), subtly or not so subtly they depict objects from multiple views simultaneously. They give the eye a view of each object that the brain would ordinarily have selected from different views of a three dimensional scene, one through each eye, or possibly from a moving point of view, and therefore approximate motion parallax, as Robert Solso puts it,¹ or even possibly approximating binocular vision, as most of their images depict objects at a distance within the range of binocular disparity. Instead of perfect perspective or prescribed organization, they use the brain's method of combining different views into a single image, the way the mind can use typical views of each object to remember an entire scene² though the views may be from different perspectives. In this way, modern artists have changed the subject of their art from the past goal, a view of reality, to a mental representation of reality. Further, artists such as Expressionists depict scenes of pure emotion, creating a two dimensional representation of a mental state itself as the subject of their work.

1. p. 221

2. Solso chapter 9

None of James Turrell's work seeks to depict a "subject" at all,¹ but instead consist of carefully controlled settings and light, natural or artificial. He constructs rooms to look into, rooms to enter to view a piece, or pieces to enter,² with several main series of works: projections, "Structural Cuts," and "Skyspaces," as well as a major landscape project: the Roden Crater. In early work, he projected bright light onto the corners or walls of darkened rooms. Creating confusing or ambiguous percepts, the light could look like a glowing box protruding from or receding into the wall,³ or look like a tangible glowing surface. In some works in which he overlaps layers of light with different projectors, the depth of the wall is unclear, and appears to consist of several different depths. His "Structural Cut" works let small amounts of light in from the outside, sometimes combining it with (always hidden) sources of artificial light. For example, in "Mendotta Stoppages" he built walls in front of existing walls, leaving only narrow slits through which light from the outside could enter. During the day the atmosphere of the room shifted with clouds covering the sun, or changed more dramatically at night as cars drove by and as street lights changed. "Skyspace" works consist of open skylights, or framed views of the sky, making it look like an actual surface with the margins acting as inducing fields to alter the perceived color.⁴ For example, "Air Mass" is a 12' by 12' opening in the center of a ceiling 21' above a 24' by 24' room. In "Space Division Constructions," also rooms to walk into, he hides other rooms of dim light, imperceptible until the viewer's eyes adjust. Finally, he also creates what he calls "Perceptual Cells," which are self-contained compartments a viewer can enter, to experience extreme visual conditions such as a ganzfeld in the phone booth-like "Close Call," or nearly total darkness in

1. Turrell, p. 26

2. *Mapping Spaces*, p. 16

3. *James Turrell: Spirit and Light*. Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1998.

4. *Mapping Spaces*, p. 24

"Soft Cell." Often the ideas for specific works come from weather phenomena James Turrell experienced while flying planes,¹ such as perception of opaque air or varying light.

Through these works James Turrell creates dramatic experiences for viewers. For example, in viewing "Twilight Arch," a space construction, a viewer first enters what appears to be a completely dark room. After standing for a few minutes looking in total darkness, their eyes begin to adjust and they barely see a faint blue glow on the wall in front of them, and gradually see the other plain walls. Upon walking closer, they see the large rectangular glow on the opposite wall, on which they cannot seem to focus their eyes, which seems like either light shining from an unknown source on the wall or a thin luminous screen. Not until right in front of the screen, still unable to look at it directly or understand what it is, do they suddenly realize that it is not even a surface, but an opening into a room filled with the blue glow, a space receding further than they imagined into an imperceptible shape. They stand close to the opening, staring into the room with their eyes unfocused, their visual field filled with a dim blue glow, suspended in a sort of psychological tension in which they cannot touch or feel the matter they thought existed. Viewing a Skyspace also occurs gradually. During dusk, a viewer sits on a bench built around the edge of the room, looking up into a rectangular panel of sky which seems to lie flat on the opening in the ceiling. Even with clouds drifting by it looks like they are shown on a screen or are feet away, changing the perception of scale. As night approaches, the viewer watches the color of the panel of sky shift, getting darker and darker. Finally with the sky almost dark they notice the small lights in the room for the first time, slightly orange and contrasting the bluish sky. Eventually, as their eyes adjust to the darkness, the illuminated room with a deep black ceiling emerges.

1. Turrell, p.34

Because of the absence of a specific subject and use of pure planes of ephemeral-seeming color, people have compared James Turrell to artists like Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, or Joseph Albers, or current artists he has worked with like Don Flavin and Robert Irwin, and considered him a Minimalist.¹ He has been said to use Leonardo's sfumato technique, with his dim hazy light. However, James Turrell also plays directly on many perceptual phenomena such as bistability, in his cube-like projections; ganzfelds; blind sight, the phenomenon of subconscious vision; changing sensitivity to dim light, from rods and cones adjusting; and idioretinal light, or the false perception of light from the random activity of neurons in the retina in the absence of real light. Rather than allowing the viewer to directly look at planes of color, what they observe instead is their own looking process: their eyes adjusting to the light, the scene changing as a result of their looking, what they know to be the pale blue sky seeming like a thin film a few feet away, or suddenly realizing upon feeling a breeze that what they thought was a black ceiling does not exist at all. Some perceptual phenomena he uses have more of a direct effect than others, such as ganzfelds. First discussed by Wolfgang Metzger in 1930, ganzfelds create strange percepts such as the greying out of color, loss of vision, inability to tell if the eyes are open, and loss of balance.² In 1968 James Turrell even worked with Dr. Edward Wortz, who was studying perception, and became interested in the ideas of James J. Gibson³ who began the idea of ecological psychology. Through the absence of contours or objects to look at, or confusing structure and scale, these changing perceptions which usually go unnoticed engage the viewer's conscious thought.

1. *Spirit and Light*, p. 17

2. Solso, p. 52

3. *Mapping Spaces*, p. 22

With his use of actual light rather than any concrete subject, and his use of knowledge of perception, James Turrell addresses a new subject in his art. Different from past art that invited but did not require reflection, which the viewer could look at remotely while in control of their own mind and visual system, he avoids associative or symbolic thought, and instead uses visual forms to foster contemplation, inducing a sort of wide-eyed meditation. He gives new meaning to the notion that a viewer's psychology effects their understanding of an artwork, and instead shines a spotlight on that psychology itself, causing the viewer to focus almost entirely on their personal experience, and making it the subject of his work.