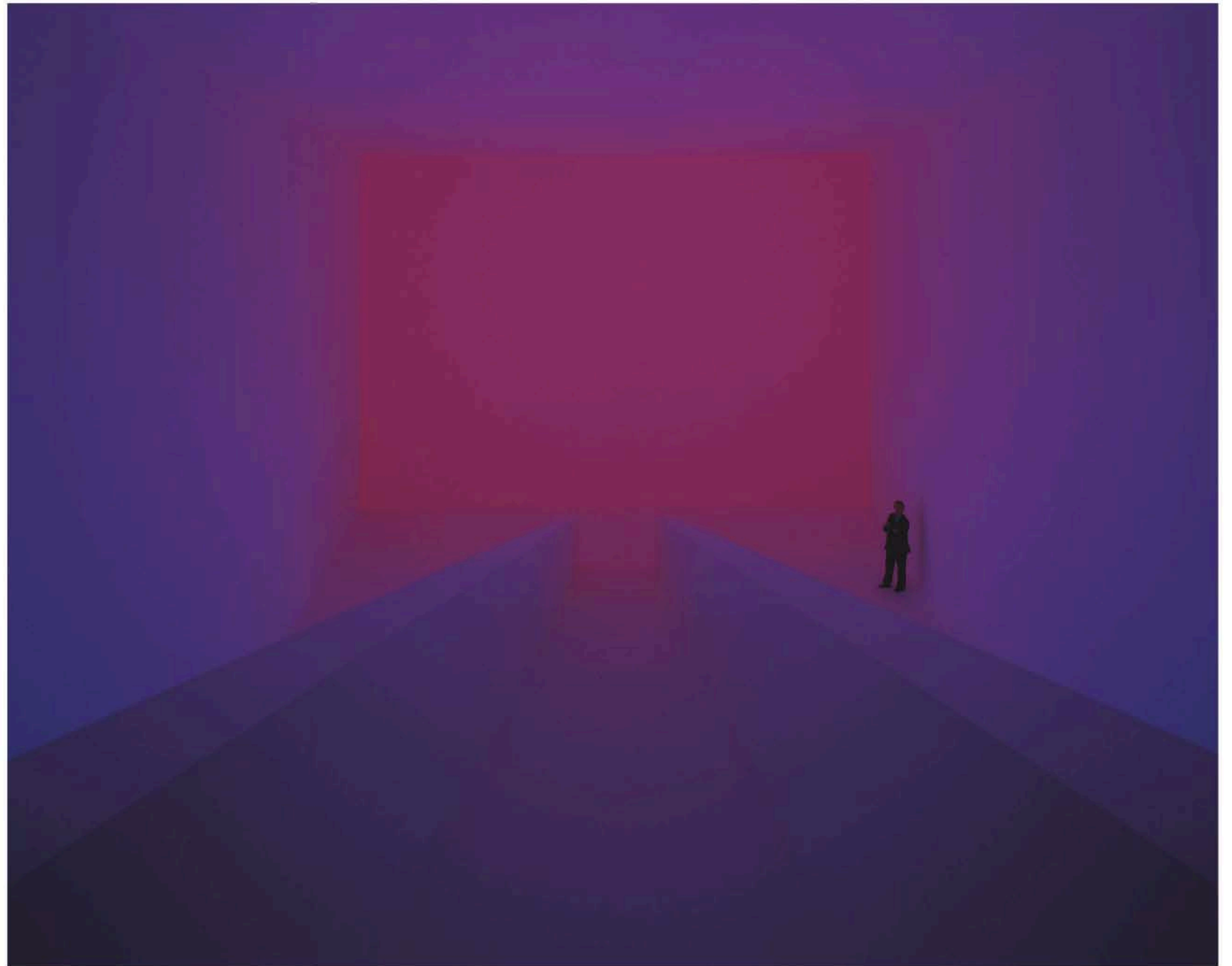


JAMES TURRELL AT 70: IDEAS FOR OUR TIME

EVERYONE LOVES JAMES TURRELL.
HE LOVES THEM BACK.

BY LISA GIMMY, ASLA

The artist James Turrell turned 70 on May 6, and a multiyear, global celebration of his 50-year-long career is under way. Turrell's mysterious and compelling art investigates the intersections of light, space, and human perception. His prodigious body of work includes light projections installed in galleries, museums, and private collections; site-specific works called skyspaces; isolation spaces known as "perceptual cells"; and his lifelong project, a naked-eye observatory in the Arizona desert called *Roden Crater*.



Bridget's Bardo, 2009; Ganzfeld; Installation view at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, 2009; © James Turrell; Photo © Florian Holzherr

Turrell was born in Los Angeles in 1943. He became a licensed pilot at the age of 16. His polymath inclinations were nurtured at Pomona College, where he studied art, astronomy, mathematics, and art history, and graduated with a degree in perceptual psychology. Turrell went on to obtain a master's degree in art from the Claremont Colleges. By the age of 24, he had identified light as both the subject and the material of his art.

Turrell is a meticulous craftsman whose work uses cutting-edge technology to connect viewers to shared experiences and ancient truths. Although he is often grouped with other "light and space" artists such as Robert Irwin, Turrell's art goes past the investigation of perception to convey a deep sense of time and connectedness with the earth and the sky.

Three Turrell exhibitions rolled out this spring—at the Guggenheim in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). For the Guggenheim, Turrell created a site-specific installation in Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda. At the MFA in Houston, home to the largest collection of Turrell's works, there are seven light installations, and viewers are encouraged to visit *Twilight Epiphany* at Rice University and Turrell's skyspace *One Accord* at the Live Oak Friends Meeting House, which serves the Quaker community. The show at LACMA is the most comprehensive, occupying the second floor of the Broad Pavilion and culminating in a separate suite of galleries in the adjacent Resnick Pavilion, where Turrell's most current works and his studies for *Roden Crater* are showcased.

The show at LACMA is a huge hit: Tickets are hard to come by, and Turrell's perceptual cell, *Light Reignfall*, which can be experienced by only one person at a time, is sold out. The

show will be open until April 2014. After that it will travel to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

I have followed Turrell's work since my first design instructor, Cherie Kleusing, introduced me to it in the mid-1980s. Cherie had spent the summer driving across the Southwest and, in an effort to explain that landscape architecture could go far beyond the three Bs—bollards, benches, and Bradford pears—wanted to share her experience of land art. She told us about the *Spiral Jetty* and the *Lightning Field*, and about James Turrell, who was building an enormous project in the desert that I then thought was called Road and Crater.

Since that time, I've seen several Turrell exhibitions and had the opportunity to visit several of his skyspaces. But the show at LACMA affords an unprecedented opportunity to study the evolution of Turrell's work over a 50-year span.

The larger part of the exhibition, inside the Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA, comprises 10 rooms. There's a fairly conventional art experience at the beginning—a roomful of exquisite drawings and prints Turrell created to document his first explorations into using light as a medium at the Mendota Hotel. This was the building in Santa Monica where Turrell began to experiment with light and time, blacking out windows and cutting holes into the building and then opening them for defined intervals to create specific effects.

Then the exhibition changes. Each of the next four rooms contains a single artwork, and the experience becomes a one-on-one encounter with Turrell's mysterious objects and spaces. The first work is *Afrum (White)* from 1966, a suspended and apparently three-dimensional polygon made of light.

Turrell's work is displayed chronologically and becomes increasingly immersive. You literally walk into *Raemar Pink White*, where a warm, embracing light emanates from a floating rectangle.

In the middle of this set of encounters, there's a room devoted to the skyspaces. It is astonishing to discover that Turrell has created more than 70 of these across five continents. This room also contains cases filled with technical drawings of the spaces and descriptions written by some of Turrell's early patrons. A particularly moving document is Count Giuseppe Panza's recollection of a visit with Turrell, eating organic food, drinking tea, and then spending the evening experiencing light and space. The count went on to commission Turrell's first skyspace at his villa in Italy.

After this room, the exhibit continues with three other installations. *Yukaloo* is a hypnotic windshield-shaped piece that subtly changes colors and focus. The viewer flies with Turrell through subtly changing clouds to some unknown destination.

Experiencing this exhibition reminded me less of going to a museum than of visiting a cathedral or a cave. I was not so much looking as absorbing and feeling. And I was not alone—one of the most pleasurable aspects of the show is witnessing others' enjoyment. Whether basking on benches in the pink light of *Raemar Pink White*, puzzling over the mystery of the light-filled prism in *Raethro II (Red)*, or being fully immersed in Turrell's newest Ganzfeld (total visual field), *Breathing Light*, everyone is having a great time. Part of this is the sheer beauty of the work. It is gorgeous, it feels good, and what it's celebrating is not esoteric, but shared: the perceptual abilities we have as humans, the light, and the sky. The art puts the viewer right at the center of the experience. Turrell

honors our presence by putting it at the center of his work. As he says repeatedly, because he really wants us to get it, "We create the reality in which we live." Turrell's art literally doesn't exist without us.

In 1974, Turrell flew in his single-engine plane over the Sonoran Desert, looking for a suitable site for his observatory. He found Roden Crater, a 600-foot-high, two-mile-wide extinct volcano, and purchased it with help from the Dia Art Foundation. Turrell has been working on the design and construction of a naked-eye observatory at the crater ever since.

Turrell's ongoing work at *Roden Crater* is highlighted in two rooms of the LACMA exhibit. In one room, a vast model of the crater is juxtaposed with photographs of the site. The room also contains some of Turrell's surveying equipment and a giant stereoscopic view of the crater. A second room features a video of Turrell as he describes the work, as well as models of several of the spaces. Turrell compares *Roden Crater* to the Buddhist stupas at Borobudur and the ruins of Machu Picchu. As he says, without a trace of false modesty, "I like a powerful site."

Roden Crater is a work of astounding ambition. When complete, it will contain 20 chambers with different viewing experiences. Its complexity is on a par with the most complicated landscape projects of any age. The working drawings, which I could study endlessly, indicate that Turrell has collaborated with architects at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and Paul Bustamante, a civil engineer, as well as two astronomers. The first phase of construction is complete, and the construction documents for phases two and three are on display. Turrell has accounted for the shifting of the planet in his calculations for the design. In 2,000 years, the project will no longer be precisely oriented to the astronomical events it seeks to capture.

What, one might ask, does this have to do with landscape architecture? Who but Turrell can arrange to purchase a volcano? Or spend 40 years perfecting a design? Isn't Turrell's work located in tightly controlled environments, and immune from the regulations that constrain our work?

I remember Laurie Olin's joking that the landscape he'd most like to make would be a big box that had all kinds of crazy weather inside. Landscape architects have on occasion ventured into this territory. For example, Topher Delaney created a fog room at the San Jose Art Museum. I didn't get to see it, but the photos look amazing.

But beyond the gallery or museum environment, the extraordinary resonance of Turrell's work has something to do with his consistent deployment of some strategies that do translate to our discipline. First, there is the framing of experience. Whether within the museum walls or within one of the skyspaces, Turrell focuses attention. Here, I am reminded of Luis Barragán's roof terrace at the Casa Barragán in Mexico City, where the surrounding city is completely shut out by walls and the focus is on the sky, and Martha Schwartz's walled garden in El Paso, Texas, a progression through vividly colored rooms, each with a singular focus. Then there is the stripping away of anything that is not absolutely essential to the experience. Again, one thinks of Barragán's work—his chapel—and the remarkable pool room at the Casa Gilardi in Mexico City, where colored planes of masonry interact with the pool to form an endless and transfixing dance of light and reflections. And of moving works by Pamela Palmer, ASLA, and Andrea Cochran, FASLA, who have created stunning landscapes that focus one's attention on the incredible beauty of the Northern California landscape.

Finally, there is what Turrell asks of the viewer: Take your time.

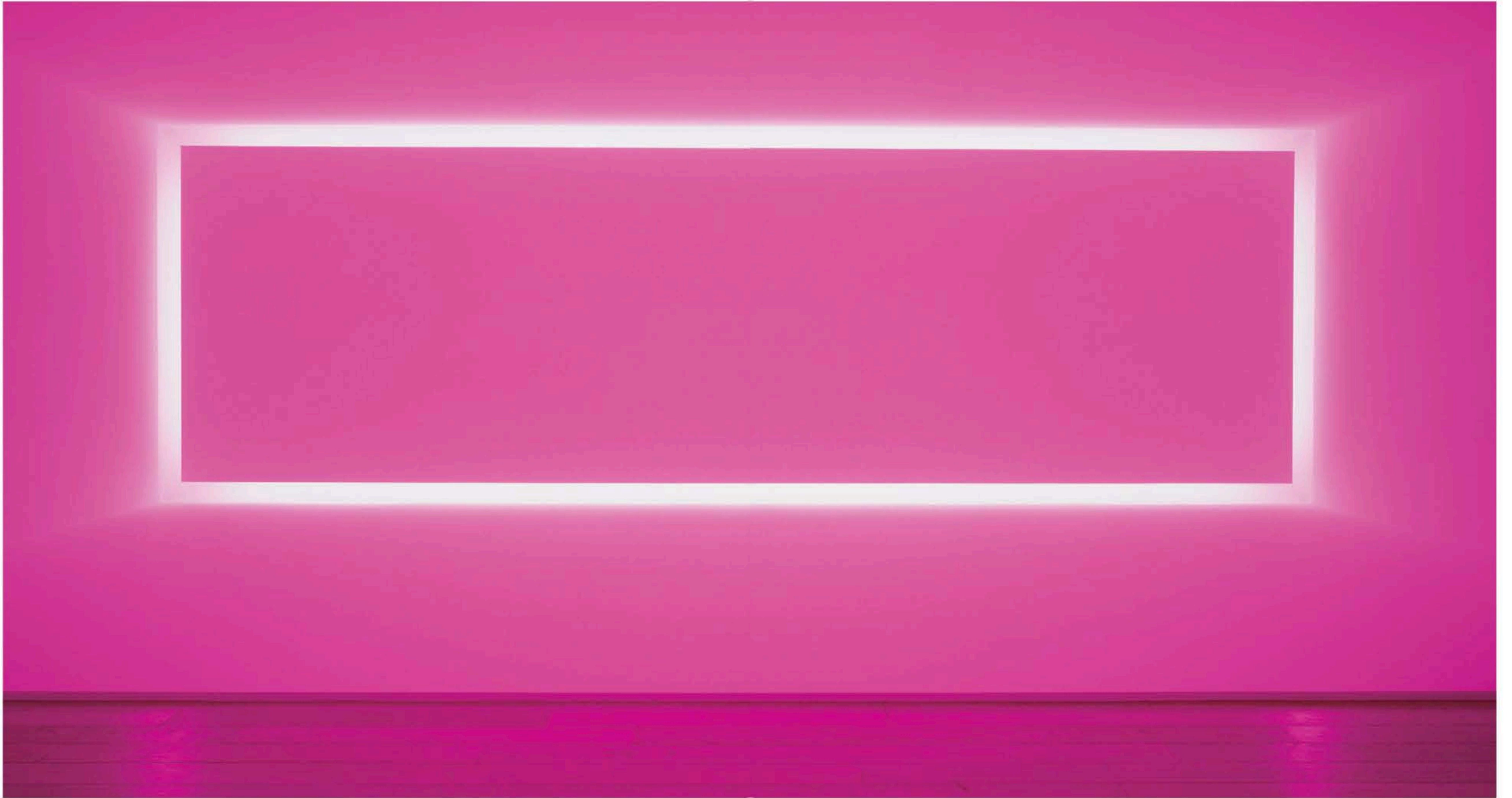
Two of these strategies, focus and duration, are deployed in one of my favorite landscapes of the past decade. The Clark Boardwalk, located about two hours east of Memphis, Tennessee, is a work of remarkable simplicity that allows the visitor a unique experience—to walk into the forest above the ground but under the canopy of a cypress forest.

The boardwalk stretches 1,600 feet into the forest. Along the way, there are places to sit and, at the end, a larger space lined with benches. The forest is part of a seasonally flooded plain, and so the walk is supported structurally by a helical anchor system—basically a series of metal screws—which allowed the walk to be created with minimal impact to the cypress roots.

The landscape architects of the boardwalk, Ritchie Smith Associates, keep the design so simple that it literally disappears, and your focus is on the majestic environment of the cypress forest. It reminds me of a statement Turrell made: "Remember, technology does not make good work. You can still write a poem on a brown paper bag, and haiku is just as profound as the pyramids."

Count Panza, one of Turrell's first patrons, could have been describing the Clark Boardwalk when he spoke of his garden in Italy as a "great, green space suspended between heaven and earth." It takes about 15 minutes to stroll to the end of the boardwalk. During this time, you experience the filtered light, the straight trunks of the trees, the small sounds of wind and birds. It's simple. It takes time. It's magic. ♦

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Raemar Pink White, 1969; Shallow Space; Collection of Art & Research, Las Vegas; © James Turrell; Photo © Florian Holzherr



Afrum (White), 1966; Cross Corner Projection; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; © James Turrell; Photo © 2013 Museum Associates/LACMA



Twilight Epiphany, 2012; A James Turrell Skyspace; The Suzanne Deal Booth Centennial Pavilion; Rice University, Houston, TX; © James Turrell; Photo © Florian Holzherr



Roden Crater Project, view toward northeast; © James Turrell; Photo © Florian Holzherr