

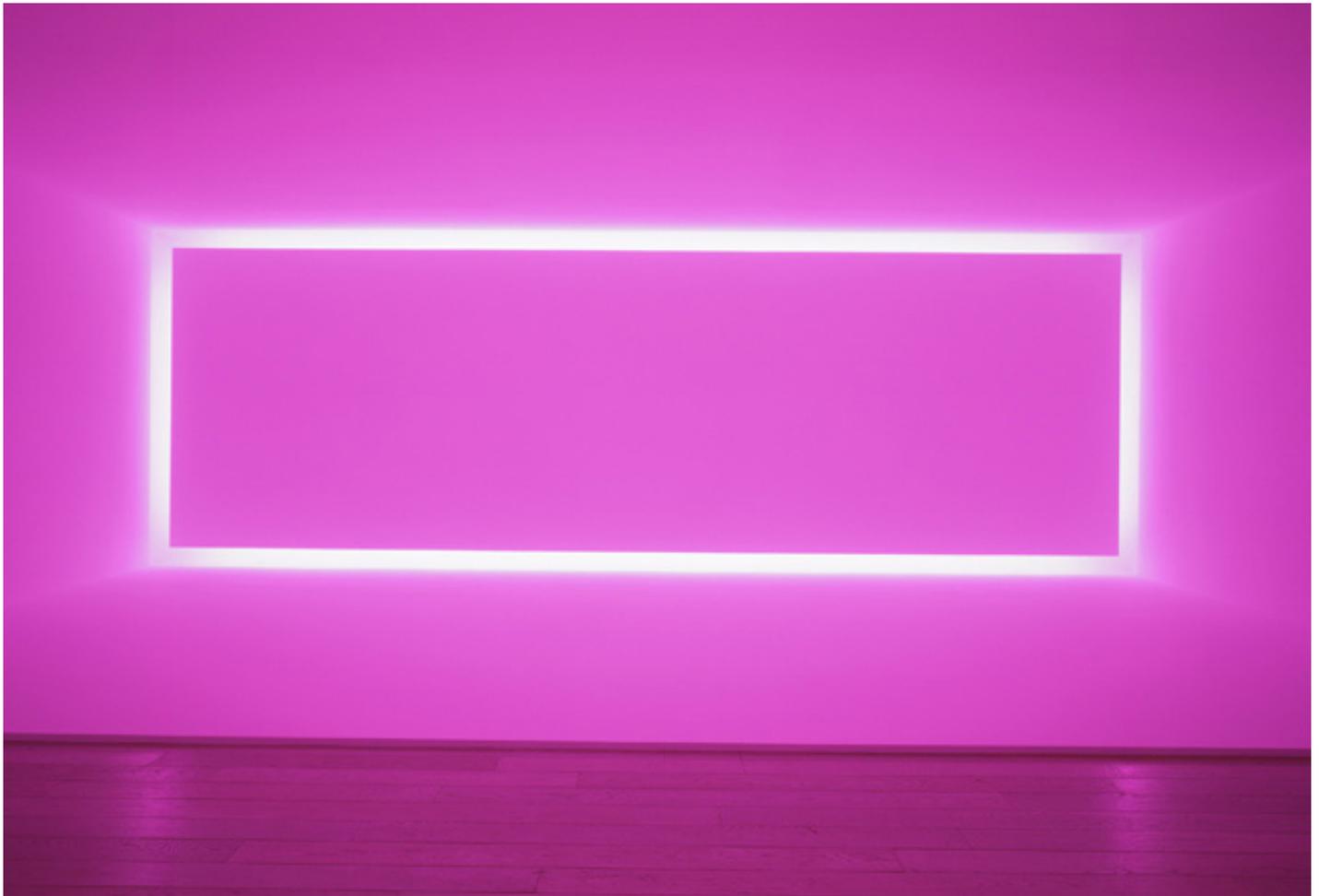


HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

Inside the Light: James Turrell in LA

Dahlia Schweitzer | July 1, 2013



James Turrell, “Raemar Pink White” (1969), Shall Space, Collection of Art & Research, Las Vegas. (all images © James Turrell, photo by Florian Holzherr, and all images courtesy LACMA)

LOS ANGELES — The first thing I thought when I saw the [James Turrell retrospective](#) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art was: *There would be nothing here with the lights off.*

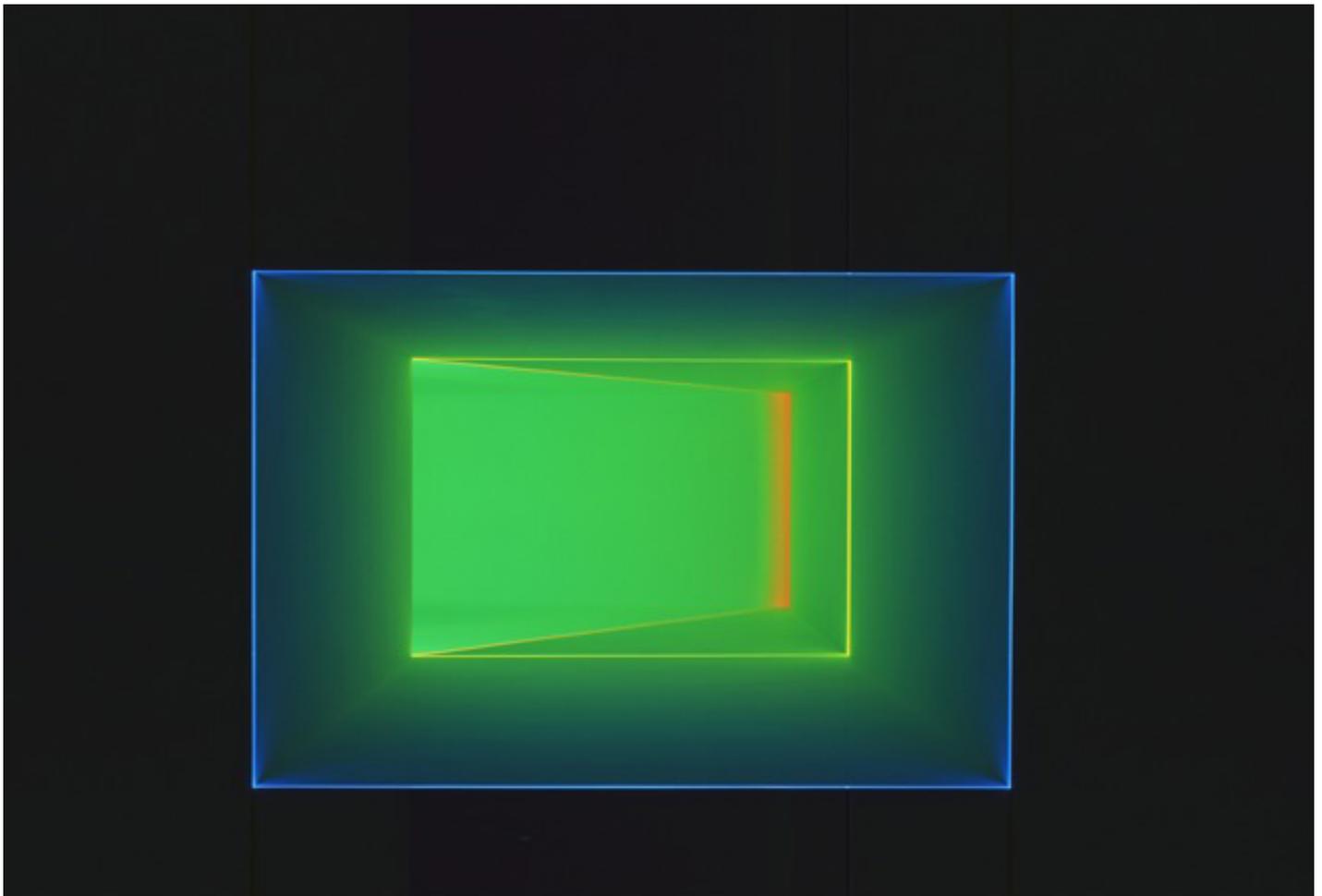
The second thing I thought was: *How does he do it?*

To discuss Turrell in terms common to art conversations is impossible. To compare this exhibit to standard museum fare would be missing the point. Nothing about Turrell is standard. And everything about his work seems impossible.

Even putting his work into words is almost as difficult as capturing it in a photograph. A Turrell experience must occur in person. Because what Turrell creates is not art, at least not in the typical sense. What Turrell creates are immersive environments that change the way you understand reality.

One of the first “pieces” of the exhibit, and by “piece” I mean room, as each one of Turrell’s experiences, with the exception of the holograms, gets its own separate environment, is one of his earlier works. “Raemar Pink White” (1969) may be almost 50 years old, but it does not feel dated. Quite the opposite—it feels as futuristic as they come. To put it into words, which again, fail to convey the grandeur of the experience, “Raemar Pink White” is a room painted entirely white, all the corners shaped into gentle curves so that depth disappears.

Directly in front of you is a rectangle, its sharply pointed corners in marked contrast to the lack of hard edges anywhere else. While you sit on the white bench, the rectangle appears self-levitating, an iridescent pink leaking around the edges, sending a softly fading rose hue across the surrounding white walls. Most of Turrell’s pieces are designed to be experienced over time, and this one is no different. You can sit on the bench and appreciate the rosy pink, the glowing edges, the light that seems to have no discernible source, while gravity and perspective feel like outdated concepts.



James Turrell, “Key Lime” (1994), wedgework: fluorescent and LED light into space with fiber-optic light, dimensions variable. Collection of LACMA.

“Raethro II (Blue),” another piece from 1969, feels just as compelling, contemporary, and mystifying. In this case, a hole filled with blue light has been carved into a corner of the room. What is impossible to ascertain is if the light comes from the outside (projected from some elusive source) or from the inside of the hole. Despite the fact that it defies logic, our eyes tell our brain that the blue hole is a floating shape, deliberately infinite. However, resistant to the impossible, our brain searches for objects, clues, anything that would explain the method and the process, but Turrell has removed any hint that might give us context.

It was only after asking the security guard where the light was coming from — because it was truly undeterminable and driving me crazy — that I learned the one place in the room where it was possible to stand and see the edge of the hole and the line of the wall. Only then was I able to figure out (or my brain was able to understand) the light in relation to the space. Of course, the only pleasure came from the perverse discovery of the trick behind the illusion, which, of course, was not a pleasurable discovery at all. Because with Turrell, you should never know how the piece works, much as understanding a magic trick strips the magic away. So the victory was bittersweet.

The artist with whom Turrell is often compared is Dan Flavin, however, as this exhibit makes clear, the two of them are fundamentally different. With Flavin, the art is the light, it is the fluorescent tube. With Turrell, the mystery of the origin of the light is a crucial component of the final product, as well as the disorientation that ensues when your brain cannot figure out what is going on or how to physically orient yourself. It is precisely the experience of light that has no source, color that has no fixed shade or corresponding Pantone number, which is the goal of a Turrell piece.

“Key Lime” (1994) is also an entire room, but the difference here is that the room is completely immersive, all in black rather than white, and to find it, you have to make your way down a dark hallway, feeling your way in complete blindness, searching for the “art.” The disorientation begins before you have even reached the light, before you have arrived at the work itself. It is only when you round a corner you did not know existed that you find a room lit in such a fashion as to echo a hall of mirrors, and you realize you are Alice in Wonderland and this is your rabbit hole.

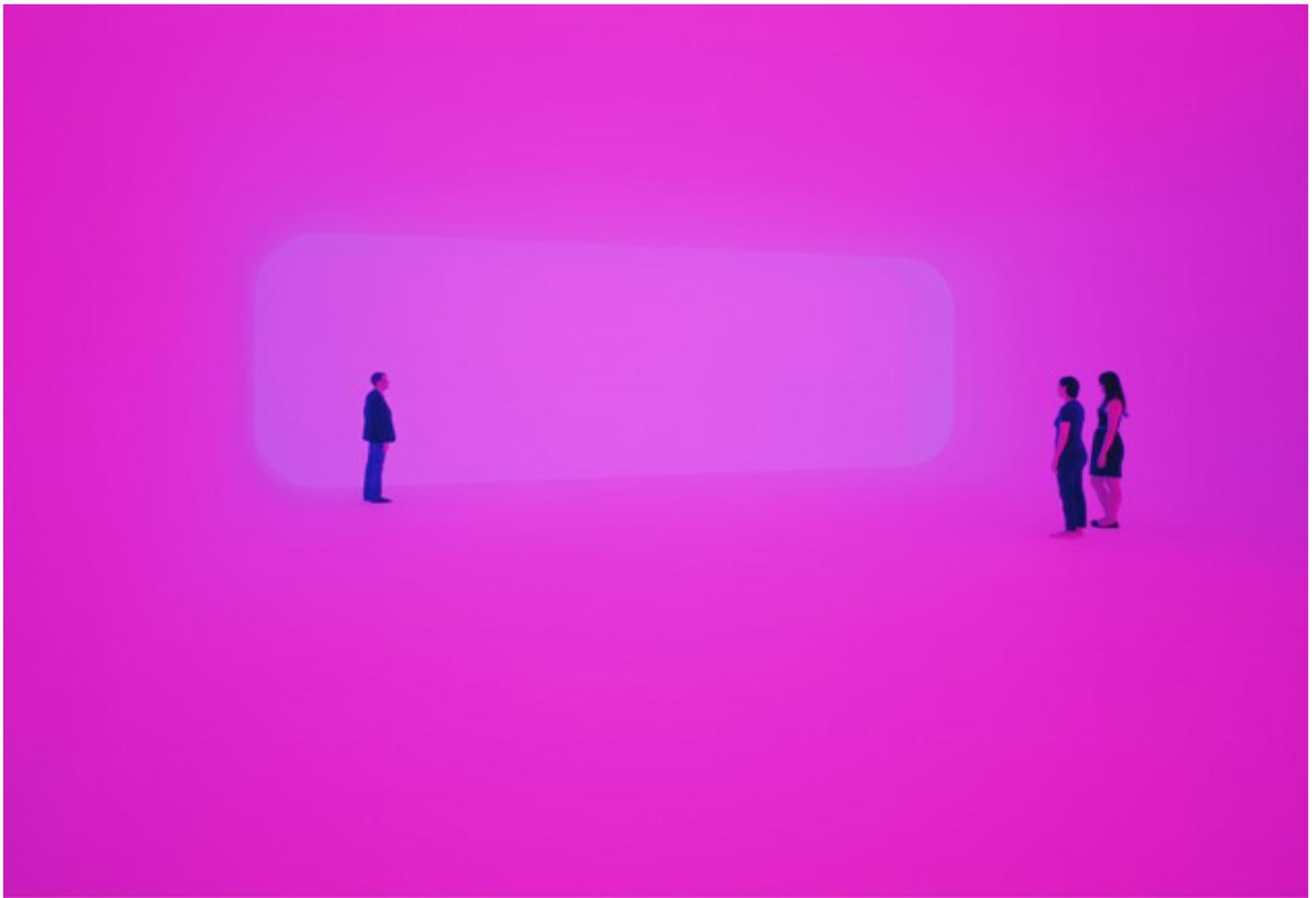


James Turrell, “Breathing Light” (2013), LED light into space, dimensions variable, collection of LACMA.

“Yukaloo” (2011) is one of Turrell’s newest pieces. This one, like the others, is meant to be observed over time, the colors changing as you watch them. Another “hole” in the wall, with LED lights somehow rigged behind what might be a frosted shower curtain so fragile that you are not allowed to come close, for fear of tearing. The colors are based off tones from the sky, a longstanding fixation of Turrell’s. An artificial recreation of the sky, the fabric spreads and absorbs the light over the course of an hour, so that the colors really do feel like the sky at different times. Apparently, Turrell had wanted to achieve this effect for a long time and only recently has the technology made it possible.

The idea of technology and Turrell should go hand in hand. After all, his studies of neuron behavior and how, in turn, to manipulate the way we perceive colors and shapes are what make his work possible. However, when experiencing a Turrell environment, technology is the farthest thing from one’s mind. Instead, his works take you away from earthly experience, making you feel the surreal in the everyday, stripping away social or political conversations, or any ordinary style of interaction. He does with light what Rothko did with paint, creating experiences and conveying emotions, except that the changes in his tones are so subtle that it would be impossible to recreate them with paint.

Even if his constructions are just tricks and optical illusions, two-dimensionality becoming three as easily as three-dimensionality becomes two, we do not want to see the man behind the curtain or understand his machinations, even if this kind of understanding was possible. We instead have no choice but to appreciate the deliberately alien impact of his creations, our brains struggling to make sense of colors, objects, and edges, all of which seem to be just out of reach, any prior frame of reference or reality rendered irrelevant.



James Turrell, “Breathing Light” (2013), LED light into space, dimensions variable, collection of LACMA.

Nowhere is this most profound or most transcendent than with Turrell’s grandest effort, “Breathing Light” (2013). The room itself is so large, the design so grandiose, that the piece is not even in the same building as the rest of the exhibit. One must go down the stairs, across the sidewalk path, into another building, wait in line, remove shoes and don white booties, before being allowed to climb stairs, as if to a temple, before experiencing “Breathing Light.”

To say “Breathing Light” is transformative is simplistic. To say it is spectacular is easy. To describe it in literal terms, “Breathing Light” is a larger version of “Raemar Pink White.” It too, is a room seemingly lit by a pink rectangular orb, edges and corners non-existent. However, literal terms do not apply to Turrell. The closest description to what it feels like to stand in front of “Breathing Light” is to liken it to literally floating in a cloud. The disorientation is so complete, the tonality so immersive, that the rules of space and perspective evaporate, replaced by a pink mist that is actually not there. But it is impossible to say what it really is. All you know is that you are there and that color is everywhere, so real that you feel you can grab onto it.

But there is no there there, as Gertrude Stein would say. There are no corners. There are no edges. There is nothing to grasp. There is only light. And we are inside it.

[James Turrell: A Retrospective](#) is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (5905 Wilshire Blvd, Miracle Mile, Los Angeles, 90036) through April 6, 2014.

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