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James Turrell At The Guggenheim Museum

I attended the [James Turrell](#) exhibit at NYC's Guggenheim Museum recently. This is really one of the most important lighting/art installations in the world right now and has taken over the majority of one of the world's most famous art museums.

Don't miss the opportunity to see this exhibit. It is lighting/art on a grand scale by the artist who is considered to be at the forefront of the "Light and Space" movement.

My expectations were high before I attended. The [Sunday New York Times Magazine](#) ran a cover story on Mr. Turrell the week the exhibit opened and the media is filled with stories of his work and life.

My thoughts are my own, I'm not a critic, and I hold Mr. Turrell in the highest regard as an artist and innovator in the field of lighting. There are a number of Mr. Turrell's installations in the museum but the one that will capture the most attention and that I will discuss here is entitled *Aten Reign*.

Frank Lloyd Wright's famous design of the Guggenheim is a spiral walkway around the walls of a funnel shaped building, with the center open to a circular skylight above. *Aten Reign* fills the entire atrium of the building. I won't go into the construction of the lighting surfaces except to say the project is fascinating and anyone with interest will want to download the app from the museum website at <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/visit/app> and watch the excellent videos and interviews with the artisans who built and installed the exhibit. It is art and craft at a world class level.

Upon entering the museum you walk directly into the small atrium space. Visitors are carefully parceled in to allow everyone to find a place to sit on comfortable benches along the circular walls, or even to lay down on a carpeted platform. Everything happens above you. I chose the carpeted platform and relaxed on my back looking up for over an hour. I could have stayed all day.

What appear to be five elliptical rings of declining size project up to the top of the museum to an elliptical skylight covered in diffusion. Many installations by Mr. Turrell are literally open to the sky, but this one is not. The five elliptical rings are lit with [Philips Color Kinetics](#) color changing LEDs and the rings very slowly change color from the slate gray of the sky to more vibrant pastel pinks, aquas, yellows, and some deeper colors are also used. Intensity is varied and the subtle changes require the viewers attention to detect.

I loved this extraordinary exhibit in this beautiful building. I was truly exhilarated every minute I was there. Mr. Turrell commented that art of this nature "Allows us to see ourselves see." This is "experiential art" that must be experienced to be understood, and this leads me to a few comments on the installation and the nature of commercial art.

This exhibit is designed to be viewed in silence and contemplation. Maybe even beyond a setting like church with its small distractions, think of a quiet and tranquil spot where the mind can achieve a full meditative focus. After watching the ceiling and slow fades, the ellipses seemed to start to move slowly, shifting, and seeming to rotate. This was my eyes and my mind, of course, trying to process something they were unfamiliar with, and which was impossible to visually orient. We are not expected to understand what we see, only to experience it. This was one of the most unique visual experiences I have had.

I could have stayed there all day except for the interruptions of the other viewers. There was a steady low din of talking, people moving around, and stepping around and over those of us on the platform. Far from quiet and contemplative, the atmosphere was noisy and festive, despite requests from the management to the contrary. The level of interest and knowledge of the viewers was variable and there were a lot of easily distracted children in the room (I attended on a Sunday morning). It started to remind me of more commercial ventures using light, going far back in time to the Magic Lantern, Pepper's Ghost, and the camera obscura, in which the public paid to see lighting used and unique lighting effects created.

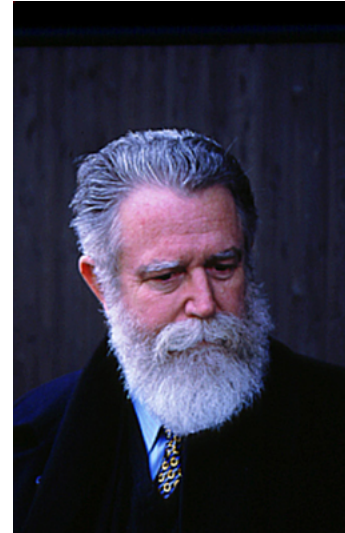
This exhibit was designed to be viewed in silence, and although it was likely viewed that way during the installation, few Guggenheim visitors will see it that way, and that is the paradox of this type of commercial art. Very few people ever see this type of art under the conditions that the artist conceives it.

My background is theatre lighting and I had a few thoughts while watching the exhibit. At heart, the installation is a beautifully crafted and perfectly executed lighting design undertaken on an immense budget and a grand scale. I thought of other designers I know and what they would do with an immense budget and the ability to conceive a "blue sky" design, and I thought of the delight every theatre lighting designer gets from creating light in a dark space and changing the reality that the eye usually sees.

This exhibit was created with both LEDs and natural light through the Guggenheim's skylight and both were equally important to this installation.

If you are in the lighting field, go see this exhibit. You may never see anything else quite like it.

[James Turrell's Facebook page](#)



Lighting Designer James Turrell



Guggenheim Museum



Guggenheim Museum Interior Pre-Installation



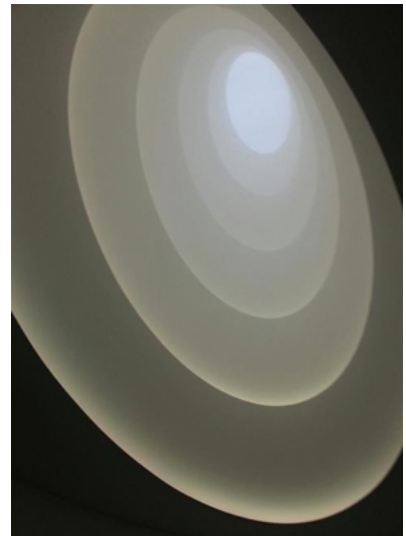
Installation of "Aten Reign"
(Photo Credit: The New York Times)



Purple-tinted viewers take in "Aten Reign" in the Guggenheim's lobby
(Photo Credit: Jillian Steinhauer)



Sitting on the atrium floor looking up to skylight 80 ft. above
(Photo Credit: Gary Fails)



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