

# James Turrell

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## James Turrell

### Biography

born in Los Angeles in 1943

### About the work (english / deutsch)

#### *First Light*

"First Light" consists of a single sheet (*"Meeting"*) and five thematic groups designated by the letters "A" to "E" and comprising between two and five sheets respectively. *"Meeting"*, the etching that starts the series off, comes under the *"Skyspaces"* category. These works involve spaces incorporating natural light. For example, visitors to the installation entitled *"Meeting"* in New York (at the City of New York's P. S. 1 exhibition und cultural center in Queens from 1980-6) saw a section of the sky through an overhead window and, with the passage of time, were able to observe the changing sky outside. Yellow-orange artificial light emanating from neon tubes concealed within the room intensified the colours of the natural light. Given ideal lighting conditions, the depth of the sky was transformed into a seemingly flat surface, which joined with the sides of the ceiling into which the window had been inserted to form one pictorial surface. The overall impression was not that of looking up in a room but rather of a canopy of light given material form.

Turrell is interested in perception. In the light-spaces represented in the graphic prints, he makes use of the initial uncertainty of the eye when confronted by spatial relationships which seem to have various levels to them. The architectonic space is refracted through light projected onto corners, and transitional areas on the floor, walls and ceiling. Thus, the observer's usually empirically verifiable certainty of knowing what s/he is viewing is shattered by what s/he is factually confronted by. The imaginary and the real blend to form a borderline area that is hard to define. Notions that had established themselves on the basis of experience are accordingly put into question, and vision detached from positions that drew their stability from prior concepts.

Turrell's ideal is to be able to see himself seeing. "Actually," he says, "I'm not interested in objects but in seeing seeing." And he wants to convey this viewers, who initially, however, only get to see what they are able to see. Only gradually and in small steps do viewers grow accustomed to the unknown and themselves come to question the common relation between vision, illusion and art. If they, for example, notice that differences in perception arise from different vantage points, then they are already on the right track. Perhaps they then try to see the transition from two-dimensional to three-dimensional perception of the bodies of light and finally reflect more and more on their own ability to influence vision as a process. By seeing they participate in what is seen. And thus that which is seen is not just the affair of the artist but in the final analysis equally the affair of the observers. "I do not want to make art for the viewer but with the viewer, with his participation. I wish to make art with perception not for perception," is how Turrell describes his intentions. By means of his works, the artist provides an occasion and an initial trigger, the viewer then completing what is presented by perceiving it. Turrell attaches great importance to distinguishing between a "journalistic view" and a form of viewing in which the viewer actively participates. For, as he says, "it is the viewer's vision with which he is confronted." Perception thus becomes a medium with a form of its own and finally we make perception itself the object of our perception.

There is hardly another artist who so clearly emphasizes how far the perceptual process depends on the respectively specific situation of the observer in view of particular artistic pre-givens. In the graphic series there is no direct way of experiencing light spatial and physically. Nevertheless, the observers notice directly that Turrell is interested in more than simply presenting the sculptural quality. Witnessing the "Twilight Arch" installation is one way of overcoming a purely visual perception of the prints; for what at first sight seem to be quite different media placed alongside each other attest in the final analysis to a basic interest in the phenomenon of light. What is involved is far more than aesthetic questions of form. In both instances, Turrell creates pieces of and for vision and when we see them, we strengthen the range of our perception. In both cases, light is the material used and perception the means by which it is given form. Understood thus, the sheets of the "First Light" series can be comprehended as a holistic unity.