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ART

At Mass MoCA, James Turrell lights up his biggest Skyspace yet

By **Murray Whyte** Globe Staff, Updated May 27, 2021, 3:16 p.m.

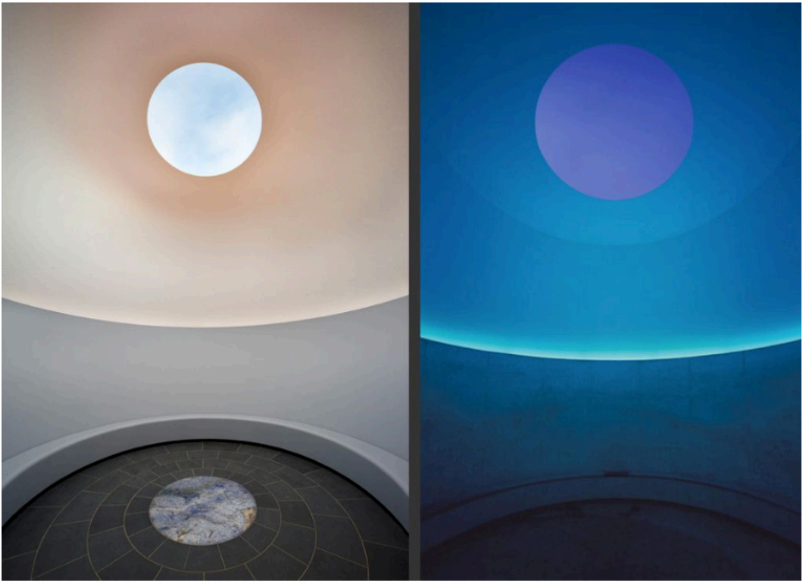
Thirty-five years in the making, the artist's giant installation opens Saturday at Mass MoCA. STEVEN G SMITH/STEVEN G. SMITH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

NORTH ADAMS — The whirr and grind of heavy machinery — a cement mixer, a backhoe, a skyjack, a stone saw — isn't the typical soundtrack to enlightenment, but there it was. I'd just finished a long, languorous conversation with artist James Turrell, who was now gamely posing for pictures inside his new, not-quite complete Skyspace installation at Mass MoCA. The dark stone bench lining the circular space beckoned. I sat, surrendering to the precise incline of its gently sloping back, and let my eyes wander skyward to the crisp, circular opening cut dead-center in the ceiling overhead.

It was a bright late-spring morning, with heavy cloudbanks tumbling in the breeze over the rolling green of the Berkshire hills. Earlier, on my way to the museum, I noted contrails streaking the sky in numbers I hadn't seen in a long, long time, the product of a travel industry emerging from pandemic slumber. It was a day of completely ordinary natural beauty, until it wasn't. The Skyspace aperture sharpened the sky in a tight edit: Slim wisps of cloud snaked and wound around each other in a primordial ballet. Sunlight haloed the undulating fringe of one drifting mass, leaving its thick middle dark and heaving. The sky behind it seemed less a shade of blue than the definition of what *blue* really is. It was riveting.

When I giddily told Turrell, now poking about the space and chatting with the construction crew, that I'd never been so aware of the intricacies of cloud movement, he chuckled. “Well, I'm happy if that's a change for the better,” he said.

Turrell, just a few weeks past his 78th birthday, is one of the best-known American artists of his generation, due largely to works much like this. It started in the 1970s, when Turrell, holed up in his Santa Monica, Calif., studio, took to cutting holes into walls and ceilings — a practice that, by 1974, had both gained him renown in the nascent Light and Space movement and got him evicted. Since then, more than 80 of his Skyspaces can be found from Texas to Minnesota, Colorado to Jerusalem, the United Kingdom to Austria and Australia.



Examples of James Turrell's Skyspaces in Australia (left) and Switzerland. JOHN GOLLINGS, FLORIAN HOLZHERR

Some are permanent museum installations, but many more are private, commissioned by an elite roster of collectors eager to have a home version. Turrell has been talking with Kanye West, a good friend, about making one for his ranch at the foot of the Wyoming mountains. ("I really do think of him as perhaps the most creative person I've ever known," Turrell said.)

The two became close when Turrell accepted West's request to film the IMAX movie "Jesus Is King" at the Roden Crater, a labyrinth of installations and Skyspaces Turrell has spent more than 40 years building under the skin of a dormant volcano near Flagstaff, Ariz. (West donated $10 million to the project in 2019.) When I mentioned to Turrell that I was thrilled to see on the Crater's website that it was due to open to the public in 2024, he winced. "2024? No, no," he said. "We'll finish in 2025, and open in 2026."

A view inside the Roden Crater. BONNIE JO MOUNT/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

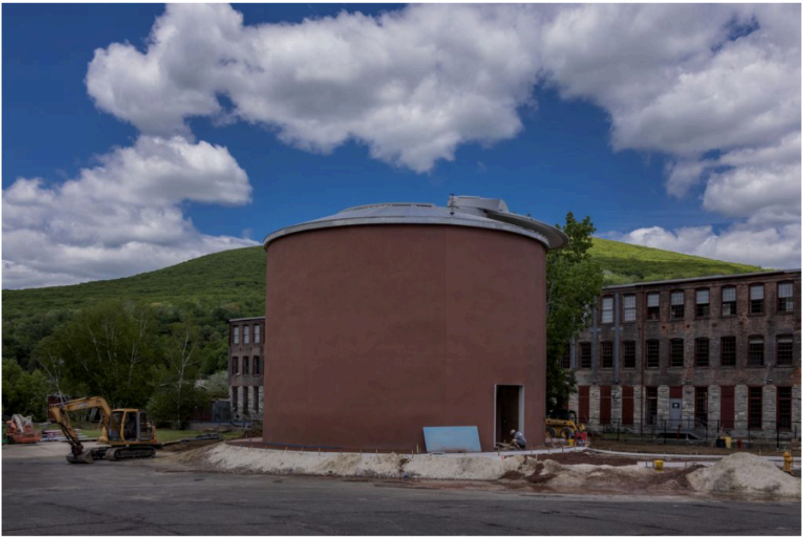
Closer to home, another local museum is in very early talks about installing a Skyspace to capture the legendary North Atlantic light that has enthralled generations of American artists. It's too soon to say which, but the link from 18th-century Luminists like Fitz-Henry Lane through the decades to Turrell feels intuitive, a long arc touching ground.

But no Skyspace, existing or planned, matches C.A.V.U., the Mass MoCA edition set to open Saturday. (When done, hidden lights in the dome will make the sky seem to change color at dusk and dawn.) It's singular, both in scale — it's the largest he's ever made — and in its protracted coming-to-be.

On Monday, Turrell and Mass MoCA's recently semi-retired founding director Joe Thompson sat around a shaker table at the museum, dotted with an array of "lapsed Quakerware," basalt-based black crockery made by Turrell and the Irish artist Nicholas Mosse. Both were brought up in the Quaker tradition but now live far outside it. "Though once you're inculcated," Turrell said, "it never *really* leaves you." (The Skyspaces may be partly inspired by the Quaker meetinghouse, where the gathered would sit in meditative silence until moved to speak; Turrell made one for a meetinghouse in Houston in 2001.)

Turrell, affable and wry, with a thicket of white hair and beard, cast back through the decades to when he, Thompson, and Thomas Krens toured the grounds of the old Sprague Electric complex, which would later become the Mass MoCA campus. (Turrell thinks it was 35 years ago; Thompson wondered if it was actually 34.)

Krens, who would go on to become director of the Guggenheim's global consortium of museums, had hatched the plan and brought Thompson in to lead it. One day, with Turrell in town for an exhibition at Williams College, the three men wandered the decaying site together. One thing in particular struck Turrell's eye: a giant, decommissioned concrete water tank, 40 feet in diameter and just as tall.



James Turrell's "C.A.V.U." this week at Mass MoCA. STEVEN G SMITH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

"I said to Joe, 'If you're going to do this, I'll make a Skyspace there,'" Turrell said, matter-of-factly.

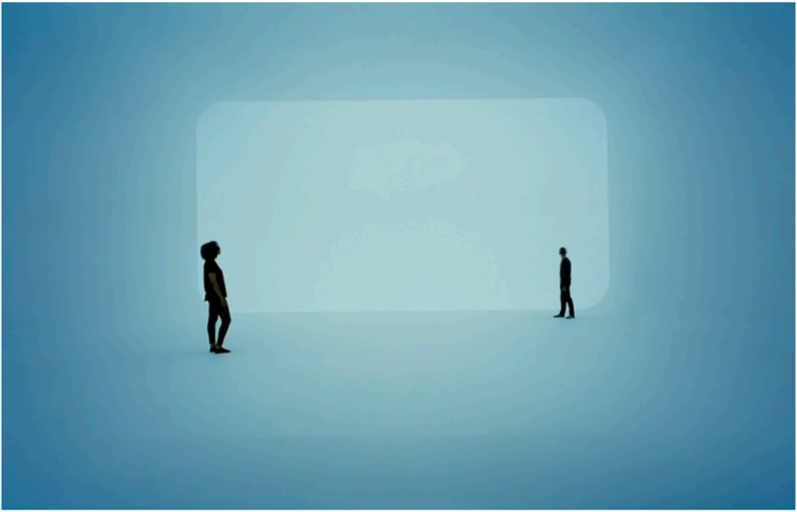
"I remember it more like, 'If you guys ever pull this off, I'll put a beautiful Skyspace in there for you,'" Thompson said with a grin.

"I didn't *mean* it as a challenge," Turrell added.

"Maybe not," Thompson said. "But I took it as one. Maybe it was aspirational."

Turrell nodded. "Well, Mass MoCA is aspirational. It does things that used to not be able to be done."

Turrell, as one of its beneficiaries, would know. "C.A.V.U." — an aviation term meaning "ceiling and visibility unlimited," or perfect flying conditions — is the capstone of his longstanding relationship with the museum. It completes "Into the Light," an exhibition of Turrell's room-size works that opened in 2017 with Mass MoCA's 130,000 square-foot expansion. Inside, the long arc of Turrell's career proceeds, dark room by dark room. The most heralded — before "C.A.V.U.," at least — is likely "Perfectly Clear," one of Turrell's Ganzfeld works, where a room contoured without corners appears to dissolve as a finite space as shifts of color and tone emanate from a single, massive panel. To call it immersive is to call water wet; "Perfectly Clear" unmoors, leaving you acutely aware of seeing yourself see, as your brain tries to square what your eyes feed to it. (In typical Mass MoCA fashion, "Into the Light" runs "until at least 2025," according to its website, while "C.A.V.U." is forever.)

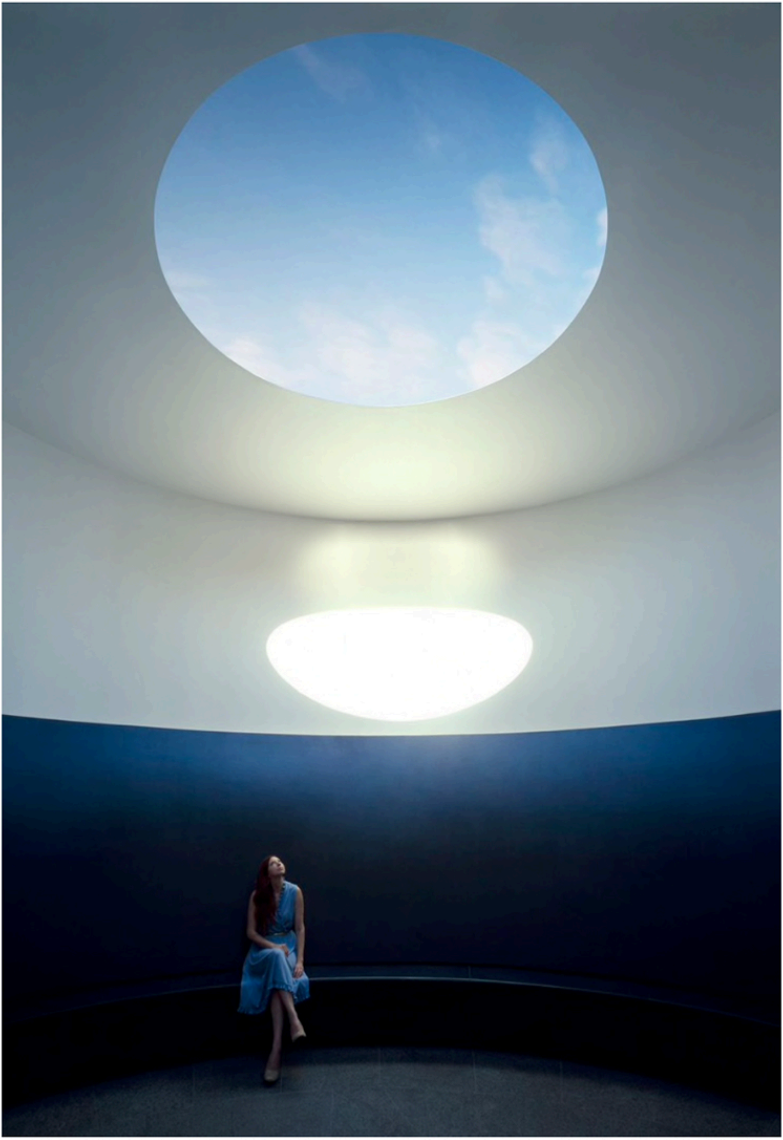


James Turrell's "Perfectly Clear" at Mass MoCA. FLORIAN HOLZHERR

Turrell studied perceptual psychology as well as art, which for him seems confluent. “It’s not about my perception — it’s about *yours*,” he said Monday, though the illusory effect has at times been too convincing. “You really have no idea how people will react to your work,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve had people dive into pieces, expecting it to be soft.” At his exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1980, viewers were disoriented enough that they frequently fell over. One sprained her wrist and sued the museum, whose insurance company then sued Turrell himself. (The suit was dropped, but not before he incurred significant legal costs.)

The artist and his work have been unconventional from the start. Turrell grew up as a semi-observant Quaker in Southern California. His grandmother was a devotee, while her daughter, Turrell’s mother, was less so. (His father, who wasn’t Quaker at all, compelled the family to the meetings.) After getting his degree in math and psychology at Pomona College, Turrell studied ceramics and sculpture briefly at the University of California, Irvine in 1965. But his stint ended abruptly in 1966 when he was jailed for coaching other students on avoiding the draft.

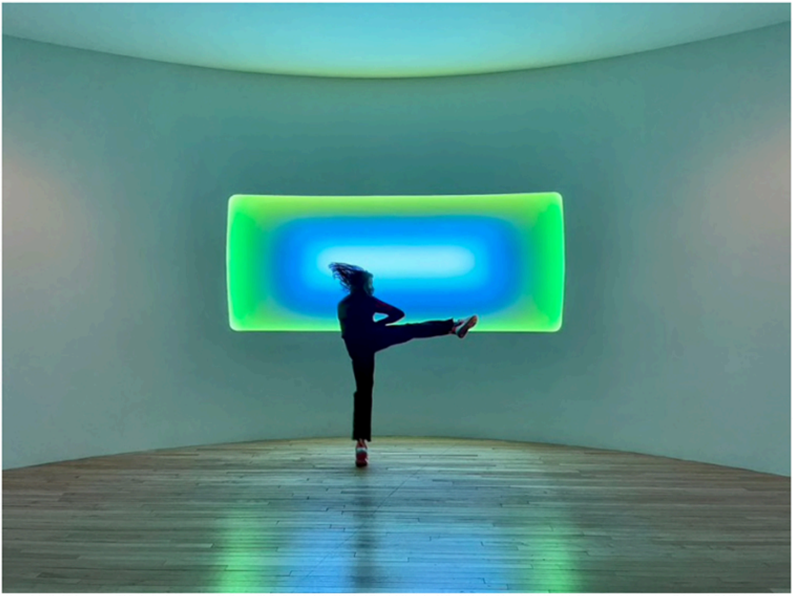
After a year in prison, he moved into the Mendota Hotel in Santa Monica and started experimenting with an old projector, throwing its sharp beam onto a corner, intrigued by how the light seemed to take physical form. It was an intuitive leap, against the grain. When he contacted his ceramics teachers at UC Irvine to tell them what he was up to, they were dumbfounded. “They had these giant mills to turn clay. They even did bronze casting. They said, ‘You want to work with *light?*’” Turrell remembered. A review of one of his shows from around that time was equally dubious. “It said, ‘This is just light on a wall.’ Which was fair.”



James Turrell's "The Color Inside" at the University of Texas at Austin. FLORIAN HOLZHERR/COURTESY OF LANDMARKS, THE PUBLIC ART PROGRAM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Of course, a Turrell piece is just light on a wall in the same way a Rothko work is just paint on a canvas, though it's been a long sell. He remembered giving a lecture at the Des Moines Art Center, which concluded with a question-and-answer session. One audience member shot up her hand before the lecture even ended, clearly agitated. "She said, 'Is this art, or did you just make it up?'" Turrell recalled, eyes twinkling. "My answer was 'yes, and yes' — and the crowd cheered! She was really embarrassed, and I didn't mean for that to happen. But it was true: Yes, it was art, and we *all* make it up."

In contemporary art especially, where a previous generation's grind of academic buffering has frequently left audiences outside a closed conversation, Turrell has a powerful message: Don't overthink it. There are volumes of instructive texts about Turrell's work that can drag at it like an anchor. Complex theoretical premises that lock it into a polemic are many: There are right ways to view it, and wrong.



The author's 12-year old daughter dancing in front of James Turrell's "Dissolve" (2017) at Mass MoCA earlier this year. SIAN RICHARDS PHOTOGRAPHY

Turrell shows little interest in that. Over the course of a few hours this week, he spoke easily and in a deeply informed manner about an array of things — how Quaker shipbuilding informed American competitive sailing, water rights in the Colorado River basin, the origins of modern dance in the schools of Rudolf Steiner, his admiration for the British painter J.M.W. Turner. But every time the conversation turned to his work, Turrell demurred. "What I want to do," he said, "is make something people want to submit to, and offer some reward for that."

A James Turrell is just that thing: an experience of unearthly, primal elegance that exists as yours and yours alone, hovering somewhere just beyond conscious thought. There is no wrong way to experience it. My 12-year old daughter, in the space with his glowing “Dissolve” at Mass MoCA this winter, burst into dance. Turrell offers the chance to see clearly what you take for granted — that sky, those clouds — and wrestle with how that could possibly be so.

JAMES TURRELL: C.A.V.U.

Opening Saturday. Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, 1040 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams. 413-662-2111, www.massmoca.org

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