JAMES TURRELL
Four Light Installations

Center On Contemporary Art, Seattle
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Artworks in the exhibition:
Iltar : © James Turrell 1975
Amba, Rayzor, House Of Wax : © James Turrell 1982

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The six month exhibition of James Turrell installations at the Lippy Building in Seattle's Pioneer Square marks the inaugural presentation of the Center On Contemporary Art. The positive results of the exhibition, both in terms of the caliber of the exhibit, and the response to the show from the public at large, indicate that COCA's unorthodox beginning was a warranted risk. Currently COCA consists of a board of directors, a continually growing membership, and various committees which involve dozens of people outside of the board. COCA has an office headquarters which is staffed by one employee. COCA does not have an administrative staff or permanent exhibition space as yet. These necessary but expensive developments were given second priority by the founding group, in favor of launching a program first.

Beginning in May of 1980, discussion of the need for a new art center in Seattle began among a group of people vitally concerned with contemporary art. The direction of the proposed center was the focus of the talk and debate during the next five months of meetings. The first official 'statement of purpose' was written for presentation to the community at a public meeting held in a large hall on November 12. It read:

*We advocate the formation of a contemporary art center in Seattle. The principle goal of the center is to be a catalyst and a forum for the advancement and understanding of contemporary art. The center will energetically participate in both current and evolving issues of contemporary art. This will be done through exhibitions, residencies, special projects, publications, and public discussions. The scope of the center will be regional, national and international. The center does not intend to acquire a permanent collection, choosing instead to stimulate and respond to new activity.*

Beyond the officially stated goals other ambitions have motivated the project. Basically COCA intends to show art which is not being seen in Seattle. COCA is very interested in broadening the audience for contemporary art. COCA hopes to inspire controversy and new communication within the existing art community, thereby multiplying the opportunities to present more and different kinds of contemporary art. In presenting art, COCA has envisioned large-scale, strong statements, and conditions which allow the art to resonate.

In January 1981, the COCA steering committee selected Jim Turrell as the artist for COCA’s first major exhibition. It was further decided that the exhibition would be of major scale, and long duration. With that accomplished, money and space were still needed. During the year that followed the ambitious plan for the exhibit was realized due to the drive of the initiators, the support of literally hundreds of individuals and volunteers, and a few absolutely crucial developments.

From our first contact with Turrell, he was enthusiastic and extremely cooperative, despite the primitive state of the organization. Turrell's good faith and flexibility have been essential to the success of the project, and amount to a major donation.
The process of developing a board of directors, at first slow to build, was pressured by the immediate need to raise money to mount the exhibit. Gradually a few interested individuals stepped forward and began to work. The turning point in the fund-raising effort occurred when boardmember Nancy Sternoff, in the first month of working with COCA, negotiated a major donation from Knoll International. This contribution established momentum to the fund-raising, and in essence made the exhibition possible.

In seeking a site for the exhibition we enlisted the support of architect Jim Olson of Olson/Walker Partners, Architects. Jim Olson arranged for our use of the Lippy Building with the cooperation of his firm and that of Hewitt/Daly Architects (who are associates in the future development of the building). Securing the space for the exhibit gave the project physical reality, and allowed Turrell to begin to work.

Turrell arrived in Seattle the first week of December 1981 to begin the construction of the installations. He worked steadily for almost two months with a crew of 10, assisted by many volunteer workers. This mammoth effort amounted to the reconstruction of the interior of the building on the first, mezzanine and second floors. For those who participated and those who observed, the whole affair had the awe inspiring character of a barn raising.

With the Turrell exhibit COCA's primary goals have been met, and a great beginning made. Now COCA faces the double challenge of continuing to present an innovative program, and establish itself structurally. Work is well underway on both counts, and momentum is with us.
The four large works by James Turrell installed in January, 1982, as the first exhibition in Seattle's new Center on Contemporary Art, have created a very special occasion in a town better known for its lumber trade, airplanes, shipping and suburban amenities. The pieces are large, impressively mounted, and have been given a six-month lease on life. The long-term nature of the exhibit has given the city access appropriate to some of the more complex ideas that have been engaging advanced artists in this country and Europe for the past several decades.

It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s that American art first began to come of age. Sometimes in isolation, sometimes in New York or on the West Coast, new types of painting and sculpture were emerging that were beginning to have a special quality to them that set them quite apart from earlier American art. There was the feeling that Paris was no longer the “art capital” of the world, and that something distinctively American had taken its place. It was then that a group of painters now generally grouped under the label of Abstract Expressionists rather suddenly, after a long period of private struggle and public indifference, found their work taken up by a society which had become eager to acquire culture. Collectors who found they had not been courageous enough to collect European modern art when it was still new, in turn began to buy contemporary art for some very American reasons: as a gamble, as high fashion, because it was new, and perhaps most characteristically of all, as an investment. All this was very exciting. Private collectors and museums were acquiring new things, gallery dealers and museum curators were building reputations, and a public avid for novelty and sophistication was busy seeking out new trends all over the country, making art history from moment to moment. Within a few years, pictures and sculptures began fetching very impressive prices, galleries became businesses concerned with “product,” and, by the mid-sixties, a new industry was born.

It wasn't long before it became apparent that the art business — or the industrial approach to turning out art — possessed some disadvantages. Without a seasoned understanding of a number of contemporary artistic concerns, it was difficult to judge whether a given work was a fresh advance in celebrating pure color-field painting, or something dangerously close to decorative yard goods. Similarly, in sculpture, an increase in size and the use of new media, including plastics, found objects and industrial materials, often expanded freestanding sculptures until they completely covered walls or formed enclosing environments. Some were unforgettable — but many others, even though agreeably crafted with great precision or brilliant slapdash idiosyncrasy, were simply quite impersonal. Quantity and quality were as far apart as ever.

Over the long haul, of course, artists seem always to have had some very basic interests, no matter how their art was ultimately disposed of. And a deep curiosity about reality — or how to approach truth and beauty, if you prefer Keats' version — has been a redoubtable rudder, giving direction to countless apparently disparate expressions of human interest in life.

We have been fortunate, thanks chiefly to photography, widely distributed in the media, to be
able to become familiar with the works of many cultures in addition to our own. The once-narrow path of official art — from Greek temples and sculptures to cathedrals, Renaissance architecture and painting — has been expanded to include the enormous variety of indigenous art and architecture created all over the world for thousands of years. We have come to respect the work of the Cave Painters of Altamira, the builders of such sites as Chaco Canyon and Stonehenge, and even the very practical rural and factory buildings built early in the century in this country by local craftsmen.

These anonymous builders of structures or practical objects were not performing in an industrial way: the work was not produced to “sell.” For them, instead, it was essential to take advantage of and reintegrate common, locally available materials, and to transform them into solutions for the old and ever present need to feel a direction, to feel properly located — both physically and psychologically — with respect to the conditions of life.

What is created by this very personal activity is often termed “local color”: it's what we hope to find when we travel, something peculiar to a particular locality, familiar but made from different materials, for individual local needs. And it's becoming increasingly scarce. Because local color is not distributed nationally; it's made by the sort of person LeviStrauss has described as a “bricoleur.” Simon Rodia, who built his distinctive towers in Watts, a suburb of Los Angeles, was a bricoleur — able to employ nearly everything as building material, concrete objects as well as the air and light that animate his work. But there are many other kinds of bricoleurs, each with a special feeling for transforming materials.

Beginning in the 1960s, from one point of view, a number of artists working with a “bricoleur” sensibility began to confront the fact of an emerging art industry. While the marketing of art could not be ignored, artists began to create works that resisted their own merchandizing. Some work was made difficult to collect by an enormous increase in its scale; other work was almost dematerialized or “conceptualized”; still other work made use of such ordinary or industrial materials that, away from the special atmosphere of a gallery or museum, they were nearly indistinguishable from raw materials in a warehouse. Work was much more frequently situated in outdoor locations, in places sometimes accessible only to a very much smaller and more determined audience. And many works of art ironically seemed to function as vestibules through which one might pass in order to learn to see ordinary real life as something indeed worth being interested in.

All these currents — and no doubt many more — were in the air when James Turrell first began to combine light and space in his Santa Monica studio in the mid 1960s, when he was in his twenties. His early gallery works were notable at the time not only for their imposing “presence,” but also because there was no real salable object. One could arrange to recreate the effect, but in fact there was only the projection onto a wall, or across the corner of a room, of a brilliant, generally rectangular entity that gave the effect of solidity, but could be turned off like a light. Likewise, visitors to his studio, which was itself a carefully enclosed space punctuated by a complex series of apertures which let in light from the “outside world,” came away only with what they could remember.

If the light in the studio originated from real outside events, why then wasn’t the effect chaotic? As chaotic, for example, as the wildly shaped sheets of light that car headlights may swing across a darkened bedroom ceiling? Because the structure of the studio itself was integral to Turrell’s observations about the characteristic properties and effects of light. The effect is not chaotic because, on the boundary between the source of the light and its presence alongside us, there is an aperture. Throughout his work, Turrell has been concerned to understand the properties of apertures. A lens, for example, placed in an aperture, will reverse the image of an object, as in a camera. But even a very simple opening can reverse the apparent direction of a moving light source: as the sun rises, the spot of light moves down the wall to the floor. The aperture is essential to vision.

In addition, Turrell has frequently chosen to work with apertures that are rectangular, and that thus take part in the everyday, modular characteristics shared by such things as concrete sidewalks, windows, doors, tables, beds, photographs (including movies), and the very pages of books. Rectangles have become an everyday algebra, set in a larger, seasonal North-South, East-West context: they form a grid by means of which people are accustomed to locate themselves.

Thus, it’s important to realize how consciously controlled the apparent simplicity of Turrell’s work is.
We are not being presented with a reproduction of the aurora borealis or a theatrical event: we are standing in a specially constructed, camera-like room that is structured to sense us as we view it; we share with the work in absorbing what illumination is at hand, and for a while we resonate with some of its complexities.

At the Center on Contemporary Art, the exhibition makes use of four large rooms — nearly the entirety of a large, older building in Seattle's Pioneer Square, a historic preservation district where for a few blocks almost every building is rich with red brick, hand-cut stone, and anonymous decorative detailing. Entering the Center on street level, one passes the front desk, another wall with the honor roll of names of many volunteer helpers, and turns down a corridor. A separate, residential-size door must be opened to enter the room which comprises the first piece, House of Wax. The room at first appears almost annoyingly dim, but one can easily see what looks like a wide, flat grayish painting as big as a billboard, but much wider, at the far side of the room. Two square columns, each two feet wide, evidently load-bearing supports for the building, stand about six paces apart and about six paces away from the grayish area, and populate the room like monuments.

The only light in the room comes from standard tungsten-filament lights, mounted two on each side up near the fourteen-foot ceiling, and directed not at the aperture, but at the side walls. Everything's painted white except the floor which, from the door, appears to be about the same gray as the "painting." If you're lucky, you've got the room to yourself, and can gradually move toward the grainy, dark grayish-yellow rectangle. At one point, the pillars cover the side lights, and at a distance of about six paces, the twenty-one-foot wide aperture fills the entire field of vision — and seems to curve out and enclose the viewer. Then, studying the flat "field" of the painting, it becomes a volume: a simple, unlighted room, with ceiling, walls and corners — but also a space containing an evenly distributed, grainy atmosphere much like that "seen" with closed eyes. Yet that room behind the aperture is not the work; nor, exactly, is the atmosphere within the aperture, or its property of interacting with the viewer, or the first and recoverable impression of flatness.

Eager to find out more, one proceeds to the next floor, to Iltar, a piece which at first appears so much like House of Wax that one feels cheated of some anticipated thrill. There it is, one may think, one of those pieces of modern art which could mean everything or nothing — like grains of sand in which one can see the world, provided one supplies the world one wishes to see. Perhaps this resistance to making it easy for the viewer is the "price of admission" Turrell mentions in his interviews. It's necessary, then, to settle down and consider, as best one can, why an artist would choose, from so many possibilities, to build two such similar pieces. There are again two monumental columns here, but they are significantly narrower; the ceiling is lower and carried on heavy beams; the light is brighter (four lights on each side), and consequently the bluish-gray field appears darker and more vibrant. Actually, the color of the field is influenced by a bit of blue fluorescent light spilling into one back corner of the room from the next work. But Iltar differs from House of Wax especially in that the slightly smaller aperture and brighter lighting seem to draw the viewer into a closer observation of the effects of the special atmosphere in the room beyond the aperture. There, corners can seem to project forward, planes appear to slant back directly from the aperture's edge, and fine vertical-line patterns may appear on the lighter, nimbus-like area at the center.

In both of these works, however, it seems natural to stand between the columns and gaze at the soft, grainy field that inhabits the other side of the aperture, and which at once seems to "sit out" from the wall three or four inches, and to extend away an unfathomable distance. The central, lighter nimbus in that distance gradually acts to center the observer, and defeats intellectual testing. All the day's after-images race themselves like comic-book figures across the screen-like space until one's nerves are finally unloaded and caught up to the present moment; then the works begin to offer you their intense and peculiarly comforting presence.

Amba, in the third room, is an immediate contrast. Here, after having wished for more light to see exactly what's going on, one has plenty — pink/ blue cloudlight floods into the room from three enormous, squareish "windows," as if one were visiting some celestial aquarium. Here, the pillars have become part of a wall in which the windows are inset, and mounted on the side of the wall we can't see are the two light sources: on the left, blue light; on the right, red. From midpoint of the room, there's a blue bay on the left, a pink one on the right, and in the center a blending area in which the colors merge
completely, although the brain insists it sees minute, individual intermingled blue and pink particles. Yet, with all this light, one cannot even clearly perceive the boundaries of the illuminated space — a distance of perhaps twenty feet. Instead, a dense fog of light-color fills the entire volume and pushes back one’s willful attempts to determine the “real area” of the space.

The colors, as opposite as pink and blue baby blankets, convey at once a total either/or and an interrelationship. They’re separate, but they exist together, and only in terms of each other. From one side of the room, the piece seems mostly blue, with a smaller reddish area; from the other, the pinkish-red is dominant. How you see it depends on what side you’re closest to — although the middle window is the biggest one. But it’s most ironic that the side wall closest to the source of each color, and which “should” be most colored by it, cannot escape a strong wash of its opposite. In fact, the most unmixed color rests on the ceiling and the floor.

Moreover, the interrelationship of the colors, left balancing right, side-to-side, also diagrams the process one has just experienced between oneself and the apertures of House of Wax and Iltar. Here, as Amba diagrams it, blue and red can be seen as equivalent to viewer and aperture. As one has interacted with the first two pieces, by either attempting to dominate or be controlled by them, so Amba permits one to look at an objectified instance of such an interaction. In Turrell’s work, any over-emphasis on either the viewer or the work comprises an incomplete experience: once in contact with each other, they cannot be understood unless each is seen in terms of the other. Anything else is inauthentic.

The fourth piece, Rayzor, is the smallest of the group, but is still in major scale. Beyond a narrow strip of floor about ten paces wide is a twenty-foot-deep white chamber, at the far side of which is mounted a rectangular wall, supported in such a way that a six to eight inch unbroken frame of blue-white light surrounds it. The billboard-size rectangle, which one realizes must be painted white, appears sunk in darkness by contrast with the light pouring from around its edges. And the sheer size of the rectangle makes it impossible to see all the edges clearly at once. The edge you concentrate on may remain straight, but it is at the expense of the others, which flicker, bend, curve, and bow in and out. The light area itself has the same foggy-solid atmosphere as in Amba, but seems to ruffle, with alternating six-inch blocks of bluer and then greener light.

For some viewers, there’s a sense of expanding depth in the comparatively dark area of the rectangle. For others, aware that the material comprising the rectangle in fact hides a large window area from which one once could see directly outside, Rayzor is more melancholy: all the light we are in fact seeing the piece with trickles in from around the edges of what blocks our direct vision. The precision of the indirectness, as with a metaphor, is what makes it valuable.

One does not leave the exhibition at this point, however: in order to go, it’s necessary to balance the conditions still another way, by retracing the route taken in. It’s a well-considered accident. Amba now appears to be not only the pink/blue window areas within which the light results in an impenetrable space, but also the “viewer’s half” of the room. This “dark” half is lit by absolutely nothing other than that impenetrable space, and yet one can make out the very grain of the floorboards. It’s evident then, that while the special atmosphere at first appears to be contained beyond the squarish windows, it also permits an equally large area to be traversed rationally. Moving on to Iltar, one discovers that the entire room is now golden, the walls like amber velvet, the aperture quite greenish-black. It is color reversal, the retinal effect of having been for so long in the bluish light of Rayzor and Amba. Gradually the visual sensation fades — but one retains nevertheless a strong sensation of hearthlike warmth. Finally, at House of Wax, one finds a much brighter and more open room. The large aperture dominates everything else with a real, waxy, pliable quality that one does not want to leave behind. The grayness that seemed so insufficient at first now seems opulent and completely correct, and the indistinctness of the space behind the aperture a nourishing release from arbitrary limits.

Finally one must step back out onto the street. Light, noise and movement return in mass quantities. Shapes look bright and thin, even far into the distance, and for a moment the mania for measurement, linear perspective and abrupt contrast are overwhelming. One sees every wrinkle in people’s clothing, and feels driven to the horizon by the narrowing ribbons of sidewalk and pavement. It takes a moment, before you begin automatically hurrying on again, to comprehend that this effect, too has been evoked precisely by what you’ve just experienced — and that this pleasant neighborhood had appeared very differently before experiencing Turrell’s work.
The House of Wax and Iltar are similar in their outward aspects but deal with peripheral vision and the use of light in different ways. Perhaps you could describe those two spaces? The House of Wax has the same outward characteristics in terms of how it’s set up, but the way that it works is different. The thing that is of the most interest to me is that, as you approach it, as you come in between two columns and the light on the side goes more to the periphery, your vision penetrates sooner and the piece will actually advance out to you with a curving or bowing that happens with the “skin” which forms at the front of the volume, between the space that you’re looking into and the space that you’re standing in.

A bowing of that surface out toward you?
Yes. Actually, the size and shape of the aperture itself, the opening, begins to do that. The bowing really does occur right in front of your eyes and comes right up to them. This takes place about two to three feet right in front of it. This front surface curve is more like the work I want to do in certain spaces in the Roden Crater piece.

It makes apparent in some ways the curving of the surface of the eye, a perceptible curvature of space.
Well, that happens in the shape of the aperture, seen from close up. This curving out of the front surface of the space doesn’t have so much to do with the eye, I feel. Frankly, I’m not sure exactly what does this, except that I know that I’m not above using things that I don’t fully understand. But it does seem that there’s a significant difference between the two pieces.

The one upstairs, Iltar, operates much like all the ones in the Prado series, and that is more known to me. The House of Wax has to do with the absolute size of working in space in relationship to you, and also to how quickly it opens up in relationship to the light on the side. That has a lot to do with stepping out from between the pillars on approach, too.

There’s a difference in the use of light itself in the two pieces — one is reflective light and one is ambient light. Is that correct?
No, they’re both the same kind of light. But the light level is more than twice as much in Iltar, the piece upstairs. There are only two lights on each side downstairs; four upstairs. The lights downstairs are lower level. Also, that works well when you first come in off the street. It takes a little while to dark-adjust, often up to ten minutes for a full dark-adjustment. So you do take advantage of the difference between the light levels that you have on the street and when you first come into the piece.

So there’s a compensation for the brightness of the street in the order in which the pieces are encountered?
Yes.

Going back to that curving of the space in Iltar and House of Wax: part of the effects that you deal with are physical effects, working with the properties of light.
Basically, there are two things happening. First, I’m very interested in the limits of perception and working with those limits, that is, with the physical organism, working with the absolute limits of what we can see and what we can’t see and where colors and where peripheral vision come into play. Secondly, I’m interested in learned limits. We’ve learned to perceive very uniquely in this culture, and differently from other cultures; prejudiced perception. There’s one classic study, a Zulu study in perceptual psychology, where a framework turns on a stick — it resembles a window in...
And all these works are primary visual experiences for the person who visits the space, not translations of your experiences. You're providing them with an arena in which a range of visual experience is possible. That's true. Of course, it takes somebody's vision to have set that up, so that the artist does create and limit the universe of possibilities, and within that you're on your own. In that sense it is like any other art. But it does demand a certain deciding to deal with it, which is this art's price of admission. But every art, I feel, has a price of admission, and often many people don't pay it. They end up looking at the work rather than into it. I think that's the biggest problem with contemporary art for a large portion of America. America hasn't learned it has to pay the price of admission, to look into it rather than just at it.

I do think that there's something important in that aspect of the work; that is, it's a testing of one's perceptual sensitivity and awareness. There is a moment when one has to decide to explore these works, and work out the visual conundrum. You have to take those steps into the room. A lot of people don't, which gets back to your "price of admission." What's interesting to me about IItar and House of Wax is that not only do the pieces have an individual experience, but the two pieces must also be compared with each other in that their differences are very slight, apparently, when one walks into them. Showing two similar pieces together is like using any delineating device — framed format, picture plane, chapter. These two spaces are different in terms of how the light inhabits the spaces, as well as having different perceptual qualities. And for me, the only way to have anyone pay much attention to that fact is to have two similar spaces in proximity which operate differently perceptually. They don't appear the same at all in terms of how that front skin operates, or how the color reaches the brain, in the different spaces. The atmosphere definitely has different thickness coming in from the side.

And different color.

Yes.

Especially upstairs, when you perceive the IItar piece and then return through it, having seen the other two pieces on the floor, your eyes have been altered by the light level in the other spaces, your perception of the color in IItar is radically different, markedly yellow, yellow-green. It's tremendously different, and it takes a certain amount of time for that to die down.

Actually, that reminds me of something — that is, the influence of your experience with view-camera photography. What reminded me of it is how light meters retain a short-duration memory of light that alters a subsequent reading unless the meter is allowed enough time to adjust to the new light level. But apart from that, I'd be interested in how much of this work arises from your experiences in photography, especially House of Wax and IItar.

Well, definitely a sensitivity to light and certain ways of looking at it, with the distance, especially with the ground glass. In fact, these two pieces are what I call the “sensing spaces.” That is, they have similarities to a camera, camera obscura, in that there is a space that you are using as a “sensing space,” and that space has nothing of itself, and it looks out onto another space, as with a camera. It takes all its energy from this other space, through an opening or an aperture. And in a camera, where it's imaged on the rear surface of that space, where the film's laying, you have of course the image. In these spaces, rather than having an image on the “film,” it is diffused throughout the entire space, by virtue of sizing the space and its volume in relationship to the light energy that's going to come through. Similar to tuning a space, or tuning a cavity. These are complex color tones, these aren't just one note — it's not perfectly analogous to sound at all but it's similar. Certain colors will not hold space, certain colors will not hold certain size spaces, and others will. So it is a sensing space made to have some relationship to the space it senses. In that respect it's very similar to
I actually did do camera obscuras and things of this sort. It would seem that there's a parallel to the idea of the sensing spaces in the painstaking visualizing required when working with a view camera. There is the need to think through the imaging process by looking at the landscape and breaking it down into its visual components, and controlling the light being passed through the camera. It does seem that there's a very direct relationship.

Well, I'm also interested in the way we develop the instruments of photography and how they have changed how we see things. Which means that the instrument is an expression of how we are going to see things. That aspect of it has interested me a great deal.

In your earlier works, the projected pieces particularly, there's a much greater use of technology. You've gradually reduced the evidence of technology. The new pieces use very simple light sources. How has that evolved in terms of your thinking about the work?

Well, the way that it's really evolved is, that when I first began, the decision to work with light in space, not light going through plexiglas or scrim, but actually just light inhabiting space and how to deal with that, was a little bit difficult for me, because it's a medium that you can't get your hands on — it's not like clay. It's very difficult to form. You end up forming everything but it. And the first attempts were more deus ex machina. I had to sort of hammer it out more, so that it had to have more devices. It was more done with mirrors, as it were. I paid a lot more attention to the source and how the light came out of it, and less to what it did once it went into the space. So I formed it very crisply and succinctly. And then quiet frankly got a little better at it or understood it a little better and was interested not only in where the light was, but where it wasn't. I think that's pretty evident in the progression of the pieces. But basically they had much the same quality, in how they have different qualities of reality, and how the light inhabits the space, what it does to it.

It's interesting, in the four pieces that are here in Seattle, the pieces begin very quietly with House of Wax and Iltar and then move, at least relative to those four pieces, to a crescendo in the last piece, Rayzor, which is the brightest in terms of light and the most powerful in terms of immediate response to it.

Well frankly, I like working with the whole range of light, because first of all Rayzor has a great deal of subtleties and also has areas where it is nearly brilliant. I mean, there isn't very much light in Rayzor, but there is in relationship to what you've been brought through.

The most intriguing work of the four, to me, partially because I was able, by happenstance, to be there as you developed the solution to the space, is Amba. It was a difficult space, it's the largest of the four pieces, and the most remarkable in its range of color. It's the most directly sensuous, I think, of the four works.

Yes, I like the sensuousity of Rayzor. That is more known to me. The sensuousity of Amba is almost voluptuous. It's more than I could live with; I could certainly look at it. Certainly some of these qualities you'll marry and others you'll just look at.

You'll just date.

You'll just date, right. It's a similar quality in light to Wedgework 3 in the Whitney exhibition in terms of its intensity of color, but where it inherited it and how it did that, I'm still very interested in. What happens to the opposite light in the corners . . . .

The halation . . . .

The halation of the light that's furthest from it's
source is quite interesting to me, because the effect is not at all one that is easily understood — it’s not expected. Frankly, that piece is one that I think I really want to follow up with. It poses more things than it settles.

I think that brings up an interesting point, and that is in this particular exhibition you were dealing with a number of problems, working in a very raw warehouse space with pillars. With Amba — the other three pieces are refinements or variations of pieces that you’ve worked on before — this particular piece seems to be brand new both in the way it was conceived in working through that space — problem solving — and in that sumptuous use of color, and also because of the scale of it. It is the piece that it is most possible to see yourself physically in.

I have to tell you quite honestly that I have looked at all these spaces as spaces I would inhabit, and the reason that I don’t or that it isn’t set up that way here, is because of the nature of exhibitions, which require some maintenance. Now also there seem to be some people who have visited the exhibition that have felt just like I feel.

But House of Wax and Illar, would they function, if you’re inside the sensing space?

Well, they do have an interesting space. But it’s not obviously one that’s made for that, because they don’t have that quality of the grain coming up against your eyes. There are pieces I’ve done that really have that quality.

So it is possible to bracket that space all around you. Yes, it definitely is, but then you’ve got to have a way of entering it, and then of course finding the way out becomes difficult when you shut the door and check out.

You have for a number of years worked with airplanes.

Yes, flying and working in planes and doing aerial photography.

It seems to me that that kind of experience is relevant in terms of being able to sense atmosphere and the qualities of light on a fairly large scale. These works, to me, summarize in discrete chunks, kinds of experiences that are all around us.

Well, there are two ways that the flying and the photography relate, I think. I’m very interested in the instrument that takes us there, as well as the place that it takes us. And the same way that different kinds of photographing equipment will limit or enlarge possibilities, so will aircraft. When you look at the early planes, it was enough that they flew. As soon as they got one that flew, they just cranked a batch out. Then, later on in the 1920s and 1930s, you got into styles of flight. You had some that were cabin planes, that had roll-down windows and flew at a velocity you would describe as stately. There were others that were very fast, that were made for racing and others made for acrobatic flight, and still others made for cargo. As each certain development took place, the form really changed. So I have a love of the instrument as well as where it can take you, and one of the things about flying is that the places it has taken us are places that we haven’t really begun inhabiting until very recently. Perceptually we are still a ground-based being, and we don’t have a real good handle on the spaces of the skies. There are a lot of illusions that occur to pilots, that are actually rather dangerous.

The twilight situations, where the sea and sky merge into one . . .

That happens most anywhere. But there are situations, definitely, where absolute loss of horizon really does change things. Also, just where your perception is wrong. About six hundred to three thousand feet from the ground there’s a quality of the earth curving the wrong way . . . being concave. That’s very interesting to me. It looks like it goes up underneath you. The first to describe this was Antoine de Saint-Exupery. “Wind, Sand and Stars” and “Night Flight,” are the descriptions of the spaces he was involved in. They were very exciting spaces. I have a whole book of illusions that happen to pilots — especially, say, in a turn, and where there are changes in terrain that may not be read as changes in terrain, and it may set up an illusionary quality. The thing is, that we weren’t made for that regime, for that world. The survival qualities that came out in the selection of the species didn’t include aerial space — we weren’t selected for it. Yet here we find ourselves in this place. So essentially what we have to do is get an awareness of this, which is knowing of our own limitations. And we have to add on sensors to help us.

It’s also letting go of our learned experiences, of our learned habits.

It’s definitely a letting go of the attachment of how we sense being correct. Talk to any instrument pilot and you know damn well you’ve had to do that to gain that license. So if you don’t, you’re going to be a dangerous instrument pilot.

Well, that’s one kind of disorientation . . .

But this disorientation is a time that’s pleasurable. Right. But that sort of gap, that area you’re talking about, which is between reality and what we think is right, or what we’ve learned to think is right, is similar to what you’ve mentioned before, in terms of daydreams or dreams.

There are similar qualities to other art experiences that I’ve had. My most memorable experience, in fact, was
at Pomona College, hearing a concert by John Cage. I didn’t know what to expect when I went to hear him — I was a Pasadena boy and in my freshman year — and I went to this concert and I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but I knew it was important. I knew there was something I had to find out about it. It wasn’t that I had any appreciation of it, but I did have that recognition of this being something that I didn’t know about and I really knew I needed to. That was that first quality of... not too dissimilar from being disoriented, pleasurably.  

These pieces are a lot about that. They don’t provide you with a ready set of answers. They plunge you into something which is clearly grounded in physical experience. There’s no flashbulbs popping, there’s no mirrors. You’re not being deceived, but you’re disoriented by what clearly is real and in front of you. Well, it’s very simple. It all comes from seventy-five and sixty watt frosted light bulbs. It’s straightaway light that you have everywhere else.  

But it’s seductive in the same way that you were seduced by John Cage’s music. I think it would be like that for those who are going to “pay the price of admission” — if you pay that price in the sense of walking into these spaces and doing more than simply casting a glance and using only your learned set of vision and saying, “That’s a great painting on the wall, what’s next?” I don’t know. I don’t think anybody could be set up as much as I was set up, coming out of the life I came out of in Pasadena and getting that freshman year. It’s hard to be that set up!  

How much of your childhood — in terms of being raised in a strong Quaker environment, with the absence of decoration, and the importance of reflection, pulling back into oneself to better understand the world outside of yourself — how much of that is in your work? That’s hard for me to answer, because I’m a little too close to that. The thing is, that the things that you’ve mentioned are obvious. There’s obviously an economy of means and also quite a nondecorative bent to that form of Puritanism. I must say I think one of the strongest qualities that you perceive in the experience of these pieces is the one of the nature of time in the pieces. It is a really different time, and that quality is something that comes from them, from those areas. It’s a different time than some kinds of art have. I think that since the works require a direct engagement on the part of the viewer, there’s a heightened sense of time. It’s clear that when you’re in that space and you’re working on the puzzle, there is an awareness of time, of the moment. In the same way that there’s an awareness, suddenly, of the space or the atmosphere in the space.  

Well, your sense of time, the play of time, is changed. In some way it’s heightened, but it’s not heightened by speeding up the time as much as it is a slight suspension of the time. I don’t know, I haven’t a good enough vocabulary about that, but I think the differences in time from House of Wax to Rayzor are pretty interesting. The differences between those pieces are stronger than just the differences in working from very low levels of subtle qualities of light compared to the brilliance. A lot of things that we attribute to one thing may come from very different qualities. An example might be your listening to facts that concern a decision you’re going to make, and in looking at the facts there’s a decision that obviously should be made a certain way. But for some reason you don’t feel like making that decision that particular way. The feeling would be more important than the facts. Generally you’ll make the decision according to the feeling, to what we call the intuitive quality. As soon as you’ve felt that intuitive quality, generally what you’ll do is rearrange facts or give different weighting to facts, so as to make that quality be the rational reason on which you’ve based the decision. Which is to say, it’s not a rational universe at all. We just make reasons. So when you talk about the qualities of the pieces, then you’re really talking about reasons. Time quality or change of existence, or brilliance, or subtle light quality. These are all reasons, in a way. I think it’s very true, in the sense that there are real qualities there — we actually may be looking at different information, but we don’t have a good vocabulary for it. It’s not at all a matter of the Emperor’s New Clothes — we often base decisions on qualities that we don’t have a good vocabulary for. We operate quite well in these areas, and probably sense a great deal; we just haven’t expanded the vocabulary. And knowing doesn’t necessarily mean having a good vocabulary about the knowing.

I’m interested in hearing more about how you tune the spaces. Some of them actually are tuned and some of them I know enough about that I don’t really do that. But occasionally I’ve had to move the walls, because they didn’t “work.” I mean, when they don’t work, when you made it it would just be an empty room. The fact of the matter is that in Il tar, for instance, the room isn’t empty, and there’s something in there — a quality of light that’s very different than the quality of light that’s in the room you inhabit. And that something comes by virtue of having the space sized in relationship to the light that enters it. That sizing isn’t always easily predictable, so I’ve actually had to move
walls and change pieces to get it to do that sometimes. So that’s sort of the “tuning.” I have these sheet-rock rollers that you can slip underneath the wall and actually move it back and forth if you haven’t tightened it down yet.

You just adjust it ‘til it’s “focused,” in the same way that a camera focuses, I suppose.

Well, it sort of jells up.

One thing that is really remarkable about these pieces, is that the immediate responses are so physical. You can walk up to the aperture in Iltar and House of Wax and know, having seen it being constructed, precisely what’s going on in terms of the structure of that space, yet as you approach the edge of that aperture there is a distinct sensation of being about to run into something, into the skin of the aperture.

These pieces do involve boundaries, demarcations between volumes that are occupied by ambient light, by spaces that are directly lit. What happens in those boundaries is crucial and interesting. And it’s about how your vision can penetrate those boundaries in the same way that near lighting will limit the penetration of vision into a space. So that quality of vision penetrating that boundary first requires that a boundary exists, and is then “worked” by being able to change qualities as you move, the near lighting goes off to the periphery and actually dims in terms of what it’s doing to your retina, and your vision can penetrate into a space. It’s just like having a porchlight on, and you can’t see into the night very far, but you can see near things very well. You turn the porch light off and your vision will penetrate into the night.

Not only are you working with the edges of perception and your ability to perceive, but you’re working with the edges of your ability to perceive color in these pieces too.

But you can. First of all, the spaces will gray out, if you stay in them.

Really, over time?
You will lose color, yes.

The reciprocity failure of your eyeball.
Yes, it is that. If there is no form you can’t hold color.

In other words, if you don’t see it on something, if it’s just the lighted color inhabiting the space...

It will tend to fade out over a period of time.

Your eye wants to put it on the wall.

If you back up away from it, then the color tends to come back again, or go into another space and then return. Then you can see the color more clearly. But the color will begin to fade as you’re in there.

The difference in the color in those pieces: the House of Wax has a slightly blue tinge.

And Iltar is more greenish.

More greenishgray. And those are quite subtle. And then as I mentioned earlier there’s that perception of coming back in the room and seeing...

Then they’re not as subtle.

Right. And then you have Amba, which is an atmosphere that is saturated, that appears as a fog of pink and blue color. How is it that the color holds so well in that space? Were the walls painted?

You can’t. If you paint the walls a color, or color the white of the wall, then you see the color as on the wall. It doesn’t occupy the space. But if the color arrives with the light and the space is white, then it has the possibility of occupying the space. They get adjusted, too. You’ll notice in Amba, the lights were taped to get the intensities to match.

To balance the different colors of the lights, you mean.

Yes, the two lights. The two sources. Because it doesn’t usually happen that a forty-watt stick will be just the right amount.

That they’re balanced.

And it definitely isn’t true that blue and red at the same forty-watt intensities are at all equal.

In the Roden Crater piece, you’ll be working with perception of color. How will that be accomplished?

I’ve got all the colors I want in the sky. First of all, because you have the color, you do have some representational color. You have electric and beautiful blues, and as you go towards night you get these really incredible silvers in areas of the sky. Plus you have good reds and oranges. Occasionally there’s green. Of course any time you have a color you can also have its afterimage to work with. And with the color and its afterimage, and with two dissimilar or nearly complementary colors, working with a simultaneous contrast to another, you can change any portion of the sky to be different colors.

You were involved, as were a number of artists in the 1960s and 1970s working in California, with environmental works. I’d like to know a little more about this. Site specific!

Of course, there was a later movement of East Coast artists moving West, as it were, but it seems to me that there were a group of artists working at a slightly earlier date in the Los Angeles area on works that were specifically dealing with environmental spaces. I just wanted to know more about when you began this kind of work and moved away from the camera and your earlier sculptural pieces — and how you evolved into dealing with whole spaces and beginning these light spaces or tuned spaces.

Well, actually, I’ve never really worked with photography in terms of putting it out as my work. But in
terms of working with the whole space, that began in 1968. That's the first work that I did using my whole studio. And I was among the first to do that, without a doubt. But those aren't interesting questions. I mean, everybody makes their own history up. Actually, the thing that's most interesting is that a lot of artists are involved in the Cargo Cult — that is, they collect a lot of tools and things with which to make art, and often the tools and the things that are collected are paid more attention to than what's made with them. And in the same way, artists get involved in making studios, and put great effort into the making of studios rather than into the art that goes out of the studio. I was definitely one of those! In fact, that really became my art. I made studios, and those became the spaces.

Your work was never really formally exhibited except that your studio was open at periodic points, is that correct?

It was formally exhibited at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967.

Right. But after that point, you had no formal . . . no way, perhaps, of exhibiting the work until a fairly later time.

I exhibited formally in my own place. Perhaps even more formally than you would in a museum, because a museum's a very loose structure, people wander in and out. I definitely did exhibit it, all the time from then on, and made sure people came to see it, and it did get reviewed and was in "Newsweek" and "Time." That's as formal as it comes.

"Time" and "Newsweek" — we're talking formal. You have to remember that some people have more access to galleries. Now the problem with galleries is that they generally want to have something to sell. You were not marketing.

Well, I wasn't at that point — it wasn't easily done. It would require a good outlay that a gallery might not get back. And also my experience with that was such that I shied away from that. My first gallery exhibition was at Castelli's in 1981, just a year ago.

In the last couple of years, though, you've had more opportunities to do pieces like the COCA pieces, in other words, create exhibitions, in a fairly short time I suppose, compared to the years you were working in your studio and altering that space . . .

The biggest change was losing the studio.

You moved to Flagstaff.

But the thing that precipitated all that was losing the studio, was being evicted. Then, the effort that I'd put into it and what I'd made there. It really was a drastic shock to lose that.

It was torn down?

It was bought by a group and they poured money into it and charged outrageous rents. I wasn't alone — other people lost their studios, too. This changed things. That had been a very important period, there in Ocean Park. A storefront artist's existence is as near to artist-in-the-garret or artist-in-the-loft as a Californian can come. Two blocks from the beach. Yes, there's nothing like poor white beach. I don't think it'll ever exist again. Not in Southern California.

Maybe elsewhere. What a great place.

You, and a few other California artists, had greater acceptance of your work in Europe than most of the United States, in the 1960s and 1970s — at least greater acceptance in the terms of pieces being purchased or pieces being commissioned. Recently, in the last couple of years, there's been a rediscovery, shall we say, of artists who have been working, such as yourself, for a long time on the West Coast.

That's the sort of dues that you pay on the West Coast. They're different dues in New York. West Coast dues are to work, and do interesting work, and perhaps get a few shows here and there, but nothing happens. Then finally, after ten to fifteen years, when they realize that you haven't gone away, then . . .

The pieces that you exhibit now, the pieces done for exhibition or short-term display, how much of these types of experiences will be involved in the crater project? There's clearly the crater itself, and the doming of the sky, and that area, but there are also tunnels and other chambers to be built. How much of these indoor pieces are leading up, in a sense, to those kinds of experiences? Or is the experience outside radically different from the experience you get in these interior, calculated spaces?

The pieces are as calculated, though I prefer the word "worked." And the qualities with which the light resides in the spaces are similar. However, these qualities change over time so that the crater pieces will have a very different sense of time than these. These pieces often seem more to suspend time than to be involved in it. The pieces at the crater will necessarily involve time because they are powered by events that occur in time. But this time will not be an everyday time because the whole place is in an area where geologic time is most predominant.

The piece Rayzor in the COCA exhibit, to most people's perception, is simply fluorescent light, but there is a bank of windows behind the plane that is floating in the space. Over time, one would perceive subtle differences that have to do with . . .

The point there was to mix light so that . . . the more you mix it the paler it gets, as opposed to brighter.
The intensity is going to change if we go from bright sunlight to cloudy day to night. There are going to be subtle changes. They will be quite subtle, because the fluorescent lights are so much stronger in the piece. Anyway, it won't be much of a change. But what I was thinking about was the nature of working outdoors in a permanent piece, where you're working over seasonal changes, and you're working with atmospheric changes that aren't under your control. These pieces in COCA have that control in the sense that you are limiting or condensing the experience for the viewer, whereas in the crater project, in working with color, in working with atmospheric changes, the range of experiences seems so much greater, that it would seem to be difficult to control. . . . Well, they may be difficult to limit, but they're not unknown. But you're also working in the crater project with celestial events.
Heavenly, please.
James Turrell shapes spaces with light that appears as substantial as a cloud seen at a distance; but upon moving into a cloud, of course, one finds the mass dissolving into atmosphere. The original configuration can only be verified by memory and a bit of mist.

Pamela Hammond is the associate editor of Images and Issues.

I recall standing in dimly lit halls and peering into museum dioramas as a child, finding myself wonderously transported to the African desert or the Asian tundra. At COCA, too, we enter intimate, light-sensitized rooms that invite hushed tones and contemplation. But Turrell reverses expectations: the space, purged of any extraneous content that might interfere with our perception of light's materiality, seems to peer at us...

Turrell’s work parallels a tradition in American art that is rooted to the land and to natural forces. Among landscape painters of the last century, particularly the Luminists, a pantheistic preoccupation flourished. In the twentieth century, that romantic notion continued and assumed new forms. The new frontier no longer lay beyond the next mountain range; it became space itself, billions of light years spread out before us to infinity. Cast into weightlessness, we have been challenged to examine our perceptions of nature...

Turrell manipulates light, the primordial messenger of energy in the universe, and makes us feel as if we have never fully seen before. No longer an homage to the Great Plan, but romantic and heroic nevertheless, Turrell’s art correlates vision with self-knowledge; the real and the ideal crystallize in light...

Do you intend your art to reach beyond the physical properties of light? My art deals with light itself. It’s not the bearer of the revelation — it is the revelation. I make spaces that are not totally unknown to us, [that are] similar to dreamlike spaces; when you look into them, the rules seem to be different from the rules of the space in which you are standing. A writer can sometimes conjure up such a space — so powerful that events in the room in which you are reading go unnoticed, because you’re in the space generated by the words.

The closest comparison for me is the space often entered while driving. After awhile, we realize we haven’t been driving — we’ve been thinking about something, and we hardly remember the route. We drift off to another place, and we’re more there than on the road, but somehow we’re able to operate. I like those things to coexist, like a daydream: here’s this reality, there’s that reality. As we move about these spaces, the reality changes, and I like a state that allows us to assemble the reality ourselves.

But freeway driving strikes me as an almost melancholy state. Your work stimulates a sharper response, an acute state that requires alertness to know when to shift gears or when to let the image slide and bring it back. That may be true, but you paid the price of admission. Every work of art has its price of admission; that is, we may look at a painting rather than looking into it. Some work yields slowly, but once we are able to see, the full impact can be there. I think a lack of knowledge about contemporary art is a problem in this culture. We haven’t brought people up to what’s happening right now. Modern
art is all there ever was: it was all made when it was now. Primarily, artists determine what art is, and in this culture a select few will do that — an elitist few, of course, but that is the absolute truth of the matter. Our art is not any sort of “people’s” art. Art is a special thing that people do. We've structured our nation and economy in such a way that art has been designated as a nonproductive activity, but of course, the opposite is true.

You work in three dimensions, but at times I see the work as a series of shifting two-dimensional planes. Basically the work is about dimensionality, two-dimensionality included. Like Monet working beyond two dimensions and using light as an illusion? Not as an illusion. When painters work on a two-dimensional surface, they allude to another dimensionality by doing virtually anything on the surface. I'm involved in a similar pursuit: I work the dimensionality of an existing space so that it is clear that the physical and structural constraints do not solely determine the perceived space.

Monet speaks of mental processes, the viewer's subjectivity and unfixed position. These ideas have flowed forward into this century to artists such as you. I think that you see a lot when you see that connection. Cezanne, who everyone seems to regard as the initiator, recorded the vision; the paintings made themselves and were documents of his visual experience, as opposed to work that included the viewer.

Monet's paintings are illusions, but your environments interchange illusion with reality. But my “illusion” is definitely not a trompe l’oeil illusion and, in fact, is not an illusion at all. When you perceive a surface from a distance and move closer to see demarcation between the light in that space and a certain kind of light that you’re in, you’re faced with the fact that something is actually there. But no illusion exists, because the space doesn’t allude to something that it is not. The light draws attention only to what it is. So when you sense surfaces or borders, these are really there. Surfaces have a tangibility and often [convey] a tactile sense. I think the work is very sensuous and has a quality of physical presence, but it’s not the kind of presence that you can substantiate by reaching out with your hand. However, it is the kind of presence you may want to substantiate that way.

Your work plays havoc with the human need to verify experience through external stimuli — touch, sight, sound cues. This morning I watched a man in the gallery. He immediately clasped his hands behind his back and approached the work. Then he reached out tentatively to the opening as if he expected it to grab him. Your art can be intimidating to people.

Your work breaks old habits and sets up new ways of seeing for us. No, you set up the new patterns. This art is decidedly non-vicarious. Cezanne presented you with a record of the way in which he saw things. This art is definitely not that. While my seeing may have generated the work, you assemble the reality of the work. I set up this vehicle through which you discover the way you see. But this work is the result of your vision, and although the product does not bear your mark, (the direct evidence of your hand), we sense your touch.

Obviously, my work does not raise the issue of the hand, even though these pieces are completely handmade. But the work definitely comes from human consciousness, and it is unique. The work has a quality that is distinct from [pieces by] other artists who work with the same material. Does the fact that you are an artist distinguish these experiences from mere phenomenological exercises?

The real issue is not taking perceptual phenomena and making art out of them; you can look to Cezanne for that. Just look at the Mont Saint-Victoire paintings, and you'll see someone who sensed the phenomenon of seeing. Monet moves from sensing the issue (in the earlier work) to being involved in sensing the painting itself, as in the water lily paintings.

You become the painting. In Jackson Pollock's large works, he involves peripheral vision, probably best expressed when the painting
dissolves surface and becomes atmospheric space. True, but Pollock gets involved with design. When his paintings become anticompositional, I find them very interesting.

What were your own antecedents to this body of work?

An important stage for me came during the time I spent at the studio in Ocean Park (1968-1970). I made a series that consisted of essentially one physical space. How you opened that space onto the space outside itself — the street — changed the inside space. It became my first “sensing space,” that is, a space that was determined by something that occurred outside of itself. The two pieces in Seattle, House of Wax on the bottom floor and Ittar above, are sensing spaces, because they draw all their energy from the spaces just outside themselves, the spaces you stand in. In those sensing spaces, the energy (the light) diffuses throughout the entire space as it passes through the opening and becomes an expression of the space you’re standing in. A camera’s aperture provides a similar opening as it looks out onto a scene, and the energy from that scene comes through the opening and is focused on the rear surface of the inside space of the camera, the film plane. The difference in my work is that the light is diffused instead of focused, and the space size is coordinated with the color tone that enters. In this way, the light is made to reside in the space, not on the walls. In a sense, these pieces are like chamber music, like a flute solo; the Roden Crater piece and the Main and Hill Studio series in Ocean park are more like the symphonies.

The exhibition pieces, then, aren’t mini-works of your other spaces, in which the viewer is completely immersed.

Yes and no. When a lot of people walk on them, the surfaces are difficult to keep clean. So a provision must be made to maintain the work, and that’s usually the first thing to be ignored. They are too fragile for public exhibition in the sense that when marks appear on the surface, instead of looking at space you look at surface. I don’t care about “perfect” walls, surfaces, and edges — I just don’t want them to be noticed.

Our involvement in the exhibition pieces, then, is limited, because if we could enter the spaces, they would stimulate ideas not related to prior associations.

They each offer different arenas that allow their own possibilities. I try to take advantage of their unique possibilities. At the same time, I don’t mind that people feel as if they’d like to be inside the spaces, because that is where I was when I thought of the work. In Arizona I’m working on some spaces with sand floors and walls that are made of a plaster [compounded with] the same sand so that the walls and floor will share the same quality. The Roden Crater piece will have spaces that you can enter into as well as look into. When you look back, the space that you just left is altered and charged by the juxtaposition.

Your Roden Crater project seems the ultimate move made by an artist to link individual human experience to the universe.

I might like to think that, but on the other hand, the same sort of linkages exist in everything; for example, the DNA in every cell in your body is an expression of your entire self. Therefore, any small effort is a microcosm of the whole.

But in your work we sense this linkage more than we see it in other artist’s works. Their concerns are predominantly formal or self-expressive or decorative.

That has to do with the purpose. I am not concerned with decorative qualities. I sense that you believe you’re more successful in clarifying that linkage in your studio pieces and at Roden Crater than in the exhibition pieces.

They are more successful in some aspects and less successful in others. The exhibition pieces are more succinct, highly focused statements and in that way perhaps more “successful.” The Main and Hill Street spaces and the Roden Crater piece are broader arenas that are more personal and risky but perhaps less succinct. In that way they are more important, because they break rich ground for subsequent work. I am reminded of the difference between a daydream — a fantasized ideal — and a dream — a more full-blown, anything-goes saga. I want to make the piece function in its surroundings. I would like to dissolve the entry, evaporate a demarcation between being in and out of the piece. But the COCA pieces make a concise statement that stands in time. Their suspension of time is very distinct from the sense of time that exists in the works I have done in Arizona. They’re somewhat responsive to events that occur outside the space you’re in. I like the different qualities of both projects.

An artist’s relationship to nature can take a direction in which the human touch is obvious or in which the distinction between the human touch and natural phenomena grays.
The ultimate conceit, I imagine, is to involve oneself in nature in such a way that your touch is indistinguishable from nature. I think that involvement is very peculiar, but it produces interesting art and comes to play in relationship to the pieces at Roden Crater. The way we have set up the proffering of art is not dissimilar. Here you get a building and do a piece that exists until it comes down; the work’s relationship to the outside is not very crucial. You have definite limits — now you’re in and now you’re out of the piece. As I mentioned, I’m interested in dissolving the distinctions between the work and the surroundings. But on the other hand, I must say, when you go up and through the pieces here and then come outside, the outside reality is definitely refreshed.

Your desire to have the work melt into the surroundings seems to have carried over into your role in the installation process. I understand that one of the carpenters approached you in disbelief at the opening last night, not realizing that you were indeed the artist.

That may be a little unusual. I was surprised by that myself. Actually, two people had that revelation last night. I guess they thought I was a contractor. Part of the production process is like writing a poem and then printing the book. The work can be made by other people, if you direct them carefully enough. I do like to see to some of the detail, I guess. That seems to have been the word out here.

How do you feel the work has changed since the Whitney exhibit in 1980?

Fats Waller once said something to the effect that people never change, they just stand more revealed. The newest piece, Amba — the one where I worked through the columns — was a surprise for me, the result of a situation that I never wanted to consider. Actually, those three pieces of the top floor and the way they tie together intrigued me. In Iltar you stand in direct light and look into ambient light; in Amba you stand in ambient light and look into direct light; and in Rayzor you’re looking at ambient light and direct light right next to each other. Rayzor tends to dematerialize something that’s physically there. In Iltar the light tends to materialize something that’s thought not to be there. I like to work the relation between direct light and indirect light, to define space in such a way that the light resides within the space and feels physically there.

In Amba you’re immediately aware of the spatial definition — three openings framed by a wide lip that reveals a large space, borders detectable, filled with graduated, colored light.

The openings are a result of the column width. I like to work with our visual penetration. If you look out your door at night and turn on an outside light, you’ll see things close to you clearly, but the light will limit your vision at any distance. Turn off the light and you can see further, although then you don’t see near objects as distinctly. I’m working with this quality of visual penetration at [Roden] Crater. When sun lights the near atmosphere, you can’t see through it. Sunlight defines a space called sky. At night the sun doesn’t light the atmosphere, and you can see through it. You can see billions of light-years, but you don’t see quite as well close to you. This phenomenon happens in pieces where I have the light near you, like the aperture pieces. The lights are set in such a way that you’re in a lighted space looking into a space having less light. Right away, the light limits your visual penetration. When you approach, the lighted area passes to the side, and your vision penetrates the space — the space yields to your vision. This happens more in House of Wax than in Iltar.

In Amba I could almost taste the color as I moved from aperture to aperture. Standing close to the rosy side, I looked toward the misty blue corner and the pink tones veiled around me. Amba seems the essence of sensuality.

Just because the work has little decorative sense doesn’t take any sensuousness away. Sensuality implies the pleasure of sensing. Amba is directly lit and you stand in ambient light — two opposite qualities of light. Direct light will generally define surface, and ambient light can define space. With direct light, this definition is more difficult, but it is very possible with low levels of light. Actually, the space you’re looking at has only forty watts of light in it.

All the space feels sensitized with light, which is different from the piece shown at the ARCO Center for Visual Art in 1976. In that work, the light caused the viewer to approach the piece differently. Here, again, I notice that people who do not know your work are surprised, but at ARCO the initiation was shocking. The gallery space, usually used for painting exhibitions, seemed so mundane that people initially accepted the rectangular opening in the wall as a gray painting — just like that. Here I’m already in a sensitized space when I walk in; I’m immediately part of the work.
I had to be careful about the light level between pieces. In the hallways the light level is carefully established so that you’re not desensitized. Yes, after being in the spaces for a few hours, I was jolted by the light when I walked into the office. People do just blast each other with this light. It is actually slightly blinding. We have excellent night vision, good for perceiving color, but we lose that sensitivity when we’re blinded. Resensitizing takes a long time. 

We have discussed your work without encountering an issue that (from an audience point of view) arises frequently: “If they had this at church, I’d go every Sunday” is a typical reaction. I’ve noted that in articles about your work, writers often share their personal revelations. Your work strikes a chord, for others and myself, that is decidedly spiritual. Do you intend to make spiritual pieces?

We can’t keep people from looking at the stars and thinking of the cosmos, but I’m not concerned with religious content in my work. I don’t mean that when I look at the heavens, the stars, I don’t think of the cosmos myself. I think those questions get mixed up with how we’ve looked beyond ourselves through organized religion. Obviously, this work is not beyond ourselves, because we have — I have, in this case — conjured it up. A spiritual presence isn’t something you put into your work, but art is something special because art is human beings trying to do something for other human beings that is super-special.