Living Form of Art

By Kristen Erickson, Upper School art history teacher



For Turrell, light is a spiritual entity in its own right, not just a method for illuminating objects.

When a major retrospective of noted light artist James Turrell opened last summer at the Guggenheim Museum, many visitors experienced for the first time the artist's signature ability to make light tangible. Yet for the Greenwich Academy community, Turrell's impact is sensed every day in the Wallace Library and Vik Lobby of the GA Upper School. Turrell's light chambers were integrated into the Skidmore, Owings & Merrill-designed Upper School from its earliest conception, with support from several forward-looking trustees. As a result, GA students have been exposed to an integrated, living form of art that involves the viewer and extends beyond the traditional two-dimensional form.

James Turrell has worked with architect Roger Duffy of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill on a number of collaborative projects over the years, but Duffy once described GA as "a beginning." The Upper School is organized around four light chambers, and these are tied to four academic pillars: arts, science/math, humanities, and library. Turrell outlined the thresholds of these chambers with fiber optics and installed LED lighting in strips along the floors and walls. The lights change colors as managed by a software program written by Turrell in a sort of ongoing dialogue between LED and fiber optics. By day, natural sunlight streams into these spaces, while at night they are bathed in the presence of Turrell's colored lights. For Turrell, architecture is part theater, and a building that buzzes by day takes on a second life at night, a sort of dream state.

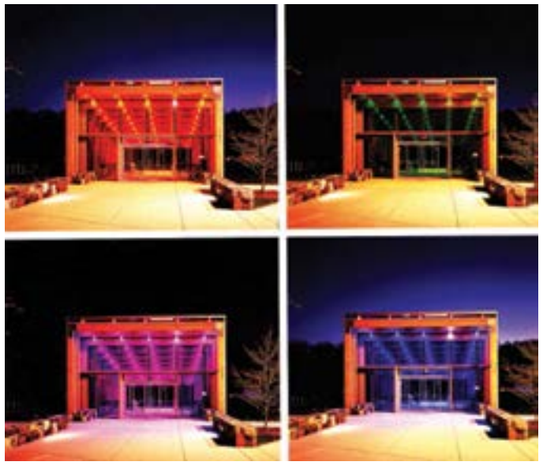
A lifelong Quaker, James Turrell has spent decades coming to know light. As a child, attending Quaker meetings with his grandmother, he was urged to "go in and greet the light." For a Quaker Meetinghouse in Houston, Texas, and for the MoMA PS1 art museum in Long Island City, he has created "skyspaces," rooms with retractable ceilings where the changing nature of the sky can be observed over time. For Turrell, light is a spiritual entity in its own right, not just a method for illuminating objects.

Turrell gained prominence as part of the Light and Space movement of the '60s and '70s, when artists rejected the constraints of the gallery and began creating large-scale works in nature. His life's work is Roden Crater, an extinct volcano in Arizona's Painted Desert that he has been shaping into a modern observatory with the help of astronomers and engineers. Begun in 1977 and still in progress, Roden Crater features a network of observation chambers that focus the viewer's attention on particular celestial phenomena, illuminating one room, for example, with the light of Venus. In the tradition of Stonehenge and the Mayan pyramids, Turrell's Roden Crater seeks to bring us closer to the cosmos.

This fall, Greenwich Academy presented an exhibition in the Luchsinger Gallery documenting the history of Turrell's work, including the GA Upper School, unveiled a decade ago. In conjunction with that exhibition, a nighttime viewing was held, featuring performances by the Madrigals and the GA Dance Corps. GA

"Turrell @ GA" runs from September 10 to November 11, 2013, in the Luchsinger Gallery.

The retrospective "James Turrell" ran from June 25 to September 25, 2013, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City.



The entrance of the Upper School pictured at different points during the 22-minute cycle of the Turrell Light Installation.