

Blinded by the light: James Turrell obliterates the senses in stunning new Mona wing

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Event Horizon, a new work by James Turrell at the Museum of Old and New Art's new wing, Pharos, which opened in December 2017. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford

Mona owner David Walsh calls his \$32m new wing 'a testimonial to the power of light as art'

When people talk about having a religious experience with contemporary art, there is a good chance they're talking about an encounter with James Turrell. The American artist's large scale installations work with light, and fuse art with science, in ways that lead some viewers into rapture.

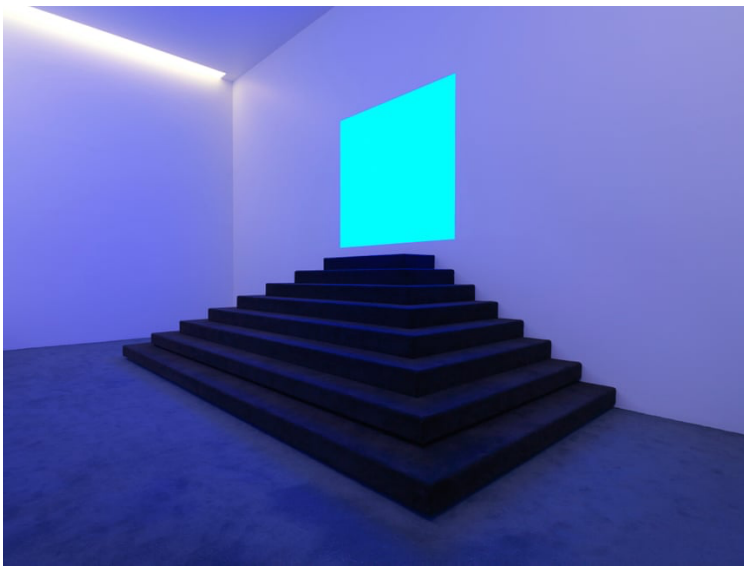
On beholding his work in a 2013 retrospective, one New York Times reporter wrote breathlessly: "The rush of blood to my head nearly brought me to my knees."

Writing about Turrell's Perceptual Cell, Guardian art critic Jonathan Jones was similarly awed: "One critic has already claimed he had a mental orgasm in the chamber. It would be nice to scoff but I feel that downplays the power of this mind-expanding work of art."

For me, encountering his work at the new wing of Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art seemed to rearrange my neurons, and completely still my mind.

The work of James Turrell is made to have a strong effect on people. A rip-off - or homage - to his work in the Drake video clip Hotline Bling bought him a new generation of fans, but it is about more than just the telegenic visuals. His work is the sort not seen, but instead experienced. The more you surrender, the more profound it can be.

Turrell, aged 74 and going through a late hot period, has said: "[My art] is about your seeing, like wordless thought that comes from looking into fire."



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The new Turrell works Mona has acquired join another by the artist, which sits on a roof above the sprawling Hobart property: the much-loved Amarna, one of 80 Skyspace installations Turrell has built in “high altitude and geographically isolated locations.”

But the four new pieces sit in a purpose-built wing, Pharos, which houses other works too, by Jean Tinguely, Randy Polumbo, Charles Ross and Richard Wilson, whose world-famous 20:50 was acquired from London's Saatchi Gallery in 2015.

20:50, which Mona's founder David Walsh has described as “one of the best works of art I've ever seen”, consists of a space filled to waist-height with recycled engine oil. You walk down a central corridor and are surrounded on three sides by the thick liquid, which is spread right to the brim. It glimmers enticingly, reflecting the sky, and the temptation to touch it is strong. (One Trip Advisor reviewer didn't get it: “A lot of it [Mona] was just hype and making you line up for a LONG time to just look at some black water ... for example.”)

20:50 is murkier, darker, more material than Turrell's lightwork - but it is Turrell who steals the show.



Pharos, the new wing of the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, which contains four new works by James Turrell. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford

Made on-site, a Turrell acquisition requires huge amounts of modifications and renovations to the space in which it will sit; the artist has spent the past 30 years, for instance, constructing a three-mile-wide installation inside an extinct volcano in Arizona. At Mona, David Walsh and his Melbourne-based architect Nonda Katsalidas built the Pharos wing at a cost of \$32 million, \$8m of which was the cost of the art itself.

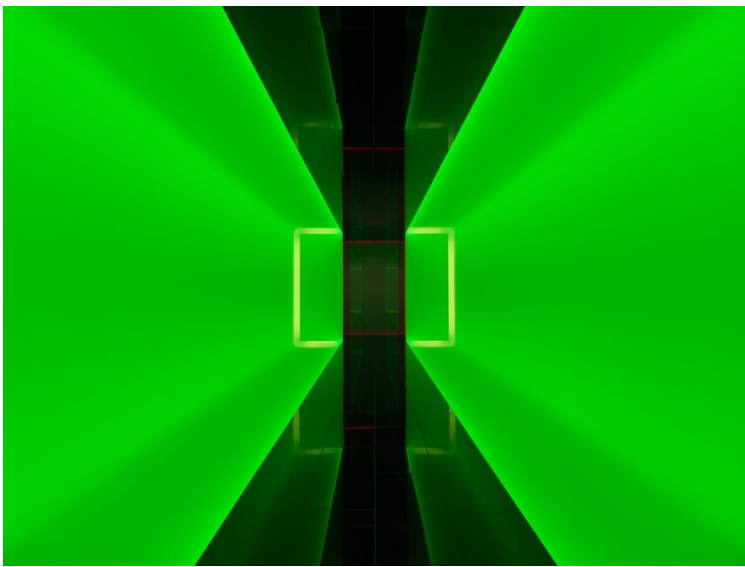
The space, which soft-launched in December but is still incomplete, is named after the Pharos of Alexandria, the lighthouse built for Ptolemy I Soter in around 280BC.

“Our new wing of Mona is a lighthouse too, but not one designed to warn ships of the risk of foundering on rocks,” Walsh writes in a recent post on the Mona website. “Our lighthouse is a testimonial to the power of light as art - not just as a medium for artworks, but as an object.”

Jutting out into the Derwent, Pharos has something of a secret chamber about it. You enter at the back of Mona's current exhibition, the Museum of Everything, through a black cloth. And there it is, a corridor and column of light. This is the first of the Turrell works, titled *Beside Myself*.

If the museum proper is a dark, sexy and surprising funhouse, Pharos is its counterpoint. It's bathed in clarifying light.

Writes Walsh: “Whereas Mona is intended to be an antidote to closed-mindedness, Pharos is open-heart surgery.” After a visit to the work, there is no doubt about the truth of this statement. Pharos not just opens you up, but scrambles your head and your heart.



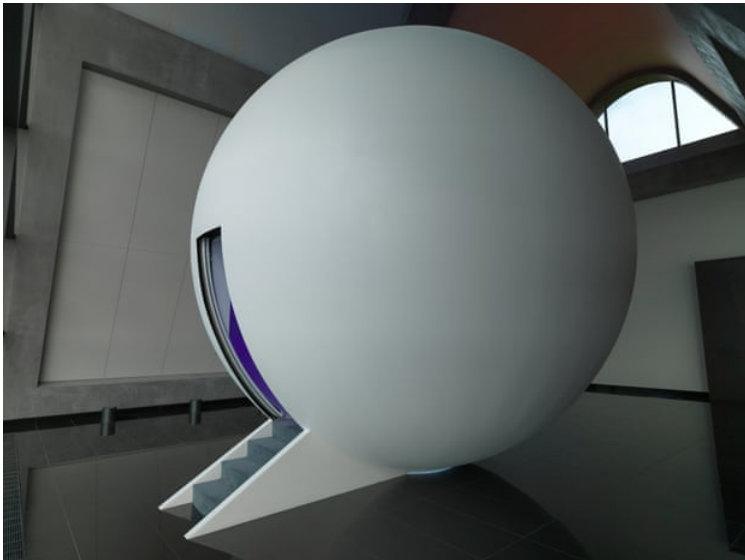
Beside Myself, a new work by James Turrell, bathes you in clarifying light. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford

Pharos opened to the public on Boxing Day - a relatively quiet opening for Mona, which is famed for its lavish parties. Instead, thousands of bars of chocolates were mailed to the museum's neighbours in Berriedale. Resembling a Wonka Bar, some contained "golden tickets" for a first look at the new wing; all contained a note of apology from Walsh for enduring the construction work.

Now just a month old, the Pharos wing feels as if it has been there all along. There is a lovely bar and tapas restaurant with beautiful views of the water, and highly Instagrammable interiors of soft pink and green. But it takes a while to realise the real beauty is hidden in plain sight: behind the tables sits a very large egg, stationed with two white-coated attendants.

After signing a waiver saying I don't suffer from epilepsy or claustrophobia, and am not drunk or on drugs, I ascend stairs into the egg with someone I had met only minutes before. The work, Unseen Seen, is made to be experienced in pairs, and we recline on a thin mattress, similar to an operating table.

At first it's awkward, lying next to a stranger on this pseudo bed, asking: "Do you prefer it hard or soft?". (The work comes with two settings; we choose "hard".) But then the light takes over. It is both visually and physically unsettling, and it gives you no choice. You surrender to it with your whole body.



James Turrell's Unseen Seen, at the new wing of Mona, Pharos, which opened in December 2017. Photograph: Jesse Hunniford

At first, the light comes dull and in fragments, like blood under a microscope which drifts into your field of vision. Soon it's as though you're snorkelling through more substantial fragments that float past like algae. Then it really kicks up a gear, with intense colours - bright yellow and magenta - and things that swirl and flash.

The experience is so complete and overwhelming that nothing can get a look in edgewise. The light floods the entirety of your field of vision; the only way to escape it is to put your hands fully over your eyes, or press the panic button given to you before you enter. Later I experienced the work as a series of patterns, as if I were living in a kaleidoscope.

"I could see the inside of my eyeball, but also the colour of my thoughts," says Walsh of the experience. That is true for me - also, the whole experience had the effect of quieting my mind, like a long meditation.

When it's over, we're escorted out of the egg to put our shoes back on - but before we have a chance to adjust, we're in the next phase: The Weight of Darkness.

The darkness of this room is so complete it seems to physically suck or drain from your body any remnants of the light from the previous work. The room is silent and the silence, with the darkness, has a strange depth to it. I touch the edges and try to get a sense of the space, but feel hopelessly disorientated. Once we find our way to some chairs, it's a matter of just sitting there: 20 minutes, spent in negative space. I find it supremely relaxing.

The final Turrell work, Event Horizon, is more social: a coloured cube-shaped room with changing lights, more like the Drake film clip. There's no sense of an edge to the space; in fact several people have been injured experiencing Turrell's work, usually by falling. (One woman sued the Whitney in 1980, claiming the work caused her to "precipitate to the floor".)



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After the Turrell experience is over, I hang out with my installation buddy for most of the day and into the evening. We sit in the sun outside the gallery, listen to music, drink wine and talk. When he returns to Melbourne I send him a text - "let's be friends and hang out" - which I have never done before.

I wonder if this is Turrell's long tail at work. A friend of mine had a more intense experience with the stranger she shared the work with: "I really miss that guy," she told me. "We didn't talk much. I don't even know his name. How weird is that?"

Does the light itself reconfigure neurons to accelerate familiarity? Does the work reconfigure the usual relationship between the work and the viewer, and actually pull other people into it? Do the people you experience the art with become part of your experience?

Turrell is focused so primely and purely on the light itself that any questions are for the viewer to hopelessly try and unpick. All he offers are inscrutable hints: "With no object no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking?"

And this: "People come to your work with very different things in themselves that you cannot change, and your work might just do nothing to them too."

. Pharos is open to the public at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania

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