

First light : twenty etchings by James Turrell : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Tatyana Grosman Gallery, July 26-November 13, 1990

Author

Turrell, James

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1990

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The Museum of Modern Art

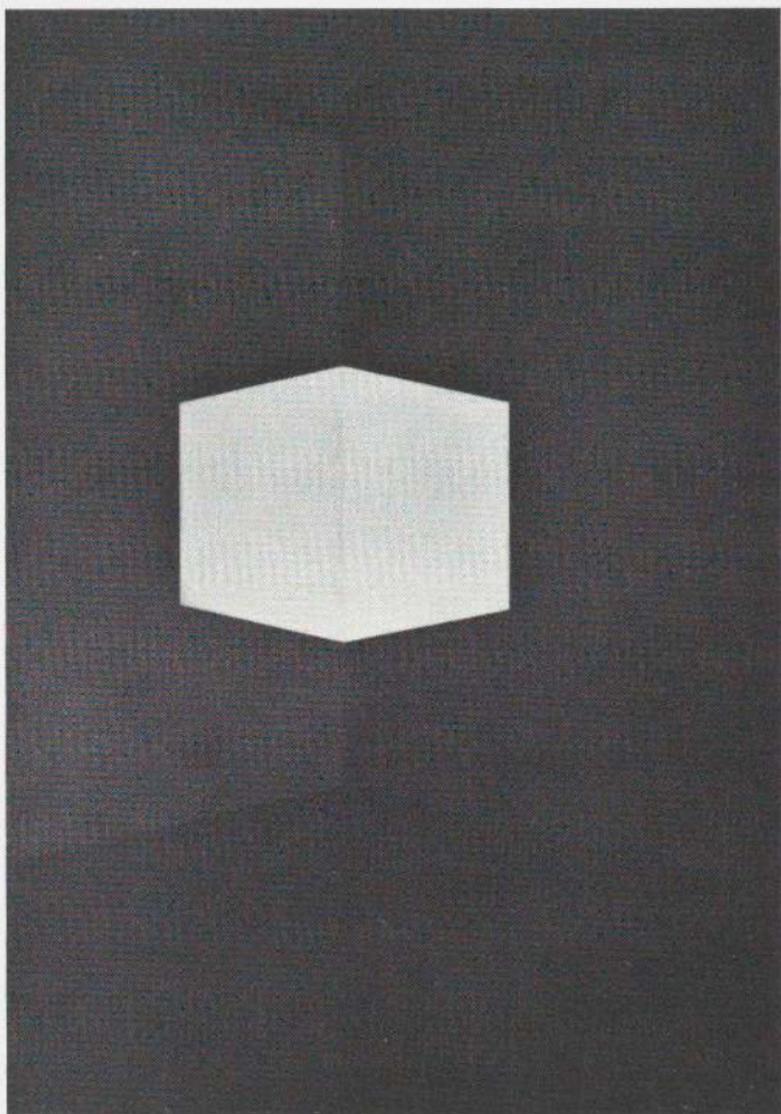
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first light

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twenty etchings
by james turrell

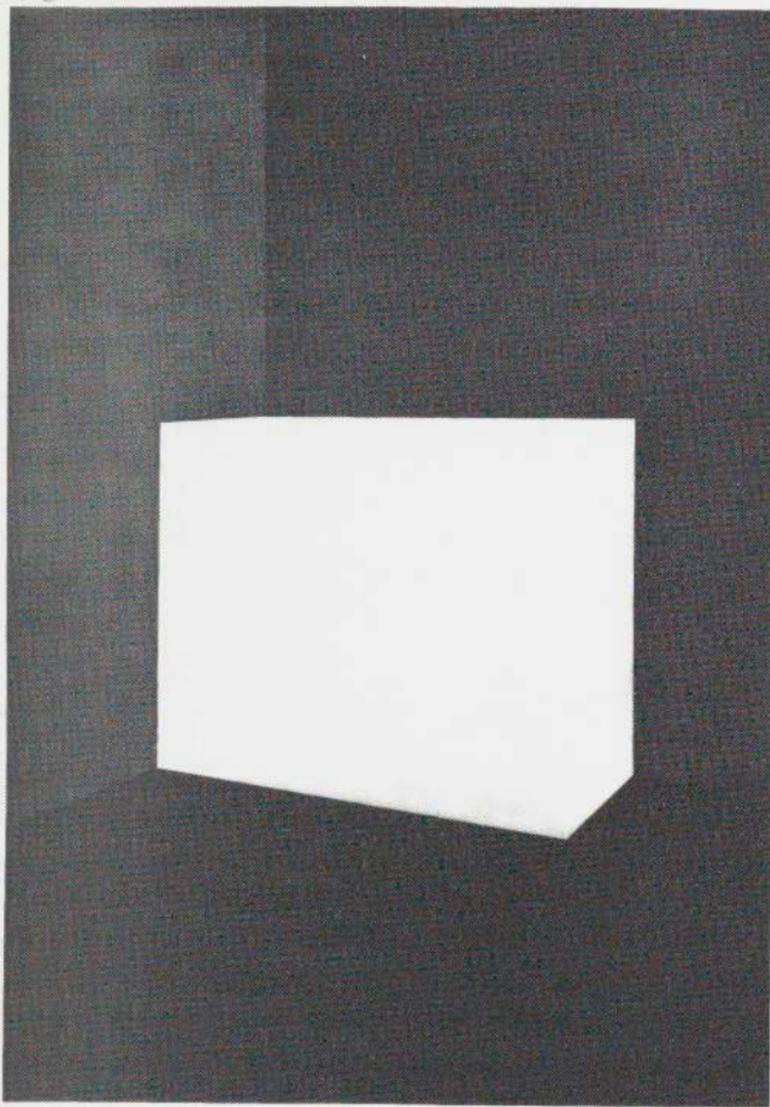


The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The Tatyana Grosman Gallery

July 26–November 13, 1990

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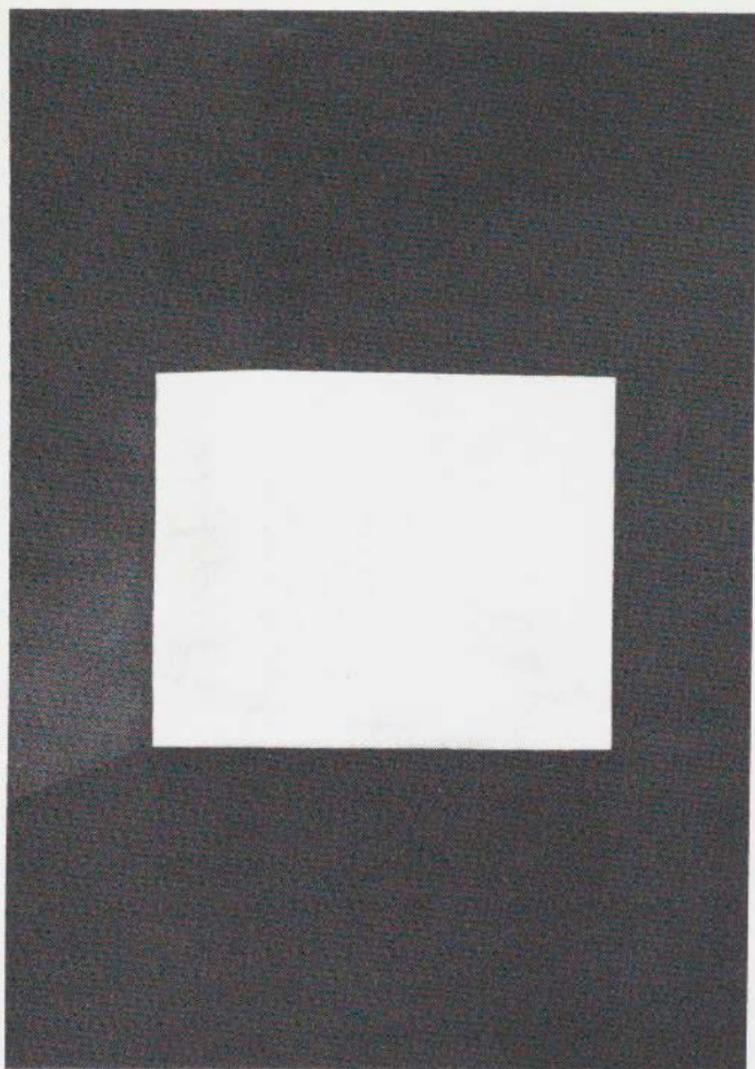


light within darkness. The image conjures up human longing, extending from the mystical to the intellectual, from the poetic to the existential. James Turrell's suite of twenty aquatint etchings provides such illumination and leads the viewer into an area not commonly explored in contemporary art. Using a familiar vocabulary of geometric forms inspired by the unexpected medium of light, Turrell creates a perception of movement from print to print that transports the viewer into a meditative realm. Our worldly, late twentieth-century preoccupations are bypassed, and our capacity for awe is expanded.

Turrell, born in California in 1943, has used light as an artistic medium since the mid-sixties, when he first gained national attention as one of a group of West Coast artists who, in an untraditional fashion, investigated the effects of light and space on perception. Turrell has gone on to create participatory installations at numerous sites in Europe and the United States. For the last ten years he

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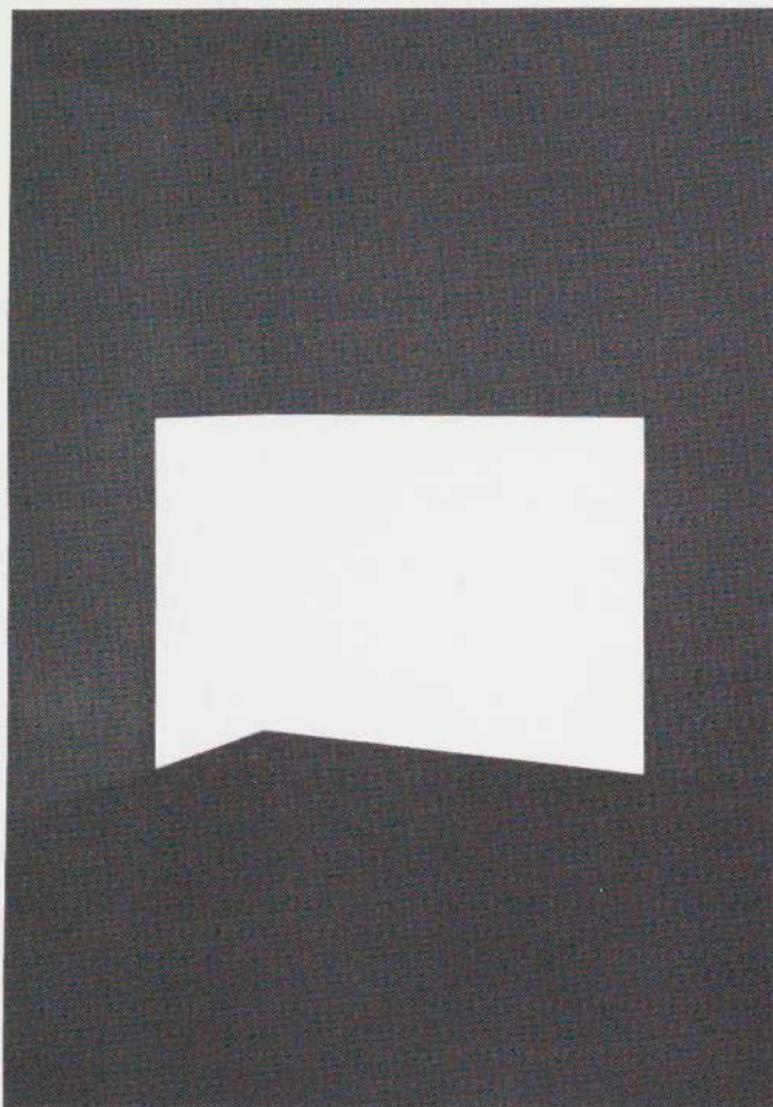
Carr, Series C, from the suite First Light.



has been absorbed in a monumental environmental artwork in which natural light illuminates tunnels and underground chambers at Roden Crater, a volcanic cinder cone in the Arizona desert.

The images in the *First Light* aquatints (1989–90)—aside from *Meeting*, which relates to a permanently installed sky piece of 1980—derive from Turrell's projected-light installations of 1967, which incorporate the walls and corners of rooms. Nineteen prints are grouped in series based on the shapes created by those earlier light projections: rectangles, triangles, cubes, and vertical shafts. In the light pieces from which they draw their imagery the shapes remained constant, but the viewer's perceptions of them altered as he or she shifted position in the room. In contrast, when the prints in each group are viewed in sequence, the white shapes themselves appear to be moving. Since each print refers to a different installation, it is only the series format that creates this sense of movement, prompting in the viewer

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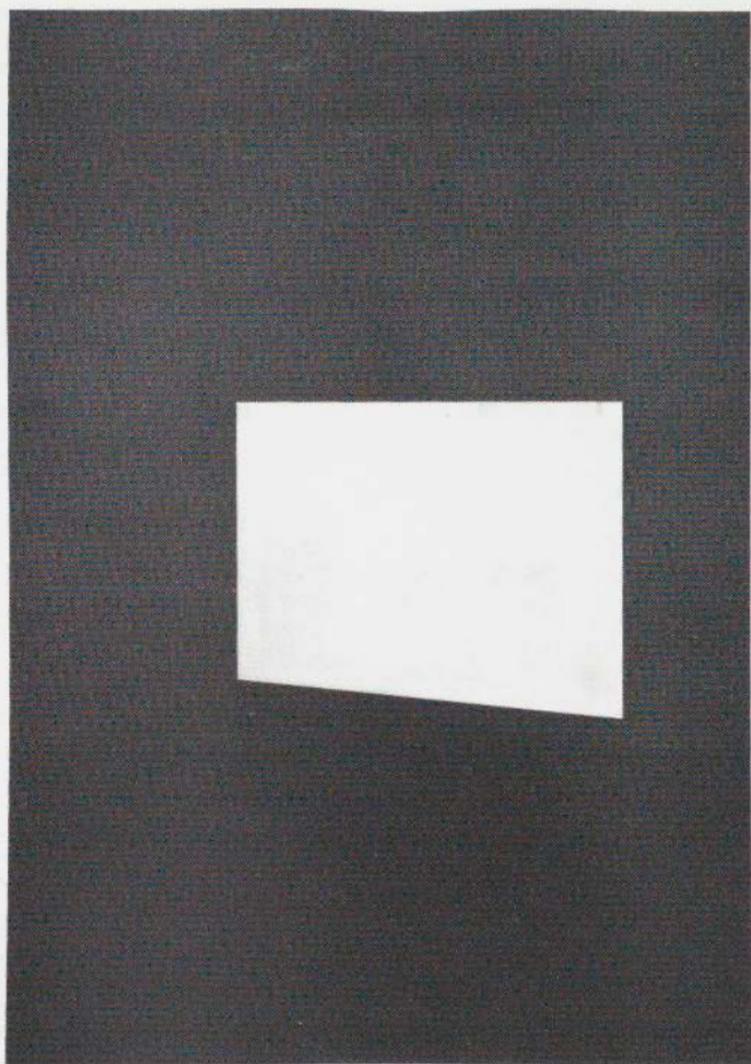
the kind of sensory voyage that is typical of Turrell's work. Although the artist has a background in psychology and has experimented scientifically with perception, his artworks, through the vehicle of luminosity, are mystical and revelatory.

In this exhibition of the *First Light* prints, Turrell has created an environment comprised of works on paper that achieves some of the effect of his installations. The walls and the room at large are in semidarkness and only the prints are illuminated, transforming the gallery into a meditation room. Looking at each series of prints, we see a range of forms and experience a variety of responses, from the purity and authority of solid shapes, to the anxiety provoked by a parallelogram amid rectangles, to the spirituality inherent in vertical light, to the mystery of cubes and triangles hovering in atmospheres resembling distant galaxies.

In *Series C*, illustrated here, the imagery proceeds from

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Ondoe, Series C, from the suite *First Light*.



the illusion of a solid that is as absolute as a Minimal sculpture to that of a flat painting on a wall, implying an opening into infinity but actually representing the thinnest sheet of light. Geometric lines convey rationality and stability and also relate to the tradition of geometric abstraction in painting. The security that such shapes provide allows the viewer to let go imaginatively and move into a visionary realm. The effect, from print to print, is trance-like and mesmerizing. Any anxiety that might accompany perceptual confusion, or the experience of the unknown, is mitigated by hints of floor, ceiling, and corners that orient the viewer. And by exploiting the potential of the grainy surface of the aquatint medium to suggest the pervasive effect of light particles, the artist creates a porous, airy atmosphere, instead of a suffocating stillness.

First Light is the third of Turrell's print projects, all of which were published by Peter Blum Edition in New York and printed with Peter Kneubühler of Zurich. His

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previous projects were portfolios, which the artist has described as being "about" his work. They relate primarily to his continuing immersion in the Roden Crater project, and capture both its scientific foundations and its deeply evocative ambience through maps, site plans, geological charts, and mysterious nighttime images. In contrast, Turrell characterizes the *First Light* aquatints as "like" his work, in that they involve the viewer directly with the experiential aspects of his investigations. With titles such as *Shanta*, *Catso*, *Afrum*, *Acro*, and *Enzu* (sounds invented by the artist), the prints constitute a catalogue in the form of an artwork: they survey Turrell's *Projection Pieces* of 1967, installations which themselves can never be shown together because light from one would disturb light from another.

Although linked to the visual tradition of painting, Turrell's work employs the mediums of light and space in their tangible manifestations. His often uncanny achievements alter our perceptions and provide an enriching dialogue between illusion and reality. In conversation, Turrell summons up the mystical nature of this experience when he refers to the light that enters medieval cathedrals, or to a theme of his Quaker upbringing, "going inside to greet the light."

Deborah Wye

Curator

Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

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Cover: *Afrum*, Series A, from the suite *First Light*.

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checklist

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First Light. New York, Peter Blum Edition, 1989–90. Suite of twenty aquatints comprising five lettered series and one single print, each plate 39¹/₈ x 27¹/₄" (99.4 x 69.2 cm), each sheet 42¹/₄ x 29³/₄" (107.3 x 75.6 cm). Edition 30. Printed by Peter Kneubühler, Zurich. Series C, The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Peter Blum Edition; all other prints courtesy of Peter Blum Edition, New York.

1. *Meeting*
- 2–6. *Shanta, Catso, Afrum, Munson, Squat* (Series A)
- 7–9. *Raethro, Alta, Gard* (Series B)
- 10–13. *Carn, Acro, Ondoe, Phantom* (Series C)
- 14–17. *Juke, Sloan, Fargo, Decker* (Series D)
- 18–20. *Joecar, Enzu, Tollyn* (Series E)

biography

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Born Los Angeles, California, May 6, 1943

Resides in Flagstaff, Arizona

education

Pomona College, Claremont, California.
BA in Experimental Psychology, 1965

University of California, Irvine.
Graduate study in Fine Arts, 1965–66

Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California.
MA in Fine Arts, 1973

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selected individual exhibitions

- Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, California, 1967
- Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1976
- Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1980
- Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle, 1982
- The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1983
- Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1983
- The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1985
- Kunsthalle, Basel, 1987
- Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes, 1989
- Florida State University Gallery and Museum, Tallahassee, 1989

awards

- National Endowment for the Arts, artist fellowship grant, 1968
- Guggenheim fellowship, 1974
- National Endowment for the Arts, Art in Public Places
commission for Roden Crater Project, 1975
- Dia Art Foundation, 1977
- Arizona Commission on the Arts and Humanities,
visual arts fellowship, 1980
- New York Section Illuminating Engineering Society with
the International Association of Lighting Designers,
Lumen Award, 1981
- MacArthur Foundation fellowship, 1984

selected references

- Adcock, Craig. *James Turrell* (exhibition catalogue).
Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University Gallery and
Museum, 1989
- Brown, Julia, ed. *Occluded Front: James Turrell*
(exhibition catalogue). Los Angeles, CA: The Museum
of Contemporary Art, 1985
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