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The Museum of Modern Art

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FIRST LIGHT: TWENTY ETCHINGS BY JAMES TURRELL

Through November 13, 1990

Twenty etchings spotlighted in an otherwise dark gallery form a dramatic installation by California artist James Turrell at The Museum of Modern Art. Organized by Deborah Wye, curator in the Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, FIRST LIGHT: TWENTY ETCHINGS BY JAMES TURRELL is on view from July 26 to November 13, 1990. Converted into a meditative space, the gallery invites the viewer to suspend worldly preoccupations and enter into an imaginary realm.

First Light (1989-90) 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. The aquatints are arranged in groups based on the white shape that hovers in the dense black field of each print. In the installation, with light projected onto the images, the shapes appear to glow and float; viewed in sequence, they seem to move. The effect, from print to print, is trancelike and mesmerizing.

Ms. Wye writes in the brochure accompanying the exhibition, "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."

While Turrell's compositions can be seen as belonging to the tradition of geometric abstraction, they are actually derived from his *Projection Pieces* of 1967, in which light was cast into the corners of rooms. Unlike prints that are used primarily to document a conceptual project, however, the *First Light* aquatints involve the viewer directly with the experience of Turrell's installations, retaining much of their mystery.

Turrell has used light as an artistic medium since the mid-1960s, when he first gained national attention as one of a group of West Coast artists who investigated the effects of light and space on perception. He has gone on to create installations using projected light at numerous sites in Europe and the United States. For the past ten years, he has been absorbed in a monumental environmental work in which natural light illuminates tunnels and underground chambers at Roden Crater, a volcanic cinder cone in the Arizona desert.

Born in 1943 in Los Angeles, California, James Turrell received a B.A. in experimental psychology from Pomona College, Claremont, California. He studied art at the University of California, Irvine, and received an M.A. in fine arts from Claremont Graduate School in 1973. His works have been installed at several international museums, including the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1976), the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1985), and the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes (1989). Among his awards, Turrell has received fellowships from the MacArthur Foundation (1984), the Guggenheim Foundation (1974), and the National Endowment for the Arts (1968). He currently lives in Flagstaff, Arizona.

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