THE INSTALLATIONS AND RARE BOOKS OF JAMES TURRELL

*Joseph’s Coat*, the James Turrell skyspace at the Ringling opened at the end of 2011. As an experiential art installation on a campus known primarily for its Baroque art, we felt the need to educate ourselves about this marked departure from institutional tradition. Most importantly however, the library received a grant in 2012 to obtain a rare book collection devoted to Turrell's work and this triggered the beginning of an in-depth look at the subjects in these books. This initial cursory glance opened up a greater field of questions and concerns. We found that the more we learned, the more there was to learn.

I initially set out to conquer this project by myself, and soon found it demanded additional assistance and another perspective. I reached out to my colleague, Arwen Spinosa, explained the project and she joined me enthusiastically. She then became my coauthor, cohort and occasional therapist on this paper. After reexamining the issues inherent in the project we discovered we did not want to present strictly on the subject matter found in the books; we also wished to discuss what greater issues directly impact this new special collection of contemporary rare titles. And we asked ourselves “are our patrons aware that such titles on our skyspace exist?” In short order, we began cracking open our books, taking notes, asking questions, proposing surveys, consulting with the curator of contemporary art, and assigning ourselves public presentations of our work.

The final result is a paper that is split into three distinct sections. It begins with a short contextual history of the institution, discusses our current concerns regarding patronage and its impact on our collection of installation art literature, and includes a short review of the major concepts found in our James Turrell book collection. We hope that by explaining our current situation, expressing our desires for the future of the library, and illustrating what incredible content can be found in our Turrell book collection, that we will provide a fuller picture of how and why museum libraries must continually strive to obtain special collections that support contemporary art on their campuses.

The Ringling Museum was established in Sarasota, Florida, in 1931 by circus magnate John Ringling, but did not officially open for regular business until 1946 (de Groft, p.23). The museum was designed by architect John H. Phillips and maintains its original 21 galleries (de
Groft, p.13). These galleries house Ringling’s art collection, spanning Gothic, High Renaissance and Baroque art to contemporary art (de Groft, p.72). A few special concentrations include Peter Paul Rubens, 17th century Dutch still-lifes, and bronze sculptures from the Chiurazzi foundry in Italy (de Groft, p.43-47). The large quantities of Renaissance and Baroque paintings at the Ringling have given us a global reputation for old master paintings and sculpture. Our community is very comfortable with this classical definition of art and their perception of the Ringling doesn't include contemporary works. Modern and contemporary art has always had a small presence on our campus however.

A move towards contemporary art originally started during the museum’s infancy, with its first director, Arthur Everett Austin. Austin had previously worked at the Wadsworth Atheneum, and is credited with bringing a great deal of contemporary flare to both institutions. He was the first museum director in the United States to stage a Picasso retrospective, done at the Wadsworth and he staged another contemporary exhibition at the Ringling, this one featuring Dalí, Miro, and Mondrian (Temin, 2000). Austin’s legacy was to be carried forward into the future by the addition of a modern art space that would highlight both traveling exhibitions and contemporary art owned by the museum. In 2007, a wing was built on the north side of the museum with full access to the original 21 galleries. The Ulla R. Searing Wing of the Ringling Museum is the perfect addition with which to feature these modern pieces on a larger scale. Traditionally, our contemporary artworks have not been exhibited with any frequency. With the addition of the Searing Wing, this is now changing.

Within the Searing Wing is a square courtyard. This space was made for the James Turrell skyspace *Joseph’s Coat*, one of the most recent skyspaces constructed in the United States. At nearly 4,000 square feet, the Ringling skyspace is one of “the largest on the planet” (Tatangelo, 2011). The space is meant to induce an experience that is meditative, transformative, and artfully sublime. It is the first to include the sensory experience of scent with climbing jasmine planted among the walls and seating, which accommodates 56 people on its reclaimed cypress benches (Tatangelo, 2011).
It is the only skyspace in Florida, and is one of only two public skyspaces on the east coast of the United States, the other being at the Museum of Modern Art. The Ringling skyspace is named *Joseph’s Coat* for its array of colors provided by a sophisticated lighting system made up of thousands of LEDs that go through a cycle of colored light every sunrise and sunset.

In February, we gave an abbreviated version of this presentation on Turrell. The audience feedback revealed that our local community is lacking any working knowledge of the skyspace as a site-specific installation, and even less knowledge of the art museum library’s existence. Stacy Brinkman and Sara Young have discussed the direct connection between installation art on a campus and the relevant literature available at the campus library. They have stated that “the conceptual frameworks for the site-specific installations are locally defined”, meaning that installation art is informed directly by its location. In their discussion they also note most importantly, that the discovery of these frameworks leads “directly to the library’s collections” (p. 62). So, we have this wonderful collection of literature directly supporting our skyspace, but the collection has yet to be utilized as a tool for understanding our newest installation piece.

This fact is unfortunate, as our museum director Steven High has stated that “the [James Turrell] skyspace is the foundation of the Ringling’s newest initiative, entitled *Art of Our Time.* This initiative will promote an understanding of and appreciation for the contemporary visual and performing arts by introducing audiences in Sarasota to a mix of established and emerging artists from around the globe” (High, 2012, [PDF]). Using the skyspace on our campus as an axis for this shift toward contemporary art, the library set out to acquire literature that supports light and space installations, especially those created by Turrell.

The Ringling Museum Library received a $10,000 dollar grant, bestowed upon our director, Steven High, by the Florida State University Faculty Research Grant committee in 2012. The grant allowed for the immediate acquisition of a rare book collection that would specifically support the study of James Turrell’s lifelong artistic achievements, as well as the newly built skyspace on our campus. The selection and acquisition process was rather quick. Our Head Librarian, Linda McKee, compiled a list of 54 desired books using three criteria. The books had to be in excellent physical condition, written or signed by Turrell, and focused on his installations. Like Layna White, who stated in her article on cataloging contemporary art, we
believe that “contemporary art in museum collections is [understood] by looking, discussing, and contributing to records that account for the life and history of an artwork” (p. 153). Therefore, the Library was highly gratified to receive such a significant endowment.

The Ringling Museum Library maintains a total of 1,515 rare books. Of these, only 7% are contemporary titles, and the Turrell collection makes up half of this contemporary selection. Drilling down to the collection level at academic and special libraries using OCLC’s FirstSearch, we found that Florida has the greatest concentration of Turrell books in the southeastern United States. We also found that at the Ringling we have 30 unique titles not found anywhere else in the southeast region. This demonstrates how important the Turrell book collection is in the grand scheme of our special acquisitions, as well as the importance of our Turrell collection and our library’s close proximity to such a unique installation piece.

The major concepts found in the book collection include architecture, perception, color theory, and the sublime. Our brief discussion of each was informed by our research and the reading of the books in our Turrell collection, to give you a fuller picture of why this installation art is important in our community, and what an incredible resource we have at the Ringling.

James Turrell was born in 1943, in Pasadena, and is loosely grouped with the Light and Space artistic movement that arose in California in the 1960s and 70s” (Brüderlin, p. 7). His work doesn’t fit well into categories of traditional media, such as painting or sculpture. The amount of science, psychology, and cultural history that goes into Turrell’s skyspaces is absolutely astounding. His deceptively simple and restrained art promotes vast multidisciplinary opportunities for study, exploration and research.

Architecturally, Turrell builds on our fairly universal human behavior of sky-gazing. Our natural fascination with light, its role in the cosmos, and our relationship to it has historically resulted in structures that encourage this fascination. Symbolizing the *axis mundi*, the center of the world, these structures can represent a sacred mountain, like the pyramids of Central America and mounds of North America. You’ll see Turrell’s skyspaces that mirror these architectural designs, with Twilight Epiphany and Within Without.

Another great example of architectural influence on Turrell is the ancient primordial cell. This ancient cell structure is typically an enclosure with an aperture for directing light into the interior. Turrell’s pieces entitled Second Wind and Deer Shelter greatly resemble Anasazi kivas.
and Asian stupas. Many ancient works were designed for observing celestial events, for seeing a specific light at a particular time. A common example is viewing the sunrise on the winter solstice. The light of the solstice that pours into this inner chamber is what animates the space so intensely.

At times these were fused, the mountain and the cell becoming the same structure, as with Stone Age burial mounds like New Grange, in Ireland; Turrell’s corollary is called Kielder, in England. These spaces evoke solemnity and inward reflection, their circular shape and use of megalithic stone construction skillfully creating passageways and inner chambers for contemplation. The Ringling skyspace is awakened with the light of dawn and dusk, and architecturally it references Greek hypaethral temples where the sky is intentionally included in the architecture of the structure (Govan, p. 33). These temples were designed to be open to the sky with no perceptual barriers; light becoming the very essence of the structure. Turrell’s diverse skyspaces reference cross-cultural and timeless forms but they do so with a very clean and minimal modern aesthetic.

A great deal of science and philosophy goes into Turrell's art. One of the most consistent inspirations is perceptual psychology, a branch of cognitive psychology, which focuses on the relationship between consciousness and its environment, or the inner mind perceiving the outer world. Another is phenomenology, the philosophy of the embodied consciousness and the study of subjective experience. Instead of the duality of mind and body, this philosophy holds that we don’t have bodies, we are bodies. All that we know of the world and reality comes through what we experience empirically (Gonzalez, p. 259).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a 20th century phenomenological philosopher, influenced Turrell through his ideas of embodied experiences. This influence is apparent as Turrell utilizes what is referred to as “...prelogical knowledge. This knowledge results not solely from the sensory grasp of things, forms, colors, textures, or sounds but also from subjectivity, created by emotions and imagination” (p. 260). As a whole, this cognitive system makes no separation between body and spirit or between perception and comprehension” (Gonzalez, p. 260).

Turrell describes his art in the phenomenological sense: “First, I am dealing with no object. Perception is the object. Secondly, I am dealing with no image, because I want to avoid associative, symbolic thought. Thirdly, I am dealing with no focus or particular place to look.
With no object, no image and no focus, what are you looking at? You are looking at you looking” (Turrell, p.18).

Another strong influence on Turrell is the artist Joseph Albers. His *Homage to the Square* series has become iconic. In his book *Interaction of Color* he explains how different color combinations and relationships change how we perceive those colors. Because the same color appears differently depending on what color surrounds it, Albers called this phenomena color relativity. Michael Govan has chronicled that: “in the twentieth century, Josef Albers demonstrated in his teaching and painting that our perception of color is entirely dependent on the context within which we see it – the same tools used by Turrell to turn the raw sky of his skyspaces red or green or any other color he chooses” (p. 15). Turrell says: “we do not realize that we give the sky its color. Because we do; if I change your context of perception I can affect how you sense the color and form of the sky” (Govan, p. 45).

One of the ways he does this is by using optical afterimages. There are several kinds of afterimage effects, and they are all forms of optical illusions. Turrell uses negative afterimages. This can be seen by looking intently at a patch of solid color and then switching to a blank white panel. For a moment you will see the complementary color to the one you focused on. If you were looking at a yellow field the afterimage would be blue, if it was red you would see green for a moment. These two aspects of Albers' work are used during the skyspace light show in a unique and powerful way. Through the aperture in the ceiling the color of the sky changes naturally as the sun sets, and the light show on the frame is orchestrated to push the afterimage effect. The result is a mesmerizing display. There are moments in the program when the effect can be so great that the frame seems to disappear and above you is one solid field of color.

Turrell points out one of our long standing misconceptions about color perpetuated through centuries of traditional art education, that is, the two dimensional color wheels used before modern scientific color theory. He describes the light spectrum as “just like a musical spectrum; it doesn’t have the colour wheel like all these colour theories. A colour wheel comes only from subtractive colour—the colour that is off a surface. We have been such a surface culture that we haven't really looked at light; we've only looked at paint, although this is now changing” (Svestka, p. 63). Studying pigments rather than light is analogous to studying only the musical notes on the sheet, rather than responding to sound of the music.
Through Albers’ work, color theory and philosophy, we have seen that color has external and internal qualities for the viewer. Skyspaces are unique artworks that hover between the external and internal worlds of perception. These art forms are manifested within the viewer’s experience. Color, therefore, in Turrell’s work is a gateway to experiencing the sublime.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the sublime as “a feature of nature or art that fills the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; that which inspires awe…by reason of extreme beauty or vastness.” Traditionally associated with the experience of man in nature, the sublime in Turrell’s work is found in the nature of man. Lindsey Mikash posits “...that the sublime is not an outdated and irrelevant concept, but instead it has transmuted to take on contemporary relevance through responding to the exceedingly technological state of contemporary culture” (p. 23).

To explain the sublime in Turrell’s work we need to return to his formative years. Turrell was raised as a conservative Quaker, and although he lapsed for many years, he returned to his faith after realizing that his skyspaces were essentially Quaker meeting houses. Quaker meeting houses are multi-use spaces, plain and unadorned, with simple wooden benches arranged to face a central area. “The Quaker concept of “inner light” that is shared in a collective silent meeting of prayer is echoed in the experience of Turrell’s skyspaces—in the collective silence, duration and receptivity they induce. Quaker practice is the minimalism of Christianity, reduced in form in search of deeper effect” (Govan, p.17).

‘Spiritual’ is a term often used when talking about the skyspace experiences, “however, few terms have been so misused in recent times” (Brüderlin, p. 133). With art that is designed as a contemplation of light it is hard to escape associations with enlightenment, spirituality, and the soul. “Despite Turrell apparently not attributing any mystic religious significance to his artistic creations, the archetype of light is powerfully active in them, ascribable to his Quaker roots and to the practical correlates of silence and the reception of light” (Turrell, Geometry of Light, p. 90). What some may reference as the spiritual we are referencing as the sublime. And it is important to note that many people make pilgrimages to site-specific light art, in a kind of secular spiritual practice that is not associated with organized religion (Rice University skyspace press release, 2012).
As gazing into the sky is an outward search for our place in the universe, so the contemplation of light and color can be an inward search for the same. Gazing up into the skyspace is a form of internal reflection, and as with a reflecting pool we are brought face to face with ourselves. “Turrell’s art prompts greater self-awareness through a similar discipline of silent contemplation, patience and meditation” (Turrell, p. 33). Turrell’s skyspaces echo ancient sky-gazing structures, and like them uses our perception of light as a vehicle to bring us a sublime experience. As this experience unfolds internally we realize that “light is…itself the revelation” (Kjaer, p. 183).

The Pace Gallery in New York City, largely renowned for their exhibitions of modern and contemporary artists, has just closed a spring retrospective on Turrell, highlighting photography of his works, the architectural models he used to build his skyspaces, and images and blueprints for Roden Crater. His work is currently on view at “the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston” (Nathan, Mutual Art, 2013). As a prolific and accomplished artist of our times, Turrell now has retrospectives staged at various institutions, concurrently, and is widely acknowledged at Ringling as the Rubens of our times.

Having just explored the James Turrell collection at the Ringling Museum Library, and seen what a valuable and unique site-specific installation piece we have at the Ringling, you can see how important the book collection is to the museum, the library, and the community we serve. Since its opening, nearly 6,000 people have experienced our skyspace. This will no doubt influence how the community sees contemporary art at the Ringling. The Ringling Museum Library will continue to develop special collections that focus on the museum’s efforts and new direction. Our hope now is that we can have our special collections utilized by our community in order that they can fully partake in the Ringling’s new art initiatives and gain the use of our exceptional library and contemporary special collections.
References


High, Steven. (2012). Faculty Research Library Materials Grant Application for Florida State University. Unpublished grant application from The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art Library [PDF].


