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James Turrell Brings Light to Lacma

Crews have been erecting what will be the artist's most comprehensive light-sculpture retrospective ever

By Christina Binkley

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Taslimi Construction generally builds office buildings, but its latest project is something more ethereal. Within the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, crews have been erecting what will be the most comprehensive James Turrell light-sculpture retrospective ever.

Two roughly simultaneous exhibitions will make this a national event. From June 9 on, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, will survey seven installations and several works on paper. Starting June 21, the famous rotunda of New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum will be filled with shifting natural and artificial light.



A rendering of how the James Turrell exhibit at New York's Guggenheim Museum will look. JAMES TURRELL/ANDREAS TJELDFLAAT/SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION

Mr. Turrell, age 70, has spent a lifetime studying how light bends, glows and reflects, creating artworks that cause the eye to lose its sense of depth and distance. Walls dissolve. Rooms cause viewers bathed in colored light to reach out, feeling for boundaries as they might in the dark.

Beginning May 26, Lacma will show roughly 50 Turrell works from 1963 to 2013. The exhibit, which will remain into 2014, will include the artist's famous early geometric light projections,

prints and drawings, as well as a sensory-deprivation installation that requires viewers to climb inside. Imported red cinder will form a replica of the Roden Crater, an extinct volcano cone that's the site of Mr. Turrell's giant land-art project in Arizona.

A Turrell exhibition is not a matter of hanging paintings or even sawing through a few walls. Because Mr. Turrell works in light, much must be built anew from his precise designs. In effect, Taslimi is building each work from scratch with LED lights (ordered from China), and precisely honed planes of wood and gypsum board.

"We have trained our dry-wallers that they are working with art, not drywall," says Bradley Johnson, Taslimi's chief architect on the project. Altogether, construction will cost \$2.5 million.

Turrell nomenclature describes the foolery making walls disappear. Doors are "apertures" into the world beyond. Windows are framed with "knife edges" that prevent the eye from grasping a surface by which to gauge dimension. These create "cave walls" that bend to meet the light, "sky spaces," and "Ganzfelds" in which viewers ascend stairs to a platform, to experience "indeterminable space," like a pilot flying in fog.

None of this works if walls and ceilings aren't perfectly smooth planes. In a typical well-built office building, the tolerance for error is a 1/32nd of an inch, says Mr. Johnson, testing a Ganzfeld wall with a heavy metal ruler. To reach a higher level of perfection for the Turrell works at Lacma, Taslimi has set the tolerance at 1/64th.

Turrells can annoy building inspectors. At first, some floor angles failed to comply with L.A. construction codes. Fire-retardant spray nozzles, required by fire codes, break up those perfectly flat planes, offering dimensional clues to the viewer's eye and ruining the whole effect. Fire strobes are out of the question. In a compromise, fire inspectors allowed nozzles at Lacma to be relocated in return for visitor limits and a full-time guard.

But the challenges haven't dented the enthusiasm that Michael Govan, Lacma's director and the retrospective's co-curator, shows for the project. "Did you hear about the [Turrell show] in Venice?" he asked recently, his dark suit gathering drywall dust from the new Ganzfeld. "Well. It was more than 1/64th off."

Write to Christina Binkley at christina.binkley@wsj.com