Greeting the Light: An Interview with James Turrell
by Richard Whittaker

It was thanks to artist Walter Gabrielson that I was able to get in touch with James Turrell. Gabrielson was an old friend of Turrell's from Pasadena and, like Turrell, also a pilot. The prospect of meeting this remarkable artist was exciting and arranging it took some persistence. Michael Bond, who managed Turrell's projects around the world, was encouraging, but he suggested some homework. I should go to Los Angeles to experience one of the artist's pieces in a private collection there, The Second Meeting. Although I was already familiar with Turrell's work from reading about it, the visit to LA underlined my sense of his unique place in the art world. Eventually I found myself heading to Flagstaff, AZ. I met the artist at his studio on his ranch outside of Flagstaff.

Richard Whittaker: When I was talking with Michael in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago I learned you were a Quaker.

James Turrrell: I was a Quaker and then, for a while, I wasn't. And now I am again.

RW: And in the war in Vietnam, I understand you did service as a conscientious objector.

JT: I did that before Vietnam.

RW: I also understand you learned to fly a long time ago.

JT: I learned when I was sixteen. My daughters got their licenses when they were fourteen. That's because you can get a license for gliding at fourteen, and now, for powered flight, at fifteen. In the old days it was sixteen.

RW: I also heard you'd flown Tibetan monks out of Tibet early on. It must have been quite an experience.

JT: Yes. It's not hard to believe in reincarnation. I feel like I've had several lifetimes in this life. Those are somewhere in memory.

RW: I think what lies behind my questions about your early years is that I wonder what first attracted your attention and interest to light.

JT: Well I was fascinated with light right from the very beginning. I did several things in my room when I was very young. We had these blackout curtains in Pasadena, as a response to the threat of attack in WWII. And I pulled them down and put the constellations along the ecliptic so that during the day I could see the stars. I was interested in light phenomena. I think it's not too different from a deer looking into the headlights-that quality of captivation.

My grandmother used to tell me that as you sat in Quaker silence you were to go inside to greet the light. That expression stuck with me.

One thing about Quakers, and I think many Friends might laugh about this, is that often people wonder what you're supposed to do, when you go in there. And it's kind of hard to say. Telling a child to go inside "to greet the light" is about as much as was ever told to me

But there is an idea, first of all, of vision fully formed with the eyes closed. Of course the vision we have in a lucid dream often has greater lucidity and clarity than vision with the eyes open. The fact that we have this vision with the eyes closed is very interesting. And the idea that it's possible to actually work in a way, on the outside, to remind one of how we see on the inside, is something that became more interesting to me as an artist.

RW: This very early interest, at what age would say this started?

JT: Oh, that was when I was very young. My brothers and sisters are older than I am by a good bit, and so I was left with my grandmother quite often. She was conservative in her beliefs. However the Quakers were very much involved in issues of women's rights and the rights of minorities. Remember, Susan B. Anthony was a Quaker. And the Quakers were very much involved in the underground railroad; and also looked at how things were happening socially in the industrial revolution. So many Quakers were also involved with the Christian Women's Temperance Union.

My grandmother was a terror to remember [laughs]. She knew Carrie Nation. So this was the other side. The Quakers are very liberal and tolerant people, but they are very conservative people too, and my grandmother was certainly part of it all. She had a lot to do with my formative years. Her son had raised avocados in the Escondido area and used Mexican laborers. My grandmother would make extremely hot salsa for them and read the Bible to them, even though they didn't speak English. They would cross themselves, right? [Laughs] I was involved with some of her views, which were a little bit startling to my mother, who was a modern person. My grandmother was not. She still wore the plain dress with the bonnet, and had me wear the hat.

RW: I want to ask, "what was your first memory?" I think this occurs to me because of my own first memory, which was of seeing sunlight on a wall. And I could swear there was a feeling I almost knew where I came from. I can't help thinking of Plato here.

JT: I make spaces that apprehend light for our perception, and in some way gather it, or seem to hold it. So in that way it's a little bit like Plato's cave. We sit in the cave with our backs to reality, looking at the reflection of reality on the cave wall. As an analogy to how we perceive, and the imperfections of perception, I think this is very interesting.

And there is the making of Plato's cave literally-at New Grange in Ireland, or Abu Sembal where you don't have a pointing sculpture like Stonehenge. Instead you have an architectural space that is arranged to accept an event in light on the horizon. When that event in light occurs on the horizon there is an event in light, inside that space.

This then became the camera obscura, which appeared in many European towns. They would have these, and eventually even created panoramas and dioramas. The "camera lucida" and the "camera obscura" were what artists used to actually make this Western painting space.

We made this eye that sees for us, like the camera, and this is very much a part of how we organized our culture. Of course it became this holder of truth. I mean in a court of law you take a photograph, and you can use it as evidence.

But, if you think about it, there are many factors: first of all, where you point the

camera, and whether you choose a lens that's a telephoto, which flattens the space, and sees through the distance, or a wide angle that sees a much wider area than we see. Then there is the setting of the aperture. All may be in focus, or just a part with the rest out of focus. Do you choose to put in a film that represents light from the sun as white, tungsten light as white, or fluorescent light as white; or do you use color, or infrared? Then, of course, you get this photo that you can change in development, and crop. Then you can present this photo as "proof of reality," when every step of the way you've created the reality.

This idea of how we create our reality through this, and in ways that we're not necessarily aware of, is very important. It contributes to this prejudiced perception that we have. And though learning to represent three dimensions in two, has been a great help to our culture in planning and modeling and all that, there are some losses that are interesting.

There is that experiment where a window is made to appear in perspective, so it looks like a trapezoid, and then it's put on a stick against a very flat background- evenly illuminated, and a few feet away- and then it's rotated. We can't tell whether it's going back and forth, or whether it's going fully around. Our guessing is less than fifty percent correct. But then, for this experiment, so-called primitive people, both in New Guinea and in Africa, were tested, and they were unable to see the illusion. They were only able to see what was actually happening. When it was spinning, they saw it as spinning, and when it was going back and forth, that's what they saw.

So certain ways of organizing information can cause some loss. Learning is one path, one way, and we have learned one way, but this also creates a prejudiced perception that we're not totally aware of.

RW: This interests you obviously, this phenomenon of cultural overlay, and then physiological possibilities.

JT: Yes. We have the physiological limits of perception, and then we have this cultural overlay which is a learned perception. They are not identical at all. Some of Plato's references are to that as well.

RW: You were saying there are many relative choices made, say in a photograph, that really delimit what is seen. And what I'm wondering is, in the encounter with light- which can be an encounter with a different color of light, or a different quality, or angle-isn't there still something fundamental about the perception of light?

JT: Yes. There is a truth in light. That is, you only get light by burning material. The light that you get is representative of what is burned. So whether you take hydrogen or helium, as in the sun, or whether you decide to burn xenon in a bulb, or neon, or tungsten wire, something must be burned to get this light. The light that comes off this material burned, is characteristic of that material burned, at the temperature at which it is burned. So you can then put a filter in between or you can bounce it off paint, but there is truth in light.

There are some very interesting experiments that were done several years ago. They show that light is aware that we are looking.

RW: You're referring to Heisenberg's principle?

JT: Yes. Very much so. Which brings things around to an epistemological, scientific area where we want to disbelieve something unless it's proven. It almost gets to the point where it has a lot to do with what we want to prove. I mean, we're a part of this experiment. We enter into it in ways that can't be denied.
This can be troubling and it troubles a lot of scientists, but I think it also is affirming of the

fact that we're not apart from nature. In fact, that's one of our greatest conceits, to even think that we're somehow apart from nature.

RW: Yes. And I think this speaks to something you've spent maybe 30 years working with and studying, and that is light. What is that drives you in this?

JT: That's hard to say. I'm interested in participating in this culture, but in a way that has meaning to me. I am interested that we treasure light as much as we treasure all these objects around us. And when somebody buys a work of mine there is the question, what is it they own? And in some way I can honestly say that you "own the light that is passing through" [laughs]. That's one way to say it.

The other thing is that we make statements, as artists. The statement is like a completed pass. Art isn't just something that is "done." It's something that is done, in relation to the culture. It has a context. And so obviously, artists have to pay attention to that as well.

RW: I read an article in the European journal Parkett by Hartmut Bohme. One of the phrases he used was "we live in an age of consummate remoteness from God." And although, in our age of scientific rationalism, we wouldn't want to say about light, "It's God," still, at the same time, the experience of light is a phenomenon that somehow tends to nudge us past that. There's something about light which science can't quite fully encompass, or reduce.

JT: Well certainly, it does do that. Actually there are two astronomers in the (Quaker) meeting here in Flagstaff. One works with me on the project here (Roden Crater). I was just talking with him this morning about lunar standstills. In some ways, they have difficulty with organized religion. but in another way they are peering into this "face of God" every night where the real awe of it is absolutely evident to them. But to have some way to express this in the secular world is difficult for them, very difficult. On the other hand, they are some of the more devout people I know.

Roden Crater, Arizona

It's an interesting thing. We're at that place now. And certainly, if you look at the history of religion, and just take a concordance and look up "light," you'll see reference after reference to light in terms of religious experience. It is something, I think, that is very powerful in that regard. And it is also a primal experience, just in the same way I was talking before about the deer looking at the headlights of a car. You can literally come to a different state, as you stare into the fire.But this quality of physical light is particularly important and does have a history of religious connotation. But, you know, we're light eaters. We drink light as vitamin D.

RW: Of course, light is the source of life, literally.

JT: That's true. But I mean also-- just in terms of mental stability --it has to do with vitamin D, which is very important in counteracting depression. So, for a lot of these people who take prozac, just step outside for a while. It could help a great deal.

RW: There's a man in San Francisco named John Dobson. He's in his eighties now. He founded something called the "Sidewalk Astronomers." And the reason he did that, in brief, is he felt it was really important for people see be able to look through a telescope at the planets and the stars. He feels this is absolutely important to the culture.

He ended up devoting his life to this. He'd build these refracting telescopes as big as 24" but more often, maybe 12," or smaller. He would build these himself, teach others how to build them, and take them down on the sidewalk at night and just stop passersby, and say "hey, take a look through this." The reason I bring it up is because I think there's a relationship to what he's doing, and to what you're doing.

JT: Well, this piece out here in the desert (Roden Crater) will have similar qualities too. Right here we're at 6900 feet (Turrell's studio, near Flagstaff). Roden Crater is at 7000 feet. One of the things you get at a high altitude, if you get away from city light, is that the universe really opens up to you. It's a very different experience.I even got a county ordinance passed to preserve dark skies. The dark sky is really important. There's one for the observatories on the other side of town, and now we've got one out here as well. As population comes in they'll have to put in lights that aim down. Just aiming lights down, and not having them go up, makes a big difference.

We generate light at night in the cities to offset our fear of each other, but lighting the night sky cuts off access to the universe. And the territory we inhabit is a visual territory. There are certainly aural aspects to it, I'll grant that, but if you cut off access to the universe, you don't live in it. It's a psychological change to do that, to light the sky and cut off access to the stars.

RW: That's absolutely true. It seems to me that one of the very interesting things that your Roden Crater project is going to do through providing this direct experience of the stars, the sky, and light in many different ways, will be to put people in touch with a greater scale, one not often felt. Actually, I think it's already doing that in some ways, just through the, the scope of the concept itself.

JT: It puts you in direct contact with it. In terms of the size of it though, I don't think the size makes that much difference. If you look inside a Cornell (Joseph Cornell's small scale dioramas), and you enter that universe, it expands to any size you'd like to think of. It's a little bit like when you're reading a book and people pass through the place where you are reading, you don't notice them because you're really in a space generated by the author, more than in the space where you're sitting and reading. This price of admission you've paid to enter, by giving yourself over to the story, needs to be done with art as well. With literature people know that, and have the habit of it. With music you can be in a small apartment, and you listen to this music which makes the space bigger than your apartment. This universe "created by the work" is also important with visual work. That's really the price of admission, and some people don't pay that price of admission with contemporary art. They "look at it," as opposed to entering it, or looking into it.

RW: You may be generous, and say that the effort should be made in front of any piece of art, but perhaps there's a lot of work which doesn't merit too much, or can't take you there.

JT: Well, that can certainly be said, and I'm not going to get into that exactly. But I will say this, that in any period, the only place art comes from will be from those who set themselves up as artists in the culture. So that when a culture isn't paying attention to its art, that's a certain kind of dysfunction. You can blame artists, on the one hand, but it also takes this audience too. I think we have one right now that's hostile

to the arts, to all of them. The government isn't supporting the arts-- I suppose mostly from the reaction to the Mapplethorpe photographs, which Jesse Helms objected to --but these things have a big effect.

RW: We also live in a culture that has this huge industry which baths us in imagery, particularly through television, and which co-opts anything it can use and spews it out as...

JT: ...as entertainment. And entertainment is a different function.

RW: Right. It will take art, if it can. I mean, it has no qualms. It will use whatever it can. It will use the highest expressions it can get its hands on, if this can help push "product." I wonder if you've pondered that sort of thing?

JT: In this time I think, obviously, we've found that entertainment is very important. It's set up with entertainment centered in Los Angeles and at the diagonal end, art is in New York. And we've sort of left it at that. You go to Los Angeles, and it's entertainment money; you go to New York, and it's going to be art.

RW: One thing that occurred to me is that, if something takes time in order to be experienced, it won't be of any use to the media.

JT: Well, that's fine. You can let that go. Because they can take care of that, and then I don't need to be bothered with that audience that's impatient.

RW: Right. One of the things about your work is that you're very intentional about the way in which people are to experience it. That is, you'd like them to be prepared, in a certain way, and this takes time. That's part of what makes it possible to experience the work.

JT: That's interesting because, you know, we're not totally avoiding that today. When we were young, getting a really terrific meal wasn't going to happen in this country, or maybe in just a few places. But today, people have really been paying great attention to cuisine, and to things that take a great deal of time in preparation. People are willing to pay for that, and take the time to do that. These are things of the senses, and those often do take time. And so, at the same time we have this sort of rush toward "media oblivion," we're having places where we do take that time. Quality is now appearing where it didn't appear when we were younger. I think that is very interesting. So it goes both ways. In the same way technology is going like this (gestures), the organization of society is asymptotically going the other way. Both are interesting contradictions that we actually need to think about.

RW: I find it interesting pondering some of the ideas that belong to "postmodern" thinking. There's this move toward radical relativity. That's one of the major thrusts. You used the word "epistemology," so I won't feel bad bringing it up again. There's the idea that epistemologies are relative; that there are no longer any objective universal standards possible for Truth or Knowledge. But I would suspect that the human perception of light, for instance, is basically a universally common experience. That cultural variances would be superficial.

Roden Crater, proposed location of visitor center

JT: It is a universal experience. It is something that even passes to other species, which is interesting too. The information contained within it may not, but that's not so much my business. I did this work-- my "motel art" is at the Mondrian Hotel in Los Angeles--

RW: "Motel art" did you say?

JT: Yes [laughs] You know, artists have to do different forms. I've done etchings, and my "motel art" was lighting at the Mondrian Hotel. I did these pieces which use just the light that comes from different television stations. You've probably walked by an apartment and looked in, and seen the space lit by the light of a television. It's sometimes very beautiful to see this light filling that space.

This light is the content for me. And the thing that is very interesting, is that each station has different characteristics in the light that they give off. So each floor of this hotel has a piece that is tuned to a different station. With the sports station you sometimes get this tremendous green, and there may be a uniform that's red. So you can get these high contrasts. And the cartoon channel has great color. The news networks are the dullest, except for the blue of the weather channel. And also the porn channel will be very delicate in terms of the color it gives off. But all of them are very interesting to look at in terms of the light.

RW: Somewhere I read where you were quoted as saying, probably in an interview, that the "light must have grace."

JT: Well, for me, the work has grace when it isn't overworked, or when it has a great ease. It's not too different from the manner in which you reach an elegant solution in a mathematical proof- when it's not just the fact that you have it, and it's proven. It was done with an economy of means, and without a lot of mirrors and steps. Certainly light does have that for me in spaces that I like. You know, many of the architectural spaces we make now have such a blank lighting. It's very difficult for people. They have that very flat fluorescent light.

RW: I noticed, in trying to think a little about light. there seems to be a sort of poverty of language for its many different qualities.

JT: We're doing much better with sound and with music than with light. One of the great difficulties is that because we had a culture that came out of painting, ideas about light are generally ideas about subtractive light. And so they really have to do with mixing earth to make a color, off of which light is reflected.

We really need to throw away the color wheel. It is the worst educational tool. You know, we can't really go to the moon with Euclidean geometry, and you can't continue with just knowing the color wheel. The color wheel is okay for paint, but you can think of it better if you think of it in light, because light is what reaches our eyes.

We can think of what light irradiates a paint or color, and what light comes off it. We should really be talking about additive light. And we need to talk in terms of the spectrum. We need to teach the spectrum, which is like teaching the scales.

And so, the reason we have a very poor vocabulary in light is because we're thinking of the objects that pull this color. We have an "avocado green," we have "apricot," "persimmon," "raspberry red" and so forth. We often associate with a fruit, or different sorts of earth materials from which we've made these things. These are materials, and we have a very material world. It's a culture very much concerned with surface.

In the piece you saw at the Einsteins (Turrell's "Second Meeting," a sky space) the color of the sky has changed. You can be inside the piece, and the color of the sky is

different than if you step outside the piece. It's not as though I've changed the color of the sky. That ends up as the result, and it has to do with our prejudiced perception. That's because we "know" a white surface, and so no matter what light is put on that interior surface, we're going to read it as a "white" surface. When other colors of light are on it, the only thing that can change is what we have to contrast with it, this open sky. This is why we will change the color of sky when in fact the sky has not been changed in color.

RW: You're saying this is a culturally determined thing?

JT: Yes I am.

RW: You mean, if I was a primitive man, I wouldn't have perceived that shift of color?

JT: Well, that is not exactly clear.

RW: Because it occurred to me, when I was having this experience, that part of it was due to the effects of the after -images of the blue and of the yellowish tungsten light, that these after images amplify each other.

JT: Yes, the laws of simultaneous contrast will work within any culture. That does happen. But we will read white into this for quite a ways even though the color is not nearly so white. We do that more than most cultures... But I don't know how to look at this through other cultures, since I'm in this culture, too. This is where we get to relativity, in terms of judgement.

We don't assign color to spaces easily, as a pilot does. That's very different. You do get involved in these colors of sky, and the sky does darken as you go up in altitude. There's no doubt of that. And that's a great joy to see that. You get different intensities of sky right here at 7000 feet.

RW: I'm glad you mentioned that word "joy" because, certainly for me, there can be a great deal of very strong feeling associated with looking at light. You must have some experience of that.

JT: Maybe I didn't quite fully express it-but as a young child, that was a great joy. My first memory was seeing this light on the ceiling. And so that's going to be from crib, I suppose. I do remember, even looking at things that I imagined up there, as well. In other words things would be in this light as well. It wasn't just that it had to carry a specific image, but I imagined things out of it.

It's not too different from giving yourself over to the experience of reading a book. Seeing "the space within the space," as Antoine St. Exupery described spaces within the space of the sky in some of the early aviation literature he wrote-- Wind, Sand, and Stars, and Night Flight and Flight to Arras —this has great imaginative appeal.

As you fly, you do see space that is determined not so much by physical confines, but by atmospheric and light phenomena within the space. I've seen sometimes a contrail that goes through the sky where you can see its shadow come down through the sky, the shadow of the contrail. This beautiful shadow actually divides the space in an amazing way. And so for me, sitting up there in this cockpit, I've seen so many things that reminded me of this other way of seeing, where light is the material and this makes the space.

Of course it can in other ways too. When you stand on the stage you often have so much light from the footlights that you can't see the audience. Even though

you're in the same architectural space as the audience, you don't see them. And so this light divides the space. Of course, if you dim these lights, that audience comes out just like the stars come out when the sun goes down. This can happen in rather near spaces, this use of light to build space, or to end vision-as much as you can end vision with a wall.

RW: I remember reading somewhere where you described flying between two cloud layers and a jet punched through leaving a contrail between these two layers. And I thought, "that must have been such a beautiful space to be in."

JT: Well, these are spaces that we do inhabit. I think for instance of the Hopis and some of the Southwest Indians, who live on the mesas. They are essentially "sky people," as the Zuni call themselves. Sky city at Acama. And also the Hopis live in that situation. They actually live in the sky. Certainly the Tibetans felt they were living in the sky. They really felt that.

Now you begin to live in the sky when you fly. And it is a different perspective. Many pilots are rather derisive of what they call, "ground pounders" ...[laughs]... and people who live in the maze, where you learn almost by memorizing the turns in the maze. Many people, when they first fly-you can see for hundreds of miles-get lost. You know, they can't find the airport. And when you learn to fly, finding the airport is an important function [laughs].

It's surprising how you can lose yourself when you can see so far. You are no longer down in the maze, no longer what pilots would call, "a bottom dweller." This is a new kind of perception. It's no different than say, if you become a diver and go into the sea, and experience that. You get "rapture of the deep." You get "rapture of the heights." It's something that does occur. And it is a joy-this opening up of perception.

Then you find there many ways we do perceive that are not good for flying, especially when you get visibility at dusk when things are not clearly defined. You start to get a loss of horizon. This is when many of the perceptions we have can not be trusted.

So you actually learn not to trust how we have learned to perceive. Pilots actually have to do this, especially for instrument flight. Night flight is like flying in an ink well. When you get away from the city, and you have no horizon the little dots of light from the farmhouses can, at times, look like the stars. You can really get confused.

One of the most interesting times I had occurred when I was training. I came down over Pyramid lake near Tahoe, and it was an absolutely still morning. I could see the reflection of the sky in the lake. I rolled upside down, and it looked perfect upside down. I rolled right side up, and it looked just the same. Of course, you can feel gravity, but when you do a barrel roll, you take that gravity into the roll. So you have to remember whether you're right side up, or right side down in relation to the real world. There is this beauty of the reflection.

RW: So there are many moments in flying that are a world apart.

JT: Well, it's a world within our world, but it is something to pay attention to, just as in orienting to light. I use light by isolating it, and often not very much of it. I try to do it without a heavy hand, as in the piece you saw at the Einsteins which is seemingly a very simple situation, but it does have something to do with our perception and our relationship to this ocean of air.

RW: I found it startling, really, to experience the intensity of the two colors that developed as the light decreased.

JT: And it gets to be an extreme color that we don't normally see.

RW: I just thought it was amazing, really. The only other piece of yours that I've seen is in the San Jose Museum of art. I think it's projected light. And I was touched by that also, but in a different way. I think I have a fairly strong relationship to light. I'm not sure where it came from, but I've had very intense experiences with light including the so-called "after death" experience of light. There is a golden light, as people report. And what I experienced with that, and I can't really get back to it--it's such an extreme state, but it was a golden light and it was also, at the same time, full of feeling. It wasn't just the light, but it was feeling too. I would say the feeling was love. I don't know what else to call it. It was a very, very powerful experience.

JT: This work that I do is an emotional work. I don't think there is any doubt of that.

RW: Yes. I certainly feel that, but I think the way you talk about it doesn't always reveal the reality of the feeling part of it.

JT: Well, it's unusual to see this kind of work. We're very primitive and have very little vocabulary in terms of light. And also, in terms of the instruments of light-absolutely primitive!
If I'm a painter, I don't need to be a chemist to get thousands of colors. But I can't go down and buy a light anywhere that I can dial through infrared, red, orange, yellow, green into blue, violet, and into ultraviolet. I can't buy a light like that.
We are a primitive culture in terms of light. We are just beginning. So I have to make the instruments, as well as to make the symphony with it.
You know, when we first made the clavier and the piano, and someone sat down to play that, they didn't say, "O my God, what a machine!" It is a machine-quite complex, really-but it's more than that. It is something through which emotion can come, freely.
When I have a work, it doesn't have the hand, but I sacrifice only that in being fully involved in a direct emotional way. And for me, it's a very powerful way. So, I have not lost a thing by taking out the hand.

RW: I was going to ask you- Over the years what has evolved? And I suppose it must go back all the way to your early experiences of light as a child.

JT: Well, the kind of experience you were talking about has been very important to me. I think the descriptions of near-death experience, descriptions of light phenomena in the dream, and in waking... I don't pretend to have a religious art, but I have to say, it is artists who worked that territory from the very beginning. So this is not an arena that we have been out of.
I think that even when you go into gothic cathedrals, where the light and the space have such a way of engendering awe, that, in a way, what the artists have made for you in this place is almost a better connection to things beyond us than anything the preacher can say. Although music, at times, can really approach that too. I think this is a place where artists have always been involved.
It's not new territory. I really do like this sensibility of at least coming close to how we see in this other way, how this light is encountered in this dream, in the meditation. And I can say, I only had this experience once, as a child. Then later, in Ireland I had it, where the physicality of the situation I was in was like the dream. That was really powerful.

I was out in a garden when I was a child, and things took on a life and a luminance that was like this near-death experience, with eyes open. Then once, in Ireland I was coming in a boat, in from Fastnet toward Whitehall. It was absolutely still. A silver light came about that bathed everything. This was an experience I had in a conscious, awake state.

Most of these experiences that people talk about are generally in altered states that are like a dream, or at least, like a daydream.

I would like to have the physicality of my light at least remind you of this other way of seeing. That's as best I can do. It's terrible hubris to say this is a religious art. But it is something that does reminds us of that way we are when we are thinking of things beyond us.

RW: You must find that, over and over, people do resonate to your work in ways that really do remind them of these kinds of experiences.

JT: That's true. And to that degree I suppose that's a success for me. But it's not my light. It's not my remembrances to trigger. They are yours. That can only come from a direct experience by you. So that, in some way, removes some of that distance between you and me, because we both stand before this, equally.

RW: Yes. I think it's an experience many people have had to one degree or another.

JT: I'm sure of that, actually.

RW: I don't know what one does with that, but it's an important fact. I say "important." But then, if someone says, "well, why is it important?" To say why is not so easy.

JT: It's not mine to say. It's enough for me to say, that the flower is for the plant. If bees and florists are interested in it too, fine. I hope to make something that is important to you, but I have to make something that is important to me.

It's not my business, or even my intent to, in any way, affirm your taste. And that's a difficult thing when people think of art. People are thinking of something they can take home, that in some way, affirms what they believe, or how they think-and boy, it's not the job description of the artist to do that. If anything, it's to challenge that, and expand it.