

Art Review: Installation Art - Five Wonders in New York

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by Gabrielle Selz

Installation art—a form of art not limited to an object such as a painting, sculpture, photograph or film, but rather one that encompasses an entire room, building, or outside environment—seems to be the current craze in New York.

Not since the late 60s, when DayGlo happenings took over the gallery scene, has so much attention, so much space, so many dollars and so much excitement been focused on an art form that is not only hard to package and sell, but often requires the efforts of multitudes of people, the backing of institutions, and can take years to come fruition. Even then it can prove difficult to understand.

Why then is there such a current infatuation with installation pieces? My sense is that in a world saturated with images—not just on museum and gallery walls but on our iPhones, iPads, televisions, computers, all of it increasingly honed to seduce and isolate our individual fantasies—more and more people feel the need to come together in a communal experience, to gather and re-inhabit a space that isn't virtual, that does not freeze time but rather lets us explore the present moment.

Installation art is almost always large enough for us to enter with our whole bodies. We do not gaze upon an installation piece so much as pass through it. In a very real sense, “seeing” an installation piece is a lived experience. What's more, in an increasingly global culture, installations connect us not only with our own bodies—touch is crucial to most installation pieces—but with the larger world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenological philosopher said of space, “I do not see according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me.”

Summer is the perfect season for installation art. Like the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon, installations are oases bursting forth anew in every museum, park and square throughout the city. Last week I decided to go on an excursion to experience five installations currently on view on the upper east side of Manhattan. Starting at the Guggenheim, I worked my way down to the Modern. By no means did I see and experience all the installations available to art lovers in the city—I'd still be at it if I had tried—and so at the end of this review I've listed some of those I didn't get a chance to view.

1. James Turrell at the Guggenheim

James Turrell has been called a light and space artist, but it might be more accurate to describe his art as the art of perception. For 39 years now, he has been hollowing out the inside of an extinct volcano out in the Arizona desert. *The Rodin Crater*. Creating is a series of vast viewing chambers, Turrell has endeavored to frame the experience light, the curve of the earth, the pure night sky, the moonrise.

The artist comes from Quaker origins and grew up sitting in quiet rooms, *waiting*, as his grandmother told him, *to greet the light*. He was an aerial photographer and a student of perceptual psychology who became interested in art after taking an art history class. That class, and in particular the experience between the art slides when the projector momentarily flashed empty streams of white light upon the screen, shaped Turrell's vision. For decades he has won renown for the way he carves and sculpts space with light.

At the Guggenheim, Turrell has been given an unlimited budget to reconfigure the Rotunda. Named after the sun-disc deity in ancient Egyptian mythology, *Aten Reign* is Turrell's new installation, probably the grandest declaration of light as pure presence as is humanly possible. He has transformed the sloping space of famous Frank Lloyd Wright building and concealed the spiral ramps behind an opaque scrim material, ringing the entire enclosure with hidden LED lights.

Filing in, visitors can take seats on benches along the wall, or like I did, lie prone on the floor, gazing upward as we were quite literally bathed in a shimmering spectrum of light. It was like being in a cloudbank or undersea. The light transitions through the entire spectrum, imperceptibly, and with each change the space shifts, too. The dome of building alternately floats down or pulls the viewer heavenward.

The result is that Turrell completely alters our experience of the concrete architecture, changing it from something solid into an indeterminate color field of light, one that he allows us to drift inside of, as if we are inhabiting a dream. In so doing, he expands our sense of our own perception. For in a Turrell space, the concept of what is or isn't real becomes hard to distinguish. "Light is not so much something that reveals," Turrell has stated, "as it is the revelation itself."

The show also includes some early Turrell installations upstairs. These are simpler, purer installations where Turrell uses only a spotlight cast in a dark corner to contort emptiness into volumes. Rectangles and triangles of light appear to float off the wall or open the space up, as if there was a room beyond is filled with brilliant, white light. And it's in one of these rooms that I truly experienced falling into a gap between my knowing and not knowing.

Aten Reign, may be grand and beautiful and a majestic ambition, but it's precisely the scale, like the carving out of a volcano, that makes it feel overly heroic and hollow. And yet, but for grand ambitions there would be no Seven Wonders of the World, no mythology of even hanging gardens in Babylon.

The James Turrell show is on view at the Guggenheim through Sept 25, 2013.



“Aten Reign” by James Turrell, 2013. Daylight and LED light, dimensions variable © James Turrell. Installation view: James Turrell, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 21–September 25, 2013. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York.

2. Imran Qureshi at the Metropolitan

My next stop was, in fact, a garden. Heading down Fifth Avenue, I went to the Metropolitan, where every summer Bloomberg funds make possible a commission for a roof garden exhibition on top of the museum. This year that commission went to Deutsche Bank’s 2013 Artist of the Year, Imran Qureshi, who used it to create *And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean*.

Qureshi is a Pakistani artist who incorporates diametrically opposite traditions: 20th century abstraction—particularly the spatter technique of Jackson Pollock (who himself was indebted to the technique of the Indian Sand Painting he’d witnessed in the early 1940s, and that he said allowed the artist to walk around and be inside the painting)—with the highly exacting miniature tradition of Islamic illustration. By weaving together the styles of east and west, old and new, Qureshi’s art seeks to create a cross-pollination between civilizations.

And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean was executed over a two-week period, from April 26 to May 3. Encompassing the entire 8,000-square feet of the Metropolitan roofdeck, Qureshi first poured and splattered the surface with a blood red, colored paint. Then, he painstakingly highlighted and defined the red splatters with strokes of white, transforming many of the blotches into delicate, ornamental foliage. From the violent gesture of the flung paint, flowers,

leaves, wings and flames took form and flight.

The ground, which he had first defiled, was cleaned-up and edited. The result is a field that alternately resembles a crime scene and a magic carpet of poppies. Surrounded by the green tree-scape of Central Park, Qureshi's piece echoes the luxuriant wall gardens of Mughal court painting, while also evoking the ravages of war-torn, bloodstained and bombed-out city streets.

Qureshi has said that his work is about the dialogue between life and death. And he deliberately creates a form of art that is meant to be tread upon. At first I noticed viewers were cautious when entering his tableau, perhaps afraid of defiling the work or maybe fearing what they might discover once they had stepped onto and into the artist's world. For walking across Qureshi's landscape is to be constantly confronted with moments of violence and hope, of destruction and creation.

Were the flowers meant to camouflage the blood or was the blood staining the blossoms? Both violence and beauty, Qureshi seems to be saying, whether one lives in Pakistan, Boston or New York, blanket our everyday lives. Crime and passion, devastation and renewal coexist under our very feet. Whether we like it or not, we are all part of the same scene.

Imran Qureshi's roof garden commission is on view (weather permitting) through Nov 3, 2013.

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Installation View:
“And How Many Rains Must Fall Before the Stains Are Washed Clean” By Imran Qureshi (b. 1972, Hyderabad, Pakistan), 2013. Photograph: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Hyla Skopitz.

3. Robert Irwin at the Whitney

From the Metropolitan I continued down to the Whitney. The museum is honoring the brutal grandeur of architect Marcel Breuer’s modernist masterpiece by reinstalling Robert Irwin’s *Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light*, a site-specific piece originally designed, installed and displayed in 1977 for the Emily Fisher Landau Gallery on the 4th floor of the museum. Now, as the Whitney gets ready to relocate to the meatpacking district next year, *Scrim Veil* has been reinstalled as a fond farewell to the magnificent building soon to be turned over to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Robert Irwin began as a minimalist painter—creating large, colored canvases with a few horizontal

lines running across the surface—but soon he began to question the mark, the canvas and the frame as a container for meaning. “I slowly dismantled the act of painting,” he wrote, “to consider the possibility that no-thing ever really transcends its immediate environment.” Leaving his studio behind, he set out to create site-conditional art. In a world flooded with spectacle, he wanted his work to respond to the existing surroundings so that the viewer’s experience of the everyday would become paramount.

The piece consists of only a few elements: From the ceiling, Irwin has hung a scrim of white transparent polyester fabric 5½ feet from the floor and weighted by a black metal bar. Painted around the 117-foot-long room, delineating the perimeter of the walls, runs a black line that is also 5½ feet from the floor. That’s it. Room, window, ceiling, floor, scrim and line of black: these are the only features in this work of art. But taken together these simple components manipulate the viewer’s sense of perception.

At times the translucent scrim appears transparent, at others, opaque. It advances, then recedes, continually casting and recasting the rectangular room and the trapezoidal window in a new light.

Scrim Veil draws our attention by asking us to question our assumptions of space. Never before has Breuer’s room felt so full of possibility. A window looks like a projection, a see-through scrim like a solid wall. By shifting the spatial composition, Irwin means to disorient, thus heightening our awareness of place. He means to reawaken us to our surroundings. For both Turrell and Irwin, art is not in the object, but in the seeing.



“Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light” by Robert Irwin. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977. Cloth, metal, and wood, 144 x 1368 x 49 inches. Gift of artist.

Walking out of the Whitney I felt as if I were re-encountering the world. Later that day, on the corner of 57th Street, I saw the Plaza. I'd seen this building maybe a thousand times before, but somehow, after experiencing the Irwin, it looked all the more magical and elegant. It took me a moment to realize that this was not the Plaza but a fake façade covering the luxurious hotel. A massive, 62,000-square-foot scrim that had been hand painted. A trompe l'oeil mural draped over the Plaza Hotel.

Maybe I would have seen it anyway, maybe not.

Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light will be on view at the Whitney until September 1, 2013.

4. Paul McCarthy at the Park Avenue Armory

Before I got to the Plaza, I stopped at the Park Avenue Armory to experience Paul McCarthy's X-rated *WS*.

First let me state that this is not a piece for children. It is highly pornographic, embracing vulgarity in a way that the 16th century painter, Hieronymus Bosch once embraced the grotesque. Bosch was only painting tiny two-dimensional sinners. McCarthy's world is a dark, 3-D satirical cartoon on steroids. Think Bosch mixed with Disney. Think dark taboos.

WS is a work in progress. McCarthy, a Los Angeles based artist known for his controversial sculpture of Santa Claus holding a giant penis, has converted the cavernous 55,000-square-foot space of the Armory into a disturbing reinterpretation of the fairy tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.

Integrating sculpture, sound, video and scenic design, the installation consists of a huge platform that viewers are invited, or actually compelled, to wander across. There's a yellow ranch-style house, apparently a reproduction of McCarthy's childhood home. Windows have been cut, offering viewers peeks inside at scenes of the remnants of a debauched "house party." There lies Snow White and her prince, both ravaged and naked and smeared in chocolate syrup. The rest of the platform is taken over by a primordial forest, an overgrowth of giant plastic trees, birdhouses and huge, Technicolor flowers.

A seven-hour film that was shot both inside the ranch house and in the fake forest plays continuously on multiple screens. When I entered, the Seven Dwarfs were on the screens stomping through the forest like psycho frat boys.

Snow White, (portrayed by the actress Elyse Poppers) is a sexy, half-dressed vixen having her face plastered with slices of baloney and American cheese by a domineering, bulbous nosed, Walt Paul (a character that it is amalgamation of Walt Disney and Paul McCarthy) who screams, "I own you!" Indeed my overwhelming sensation of the installation was one of noise, a profound almost plaintive wail that never ceases.

In the end, *WS* is more confusing than anything else. Perhaps that's a comment on the continuous onslaught of mass-media culture. But when the friend who was accompanying me asked, "What are

the stakes of all this?” neither one of us could come up with a good answer. Was it a critique of our infantilizing culture? Shouldn’t we have known? The one element that stood out, aside from the screaming, was the strangely beautiful cinematography. Shot up-close and at odd angles, the images were eerily lit, operatic in both their size and intimacy and impossible to forget. But then so is Bosch.

Paul McCarthy’s WS is on view at The Park Avenue Armory until Aug 4, 2013. Viewer discretion is required.



“WS” by Paul McCarthy, 2013. Image courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Joshua White.

5. rAndom International at MoMA

Finally, I arrived at the *Rain Room*. In a 300-foot temporary annex next door to the Museum of Modern Art, rAndom International—the London group known for creating digitally based

installations that blend art, design and technology—has created a minimalist installation of water, light and space: A rain room where one enters, dances, spins, chases the water and *doesn't* get wet. This design feat is accomplished by special cameras and sensors, which have been built into the structure and are designed to track and detect visitors in the room. You can move in the space under the flow of water as the droplets literally part for you. Think of those cartoon illustrations in which a figure is followed by a dark raincloud; in *Rain Room* visitors are surrounded instead by a capsule of dry space.

Taking a page from kinetic art, which in the 1960s embraced the art of motion for effect, *Rain Room* is all about movement and human interaction. rAndom International has an ongoing interest in human interactions and reactions with their projects. This piece uses filtered and recycled water, and addresses the pressing ecological concerns about the impact we humans have on our environment.

A curious exchange takes place inside the room. Moving through the space, I began to feel as if the water was emotionally responding to me. I felt as if I was lending the rain itself a human presence, as the feedback loop between the viewer and piece is completely integrated into this experience.

Rain Room is on view at MoMA until July 28, 2013. Only a handful of viewers are allowed inside at a time, so be prepared, rain or shine, to wait at least 2 hours.



Installation view of Random International's "Rain Room" at The Museum of Modern Art, as part of MoMA PS1's "EXPO 1: New York", 2013. Photo: Charles Roussel.

There were many pieces I didn't get to see.

Expo 1: New York is a sprawling, multi-site show on view at PS 1 until Sept 2 and includes the work of Olafur Eliasson and Pierre Huyghe.

Along the High Line between West 21st and 22nd streets, El Anatsui has created a monumental wall of pressed tin, *Broken Bridge II*, up until Nov 21.

A hand-knotted nautical rope piece by Orly Genger winds through Madison Square Park until Sept 8.

Down at the New Museum is a show of multi-media and sculpture installations by Erika Vogt until Sept 22.

For night owls, The Art Production Fund is sponsoring *After Hours 2: Murals On The Bowery* on view until Sept 29. Fifteen artists celebrating downtown by painting murals on the steel-roller shutters along the Bowery. A map and a cell phone audio guide is available at the New Museum.

Times Square Alliance has an ongoing series, also called *After Hours*, in which ephemeral performances and installations are hidden in the famous district and *Midnight Moment*, a digital gallery displaying video art on many of the screens surrounding Times Square appears nightly in the minutes between 11:57 and midnight.

Too often the world isolates and narrows down our perceptions. I happen to be a great proponent of any art form that encourages piercing the permeable boundary that separates me from the world. Climbing inside an artwork is like walking around in someone else's imagination. To break through that boundary is to be born anew. To experience the world through someone else's eyes is to reinvest it with fresh understanding and meaning. What more can we ask of art?

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