

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 8
Rafiq Bhatia and James Turrell's *New Light*
National Gallery of Art

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host, Celeste Headlee.

Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music, we see a photo, we walk around a sculpture, we taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint. But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting.

When we listen what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting what do we hear? This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts on Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

When you interact with a piece of art, not just glance at it as you stroll by, but really see it, you participate in that piece. At its best, visual art is not just an image, but an experience that's unique to the viewer. And that's true of all art forms. So what you hear in a piece of music or perceive in a painting is very much specific to you—your experiences, your tastes, your mood. Your experience might be very different from what the artist intended.

So what happens when a piece of art forces you to experience it in a specific way? That's the question posed by James Turrell's *New Light*, the piece we'll focus on during this episode. It's a work that plays with light, with time, and even with the inner workings of your eyes. It forces you to slow down as you take it in. That passive interactivity appealed to Rafiq Bhatia. He was lucky enough to see *New Light*, and the experience struck such a resonant chord with him he was inspired to write music.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So what drew you to this piece?

RAFIQ BHATIA: I think there's so much to unpack in James Turrell's work and pieces like this. But above all else, it is this recontextualization of a medium or a substance being light that we think of as this continuous, unbounded stuff of the ether. And the way that it is bottled and distilled or bounded into a form that we can experience almost like a snapshot of itself, or almost being able to slow it down or come closer to it, or have a more intimate relationship to it.

And that's something that is very inspiring to me as somebody who tends to work or be preoccupied with more ephemeral aspects of sound and almost these kinds of transient moments, fleeting moments in sound that call attention to the human beings that are creating it and the experience that those people are having. And as somebody who tries to find ways to capture that stuff and work with it, that stuff can feel almost impossible to take out of the context of a moment sometimes.

As an improviser, and as somebody who's interested in improvisation, the whole beauty of that practice, or a central part of it for me, is to be able to create something that feels like it speaks directly to a particular moment in time.

CELESTE HEADLEE: For more on James Turrell's unique installation and artistic statements, we turn to Molly Donovan, the National Gallery's curator of contemporary art.

MOLLY DONOVAN: When this work was installed back in the early aughts, soon after we acquired it as a gift from the artist, it was a major destination for people because Turrell's work uses light as the medium. He uses light as medium the way other artists use paint.

And so you would walk into the room where just this work is installed, and you would stay a long time because at first, when you walk into a fairly darkened room, your eyes take time to adjust. Over time, though, you begin to see this red rectangle on the other end of the room. Just a red rectangle of light. And you think it's projected onto the opposite wall. But then you walk up to it slowly because you're not sure what you're walking towards. And eventually the magic is revealed, and you recognize that the light is created from recessed light sources that are projected onto the walls inside an aperture or a room within the room that you're standing in. And it's quite wonderful.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Does it give the impression of an optical illusion?

MOLLY DONOVAN: There is an illusionistic quality to the work. You do think that it is a projected light or a neon light hanging on a wall. And then the other illusion is that, as you're walking towards it—from one side of the room towards the aperture—the red rectangle, of course, starts to envelop your field of vision so you feel like you're walking towards a space. And that is very illusionistic and very perceptually powerful as an experience.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So that sense of anticipation I definitely recognize in the music that you chose. Was this music at least partially inspired by Turrell?

RAFIQ BHATIA: Yes, quite a bit of it was formulated at a time that I was thinking about Turrell's work and about pieces like this one. And this hue of red was one of the colors that I kept coming back to, but there's also a very bright pink that is used in some of his work that has a similar effect on me. And it's one of the things that I'm really interested in in the music, which all comes from an album that I put out in 2018 called *Breaking English*, is this effect of distance and perspective and the subjectivity of the experience that distance can create with light.

What can warm and comfort us at a distance can be searing up close. And what is illuminating from afar, as you draw nearer to it, can be blinding. And that is something that I love about these pieces is that it feels as though you can both be warmed and comforted by them, and you can be overwhelmed by them. And it allows for both kinds of experiences simultaneously, it feels like.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It occurs to me that we so often ascribe emotions to colors in the same way that we ascribe emotions to different musical keys or tones, right? The stereotype of a minor key as opposed to a major key, which is supposedly happy, is that the minor key is sad. There's always a bit of surprise

when people subvert that. And I feel the same way about red, that you could see this as stereotypically assertive or angry. And yet I wonder what you see in the red he has chosen?

RAFIQ BHATIA: What I see is something that feels almost like free perception. It's like the way that if I stare at a light that's bright and I close my eyes, I see a red afterimage. It almost feels like I'm encountering this state of my consciousness that's preretinal or something. It's "pre" the level at which my eyes are giving me more elaborate information to go on.

And that's one of the things that I love about this is that it's so monolithic, as I said before, and it's so stark. And it pushes me into a place where I feel like I'm forced to contend with what else is in the room. And that includes myself as the viewer, and I'm forced to look further inside myself for answers.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder what kind of red you would call this. They have all kinds of imaginative names for reds when you're looking at a lipstick, right? What kind of red is this?

MOLLY DONOVAN: It's hard to describe the color of light that this red represents. Maybe it's stoplight red? I'm trying to think of a red light that relates to this color. It's maybe a little warmer. The depth of red I can't quite equate it with another—put a name on it, but maybe stoplight red.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's interesting you say stoplight red because, having never seen this piece installed, but the way you describe it and others describe it, it requires you to stop and wait and allow it to unfold. Do you think that's accurate?

MOLLY DONOVAN: Yeah, but I don't think the color is a metaphor for the effect of the work. And, of course, these aperture works used blues, greens, magentas. This one happens to be red. He has his palette, as it were. It's not a cautionary red in that way.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Why do you think he wanted us to reconsider light? What was he trying to tell us by forcing us to see light itself as artistic, as beautiful?

MOLLY DONOVAN: What Turrell does in this work by choosing light as his—and many of his works—by choosing light as his primary material, he's really expanding our understanding of what art can be to include light, to put light into the toolbox of artists.

He's also in these works making art an experience. And I think that's a big part of his practice. He calls it "nonvicarious" work or experiences—that one has to experience the work in person. You can't convey it to another person. You can't reproduce it very easily, even. And I think those two things really set him apart.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder how you feel about this difference of approach to art: that, in one case, you do all your preparation and then you go and do the performance, and it comes out as it comes out with this spontaneity, and James Turrell's approach, which is so careful.

RAFIQ BHATIA: Well, I think in my work, I'm often trying to reconcile both of those instincts because I come from a background of dealing more in things like improvisation, but I'm also fascinated with the tools and capabilities that recording sound gives somebody who's making music. The idea that if you capture a recording of something that's fleeting or speaking to a particular moment that you're in essence able to bottle some of the characteristics of that moment in time and offer the listener a perspective on that through working with it and shaping it. It's almost like a sculptural approach to dealing with these sound ingredients.

And so in the analogy to Turrell's work, I think light itself is this ephemeral fleeting substance, and then finding these really elaborate ways to contain it and present it in such a way that plays with the perception of the viewer and changes the viewer's experience of the space around them and things like this is something that speaks to me and appeals to me very much.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder if you'd go a little further or deeper into the word "ephemeral," especially when it comes to James Turrell's work. I've always interpreted ephemeral as referring to time, a space of time, something that doesn't last very long. And I wonder how you see that, literally see that quality in this piece by Turrell.

RAFIQ BHATIA: Well, I'm not sure that I'm seeing ephemerality so much as I'm seeing this relationship to it that I'm talking about where you're able to take something that ordinarily would be fleeting and slow it down to a level that you can sit with it. And light is something that we tend to have a very fleeting relationship to because it moves so fast. And here we are sitting there looking at something that we could never grasp ordinarily in a framing that almost feels two-dimensional and still. And it really allows us to be overcome by this substance and also to vary our variety of experience with it—like we can walk close to it, we can get far away from it. But we still see it in this almost undeniable, monolithic way.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's interesting to me that James, so many of his pieces incorporate the viewer as part of the art—that where you're standing, your height even, changes what you see. And I wonder what you think about that for an artist to then make part of the impact of their work dependent on the viewer.

MOLLY DONOVAN: It's really one of the most remarkable aspects of Turrell's work, that he incorporates the individual retina of the viewer and then the connection to the viewer's brain and the processing. And I think it's very interesting that he focused in his undergraduate studies on perceptual psychology. He was clearly very interested in this very issue, how the retina receives information and how that gets transmitted over time in the brain of the individual person. And that's a major contribution to the history of art.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: So in returning to this music that you—this album came out in 2018, which I assume meant that you had been working on it for the years before that. And you returned to it. And what did you hear when you went back to this music? Anything that surprised you?

RAFIQ BHATIA: Well, mostly I heard how much more work I have to do. It's a never-ending process, and going back and listening to my older work is always—

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's tough, right?

RAFIQ BHATIA: Oh, yeah. I hear all the things I wish I'd done differently and whatnot. But it's also this album is a very deeply personal album for me. And if I'm being totally honest, I think just as much as the music is drawing on artists like James Turrell, it's also about what is not yet represented in the collections of major galleries.

I grew up going to art museums with my family, and oftentimes what I was exposed to when contemporary work was on display, the artists were overwhelmingly white and also overwhelmingly male. And I think that's actually a big part of what's happening here in this music is it's an attempt for me to try to articulate some sense of my own experience in a world where, in my formative years, I felt like I didn't really get to encounter that very much in these spaces.

And maybe that is actually a part of what drew me towards the abstraction that you find and the lack of overt symbology that you find in the work of people like James Turrell because it leaves open the possibility for me to find my own meaning and resonance within that kind of a space.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder—the first concern I had was, I didn't want anyone to think we were trying to make a soundtrack for a piece of art. And I wonder how do you avoid the natural—how do you work your way around the natural human tendency to create stories out of everything that we put together?

RAFIQ BHATIA: Yeah, I suppose that there is this tendency to want to tie things neatly up all together. And to me I think it's important to acknowledge that inspiration or influence does not necessarily constitute a relationship, and certainly that's been the case for me. A lot of the musicians and artists and folks who I've drawn inspiration from are people who might not actually like what I did with that inspiration, or resonate with what I did, or feel great about how their work might have shaped what I'm doing. And I think that that's good.

And so it's not necessarily that I can only imagine that I would be very honored to meet James Turrell, but I also have no idea how he would feel about the sounds that I've made that his work was an inspiration for in certain ways.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's "Hoods Up" by Rafiq Bhatia, uninterrupted.

[MUSIC - RAFIQ BHATIA, "HOODS UP"]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Thanks, once again, to Rafiq Bhatia for joining us. You can learn more about him and James Turrell at our website, nga.gov/podcast.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Right now you're listening to a movement from Nathalie Joachim's "Suite pou Dantan." Nathalie will join us on our next episode to discuss her Haitian musical heritage and the Carrie Mae Weems photograph that reminds her of a past trip to her home island.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Sound Thoughts on Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art's music department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs, and mixed and

produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, [nga.gov/podcast](https://www.nga.gov/podcast). If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts on Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also leave us a review wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time, be well.