

## You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real).

---

### *The Mendota Stoppages.*

In 1969, the American artist James Turrell purchased a block of land that housed the abandoned Mendota Hotel. Turrell set to work on the building, adding walls, painting entire rooms white (including the floor) and smoothly plastering the surfaces, assiduously preparing the space for a series of light and perception experiments – the *Mendota Stoppages* – which the artist undertook between 1969 and 1974. Turrell is now well known for his light works, which explore the characteristics and limits of human perception. He is most particularly revered for *Roden Crater*, a site-specific and quasi-mystical project sited within a volcanic crater in the American desert that Turrell acquired in the 1970s and is slowly transforming into a naked-eye observatory. When it opens, audiences will journey there, stay for a 24-hour period, and move through a series of chambers in order to experience different cosmological events.

The *Mendota Stoppages* – which James L Marshall’s exhibition title references – were some of Turrell’s earliest experimentations with light and perception. To experience the work, audiences would arrive at the Mendota Hotel customarily at 9pm or 10pm – though sometimes later – and participate in a light performance that lasted anywhere from two to four hours. Turrell would guide the audiences through a series of rooms to experience ten sequences of different light performances, which were choreographed by Turrell through opening a series of apertures – often doors, windows or louvres – to let in diverse external light sources, such as light from a street lamp, the emanations of a neon sign or the headlights of a passing bus. This reflected light articulated different light and space manifestations, some vivid and well defined, others ambient and barely perceptible.

In the tenth, and final, sequence, Turrell plunged the room into complete darkness. Curiously, however, despite the cessation of all light stimuli, participants never experienced total darkness, instead describing their experience of seeing continuing light effects in the room. What participants were actually seeing were residual electrical impulses within their retinas that were being interpreted by their brains as ‘vision’. For Turrell, this perceptual experience of ‘afterimage’ – a continuing experience of light despite the absence of external light stimuli – was of interest because it performed the artist’s contention that the limits of perception are impossible to map. Perception – which is, ultimately, the experience of being human – is an experience seemingly impossible to quantify or demarcate with certainty. The participants thought they saw a light source, but really they were seeing the internal machinations of their own body. Therefore, Turrell might contend, seeing should not mean believing and reality sort of is a state of mind.

### *The Mendota Block.*

An interest in perception is one of the key impulses running through James L. Marshall’s installation *Mendota Block* at Bus Projects. His title pays homage to Turrell’s *Mendota Stoppages*, and his attempt to create an immersive and sensorially potent space recalls the work of Turrell and his contemporaries

such as Larry Bell and Robert Irwin, a group now described as the ‘West Coast Light and Space’ artists.

After graduating from the Masters program of the South Australian School of Art in 2011, Marshall gravitated to Los Angeles, which enabled him to explore these Light and Space antecedents and to immerse himself within LA, a city full of radiant light and heat, which rises out of the desert almost like a mirage, and whose spectral qualities are intensified through association with that most illusionistic of industries, the Hollywood movie business. In LA, Marshall continued his studio-based practice, curated exhibitions through the initiative ‘Doheny Projects’, and also contributed to the *Utopia Project: Los Angeles*, a project exploring utopian idealism through artistic collaboration.

There is much of sensory interest in *Mendota Block*. Marshall is interested in how we perceive stimuli and how our bodies – and their various senses – interpret the world around us. This ambitious project transforms Bus Projects’s gallery spaces into highly immersive environments. One of Marshall’s most dramatic and most immediately apparent alterations is his application of a red filter to the windows, drenching the interior with a moody and intense blood-red light. This intervention makes the space feel corporeal – it seems to pulse with an ethereal light-based life-blood. As you step within this zone, you accept Marshall’s invitation to inhabit another ambiance. Just like Turrell’s Mendota Hotel, on entering Marshall’s Mendota Block you leave ubiquitous reality behind and open yourself up to an experience of other perceptual states of being.

A large pentagram in the centre of the space is offered up as a platform to gather around – perhaps to lie on – in order to properly see a screen mounted on the ceiling playing a looped live-action sequence of abstracted flames. The artist’s modification of the video’s pictorial space, through rotating a circular section of the flames, increases the ritualistic atmosphere. There is a sense of eternal return, of some eternally burning life force, of enduring cycles of death and regeneration. Marshall’s Masters project considered how motifs familiar to horror films might be used within a more sculpturally focused contemporary art practice. Here, his inclusion of the pentagram – so ubiquitous in the horror genre – might add a dimension of horror or it may just be another emblem – another totem object – that manifests a desire to reach the otherworldly.

All in all, the different elements within *Mendota Block* combine to create a heady atmosphere, and one that might start to reveal – if you are that way inclined – heightened awareness of paranormal or pataphysical activity. Flickers of other phenomena may start to appear; the lift of astral disembodiment might commence; the séance may start to work. This invitation to give over to some kind of perceptual shift is underscored by a print work, hanging between galleries 1 and 2, in which three lines of overlapping text state ‘out of body experience’. The typography and the aesthetic – white text on a black background – reference Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara’s *Today* series, a durational and daily painting project comprising a series of ‘date’ paintings in which, beginning 4<sup>th</sup> January 1966, the artist has attempted to create a painting documenting the date on which it was made. Through invoking On Kawara, Marshall invokes a discussion of time and duration, two curious ideas to explore: while ‘standard time’ is an attempt to synchronise time and render it universal, duration is a deeply elastic and subjective experience – time can drag or fly depending on our experience of it and can perhaps even return or expand.

In 1939, the Russian inventor Semyon Davidovich Kirlian developed a photographic technique using electrical current, through which he claimed to have transfixed a person's aura on a sheet of photographic paper. The images produced through this method – now called 'Kirlian' images – are attractive spectral images, in which large swathes of black are dramatically (if allegedly) enlivened by brightly coloured spikes of astral energy or more softly coloured clouds of aura. For *Mendota Block* Marshall has made a suite of Kirlian-styled images – beautiful abstract images whose blobbish moiré patterns manifest on the sheet like ethereal soul splotches. Yet, unlike Kirlian, Marshall makes no big claims about capturing 'soul energy' in these images – he unabashedly takes them using an iPhone camera and then digitally manipulates them to heighten the forms and colours. This may seem glib to those who prefer their otherworldly artworks with a little more hocus-pocus, yet they are nonetheless potent. They are beautiful images, and their shimmering abstracted surfaces remind us that the world is not a simple code that is easy to crack. Much – perhaps most – is mysterious. What we see and what we feel are changeable and surprising – even to ourselves (who should know us best). *Mendota Block* successfully builds an environment in which sensation is heightened and perception is enlivened, and this – if you let it – can intensify your experience of being human. It might even make you feel mighty real.

Phip Murray