



Multiple grotto, 2004
Courtesy of SFMOMA



Beauty, 1993



360 room for all colours, 2002

Olafur Eliasson: The Visible Wizard

By Kenneth Caldwell

Take Your Time

Olafur Eliasson

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Olafur Eliasson, in the lineage of Robert Irwin, is a wizard of an artist. He embraces and modifies the environment, with light and time as primary tools, to reflect and refract our own selves. Irwin came out of television's early age, when the medium was limited to only a few channels. Eliasson, just 40 years old, emerges from a complex media age nobody previously imagined; therein lies the challenge for a post-object artist. How can one create something powerful enough to engage viewers without resorting to entertainment? Eliasson solves this riddle by offering full disclosure without any absolute answers.

His approach differs from James Turrell, one of the most important artists currently working with light. Eliasson's pieces reveal how they work--in a way they are mechanically simple. You can see how they are made, and they are not perfectly smooth like Turrell's pieces. The hand is visible; indeed the wizard is visible. There is no curtain, and that is part of Eliasson's genius.

What remains is the viewer experiencing the moment. Or as Eliasson likes to say, "Seeing yourself seeing." Eliasson's emphasis on the viewers' experience in each constructed environment hopefully inspires visitors out of their passivity to go out into the world and create something. This is what he means by naming his first major retrospective *Take Your Time*. It's your time—don't rush. Own your time, and you can be empowered. Walking through the exhibit, people talk to each other as if having discovered some part of themselves for the first time. He creates a forum for self as well as communal exploration, and this acknowledgement of the connection between the individual and the commonweal is a profoundly democratic idea underlying his work.

In 2003 Eliasson installed *The Weather Project*, a kind of sun made from light and mirrors, at the Tate Modern in London. It drew record crowds and pushed the artist into the pantheon of contemporary, accessible artists. Stepping off the elevator on the fifth floor of SFMOMA, the visitor walks into *Room for One Colour* (1997), a bath of yellow light. For one brief moment, I imagined that all would be golden as with *The Weather*



Yellow versus purple, 2003



Sunset kaleidoscope, 2005

Project, but then everything pales and people turn shades of gray, their normal color drained out of them.

In the next space, *Yellow Versus Purple* (2007) a white spotlight shoots towards a rotating disc of color-effect filter glass, producing a yellow glow while the light that bounces off the disc is bluish. When the two reflections cross on the wall there is only a thin line. It takes time to see this--as Eliasson suggests in the naming of the show. The adjacent model room is not so much a piece of art as a three-dimensional sketchbook holding various architectural inquiries and one reflective lamp sculpture. One of the highlights of the exhibit is the *360° for All Colours* (2002), with hundreds of lamps changing color in a panorama that recalls historic dioramas but without pictorial content. With *Remagine* (2002), seven spotlights create moving rectangles that rearrange the perception of depth. Once again, the technology is not complex, but the effect is.

Creating a contrast to the light works, the journey next takes you down a dark, damp tunnel. Earthen tiles comprise *Soil Quasi Bricks* (2003), which serves more as a transition for the next pieces than as a strong piece on its own. Here you can move ahead to the reflective water in *Notion Motion* (2005) or turn left towards the sound and smell of water in *Beauty* (1993). Small upturns in the creaky wood floor activate a wave pattern reflected on the wall. On the other side of the wall, the relatively simple mechanics of this piece are revealed. In *Beauty*, you can see a distorted rainbow in falling mist or, if you dare, you can walk through the mist to look at the other side. But this is no funhouse of tricks--the pipes and illumination are all there to see. Each piece asks you to question your experience and look again.

Kaleidoscopes, those marvels of light and color, show up in several different guises in Eliasson's work. *Multiple Grotto* (2004), a stainless steel sculpture, explodes the toy into a bigger-than-life version so that the smallest of human movements activates your perception. In *One-way Colour Tunnel*, commissioned for SFMOMA's interior bridge, he borrows again from the experience of the kaleidoscope. Seen from the west, the acrylic triangles look black, and on the return trip heading east, each facet explodes with a rainbow of color. At the end of the bridge is a small work, *Sunset Kaleidoscope* (2005), which allows you to focus on the outside world through a small yellow disc and then a seemingly infinite number of views created by mirrors.

Another of Eliasson's forums for inquiry is photography. I had difficulty focusing on the several series of prints because they were so different from the environmental pieces in scale and

material. They felt like more notations than independent works. The exception was his eerie *Glacier Mill Series* (2007), shown in conjunction with his frozen-hydrogen powered BMW in a related exhibition entitled *Your Tempo* in the architecture and design galleries on the museum's second floor.

Since 1975, BMW has commissioned art cars from famous artists. Eliasson has moved beyond the traditional approach of treating the car as canvas. Instead, he literally dismantled the vehicle and created two new skins, covered them with water, and employed an enormous commercial freezer (powered by renewable energy, of course) to freeze them. The result is a time-twisting comment on the global threat of the automobile. Tweaking the promise of an experimental car, he has built a kind of insect of the future preserved as a frozen fossil after its imagined demise. To enter this time warp, you need a gray blanket (like something out of a Joseph Beuys exhibit), which the museum kindly provides. In the adjacent space, the photographs of holes in Icelandic glaciers that no longer heal up in winter--another sign of global warming--in conjunction with the frozen skeleton of contemporary technology create the most exquisitely beautiful reminders of our perilous future.

Eliasson uses his considerable power of inquiry and environmental ingenuity to prod each viewer to see again, to engage again, to take time back from whomever steals it, and to think bravely as a unique person within a larger community. This show is no light entertainment; it's transformative.

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