

Light made real

Luke Clancy met the American artist James Turrell, artist in residence at the Old Yacht Club, Cobh, and currently showing a number of his art works in Cork

Kick off your shoes. Lie back on the trolley, and we'll slide you into the sphere. Then you can start to feel the colours. It has, says the sphere's creator, a lot to do with submission. So just relax.

Although the instructions sound as though they were culled from a Merry Pranksters' manual from Ken Kesey's psychedelic days, this is not an Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. At the National Sculpture Factory in Albert Street, Cork, an expectant little crowd is gathered around one of the latest creations of Californian artist, James Turrell.

Turrell who was born in Los Angeles in 1943, originally qualified as a psychologist, and only later moved on to studying art. His first love, however, is aviation. He once restored antique aircraft for a living, and he still talks lovingly about aircraft he has known, with names such as the Student Prince, or the Fleet Model 7. For a long time after deciding to become an artist, he says, he still had more restored vintage planes in museums than art. When he talks to art world journals, his conversation is still apt to dwell on high performance gliders and the possibility of riding the gulf stream all the way from the Rockies to the Sangre de Cristos mountains in New Mexico.

Turrell has exhibited widely in the United States, with a major exhibition of his work being held at the Whitney Museum in 1980. His first significant European show was at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1976 (to attend which, he flew solo across the Atlantic). Just a year ago, he showed an installation entitled Air Mass, at the Butler Gallery in Kilkenny, and was also planning

a major collaboration in West Cork called Sky Garden. According to Turrell "things folded up" on this project, and now, he says firmly, he has "no involvement in it at all".

Turrell's present work, carving up a volcano in the Painted Desert, just outside of Flagstaff, Arizona, might seem to peg him neatly as part of a group of sculptors, such as Robert Smithson, Walter De Maria and Michael Heizer, who have used the landscape of the American west as their material, creating ever more daringly gargantuan projects by cutting up the mountains and deserts with earthmovers and drills. But even if he shares common ideas with these Seventies artists, Turrell's sortie into the world of Earthworks relates more strongly to experiments with light which he has been performing since the mid-Sixties: the artist's interests lie more in the curious atmospheric conditions in the desert air around his volcano, than in the rock itself.

"I found Roden Crater in about '76," says Turrell, a burly-but-benign-looking figure, with a silver beard, "and it took me three years to talk them into selling it, but then, when they finally said yes, I didn't have any money. They gave me an option to buy and in '81 I bought it. The difficult bit is that you can't just buy a piece of a ranch. Basically we now have a large ranch with 106,000 acres, but some of that's leased. We keep some cattle there too."

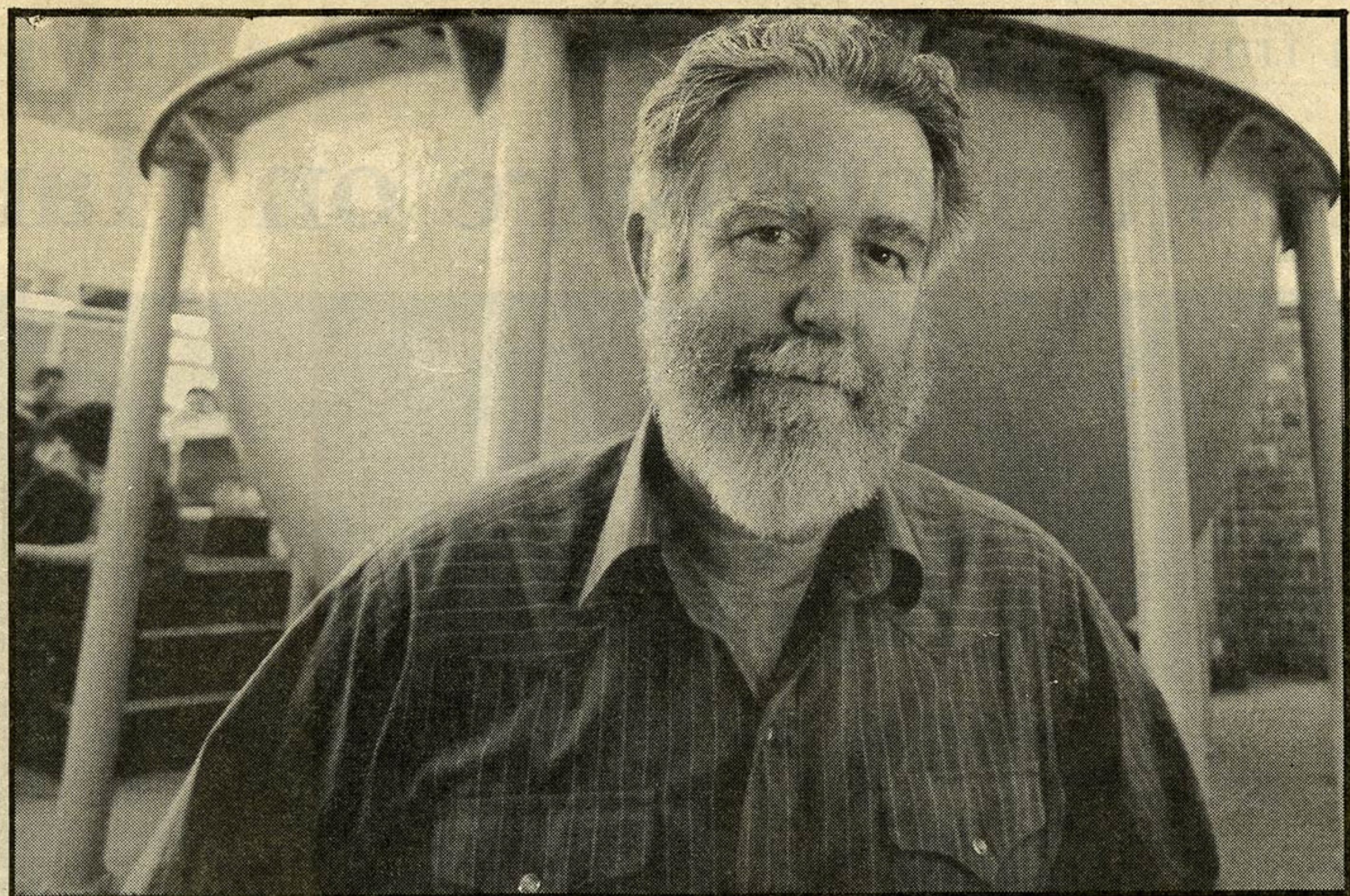
The cattle must offer a nice, earthy balance for a site once referred to, by a notable Italian art collector, as "the Sistine chapel of America." In its simplest expression, Turrell's Arizona project involves scooping out part of the crater with the aid of

earthmovers, until, in accordance with the predictions of the nineteenth century topologist, Georg Friedrich Riemann, from a certain position on the concave surface, the sky appears to fall, coming to rest a few feet above the viewer.

Turrell has further plans for the Roden Crater, (including a thousand-foot tunnel, built so that, once every 18.61 years the image of the moon will enter and be projected on a wall within) but for the moment he has abandoned the Painted Desert to become artist in residence at the Old Yacht Club in Cobh. To celebrate which, there is now a three part celebration of the work: a collection of prints; a light installation which converts an ordinary room into a chamber of illusionary blue gas; and the Ganzfeld Sphere, a giant globe, part Boletesque fantasy architecture, part Roger Corman b-movie.

"You see, when you want to use light of a certain colour you can't just go to the shop and buy some, so you have to create it," says the artist. To create light, Turrell built his Ganzfeld (or homogenous field) Sphere, into which human subjects slide on something that resembles the type of person-sized drawers found in mortuaries. Once the subject is safely stowed inside, someone on the outside begins manipulating a panel which controls the colour which is projected seamlessly on the inside of the sphere.

AT FIRST the sphere is filled with a violet light, but as time passes, the violet changes slowly to a shade of turquoise. The light alters so slowly, that it seems as though the change may simply be some retinal effect. Gradually as the range of colours grows, it becomes



James Turrell: "Sometimes you miss it if you just look at a painting: you have to enter it."

clear what is happening. Initially, it is clear that you are below a domed ceiling, but then as the colour shifts, the space alters. With one shade of blue, the ceiling rises infinitely, with another shade of orange-red, you are immersed in a gas; one more variation and you are at the centre of something solid, which presses down all around. Finally, about three quarters of the way through a 20 minute session, a series of strobe lights begins, causing patterns to appear superimposed on the colours. And then, all too soon, the lights stop and you are pulled gently from the sphere, thinking: "Every home should have one."

Waiting on the little staircase is the artist himself, like a bomber commander ready to debrief his pilot. As painter Barry Cooke emerges, the small crowd strain to hear the conversation. Phrases peel off the huddle: "That red... thicker and thicker... deeper and deeper... but it wasn't frightening."

A little later, Cooke no longer wants to talk about his own experience, but longs to slot Turrell's work into the pantheon of West-

ern painting: "There is a physicality to all Jim's work. It is light made real in a way that only Turner, I think, has ever done before. For Turner, light was as real as water... It's a physical thing, it's like glycerine, it's a thick, thick matter, and that is the quality that Jim can create too. If you're a painter and you see Jim's work, part of you says 'why bother painting?' because this is the way to create colour."

"The Ganzfeld Sphere works on our Cartesian expectations," says Turrell of his creation. "We have prejudiced perception. We have the perception we have as the creature we are, but often more important is the perception which we've learned, from the culture around us."

So what effect do these prejudiced perceptions have on the way we live? In a manner that is typical of his communicational style, Turrell makes no great haste towards his conclusion, but when he gets there, it comes like a gentle rap on the knuckles.

"Well, it's part of my job description as an artist to challenge prejudiced perceptions. This hap-

pens whether in art of a literary nature, where they are challenging belief structures, or whether it is challenging the way we have decided to see things. Basically, art is not about what you like. Nor is it about what I like. It's about feeling from that point of view, and expanding it, for sure. It's about challenging likes and dislikes, particularly ones that we don't know why we have. This examination is very important. That doesn't mean works of art can't be elegant, beautiful statements, but also, they don't need to be that at all. So what my job is may be very different from what someone wants my job to be. If you want big steel, I'm not your guy. There are other people who will take on those issues."

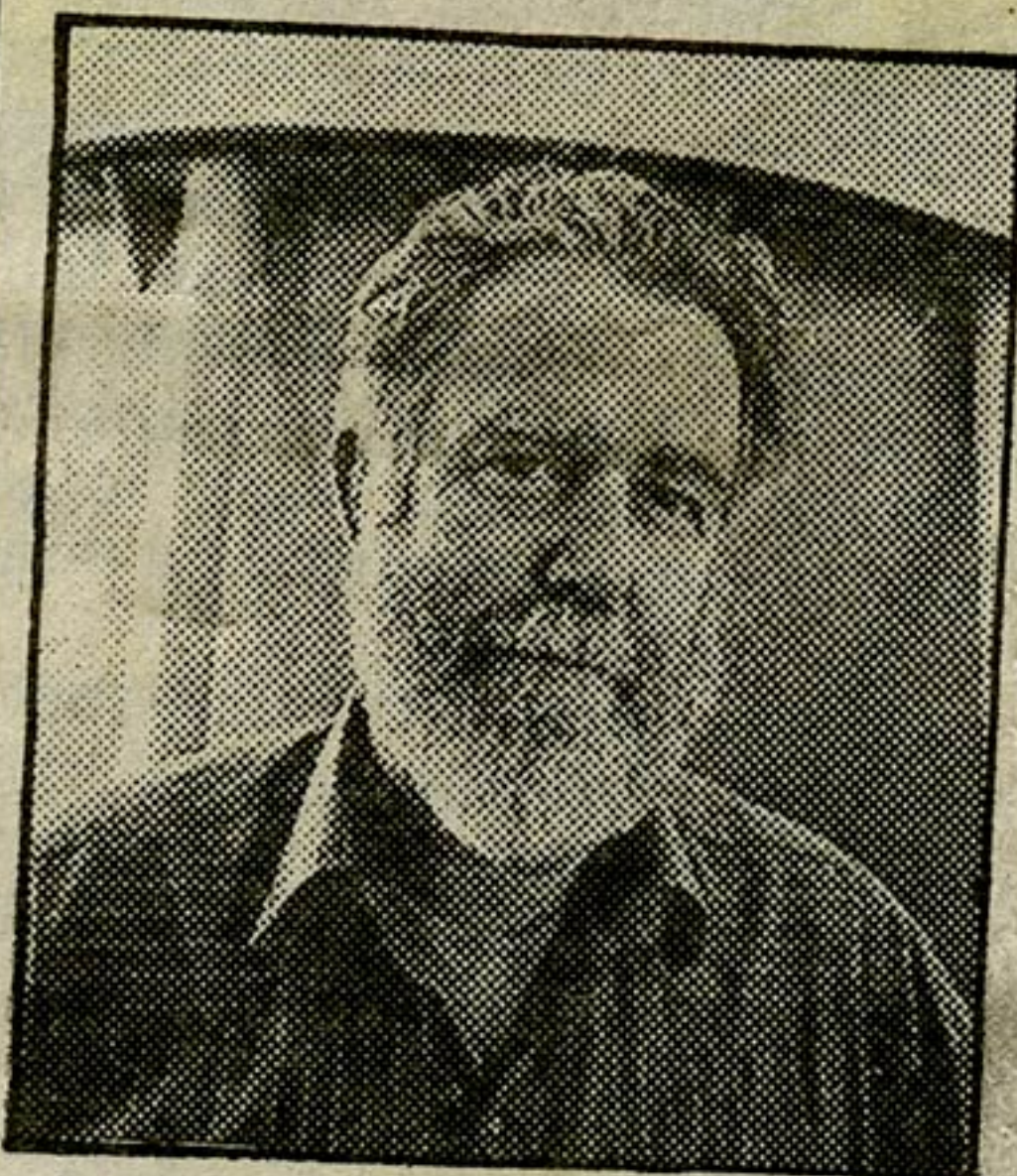
But where then does Turrell's project lead? Does his Quaker faith, which the artist says is growing in importance for him, have a role? Or is the link between his creations and the Friends' search for an inner light only coincidental? There something about the Ganzfeld Sphere, for instance, which seems to offer another form of consciousness with which one might be able to understand tran-

scendence from the physical being.

"I do feel that," says Turrell. "I think there is a lot of art that does that. In fact, in terms of transcendence of how we think we inhabit the rational world, there's a lot of work that comes from this other space. If you are reading a good novel in a chair, you are often more in the space of the novel than in the chair. People go by you don't even notice them because really you are in the space generated by the author. This superimposition of the day-dream consciousness, over the conscious, awake state, is the reality we generally inhabit. Any work that addresses this comes from that other place, and that other place is something that artists have always been interested in. Sometimes you miss it if you just look at a painting: you have to enter it." Which is, exactly what a small queue at the steps of the Ganzfeld Sphere is waiting to do, so Turrell excuses himself and walks up the aisle of the Sculpture Factory to take the controls.

● See review by Brian Fallon, below

ART OUT OF LIGHT



James Turrell likes to carve up volcanoes, and use light itself as his medium, Luke Clancy reports

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James Turrell
Cork and Cobh
Brian Fallon

THE American artist James Turrell rather overshadows Cork at the moment, since he is the artist-in-residence (the first) at the Old Yacht Club in Cobh, and his work can be seen at both the Crawford Art Gallery and the National Sculpture Factory. Turrell appears to be an artist with huge energies, a disci-

plined approach to all he does, and considerable organising powers. He is rather hard to classify, and what I have seen (including his London exhibition of about two years ago) has varied greatly. The works on view in Cork, however, seem quite definitely related to one another, though not actually of a piece — certainly they do not, in any respect, represent a sequence or a single “project”. Broadly speaking, they all have to do with light, rather than with things or materials.

Turrell apparently is of Quaker background, and it is interesting to speculate how much (if at all) the American Transcendentalist tradition lives on in his work. It would go far to explain the relative immaterialism of so much of it, which seems intended to banish from the viewer the feeling of any physical solidity or immediate surroundings, and to bring him into an almost trancelike state.

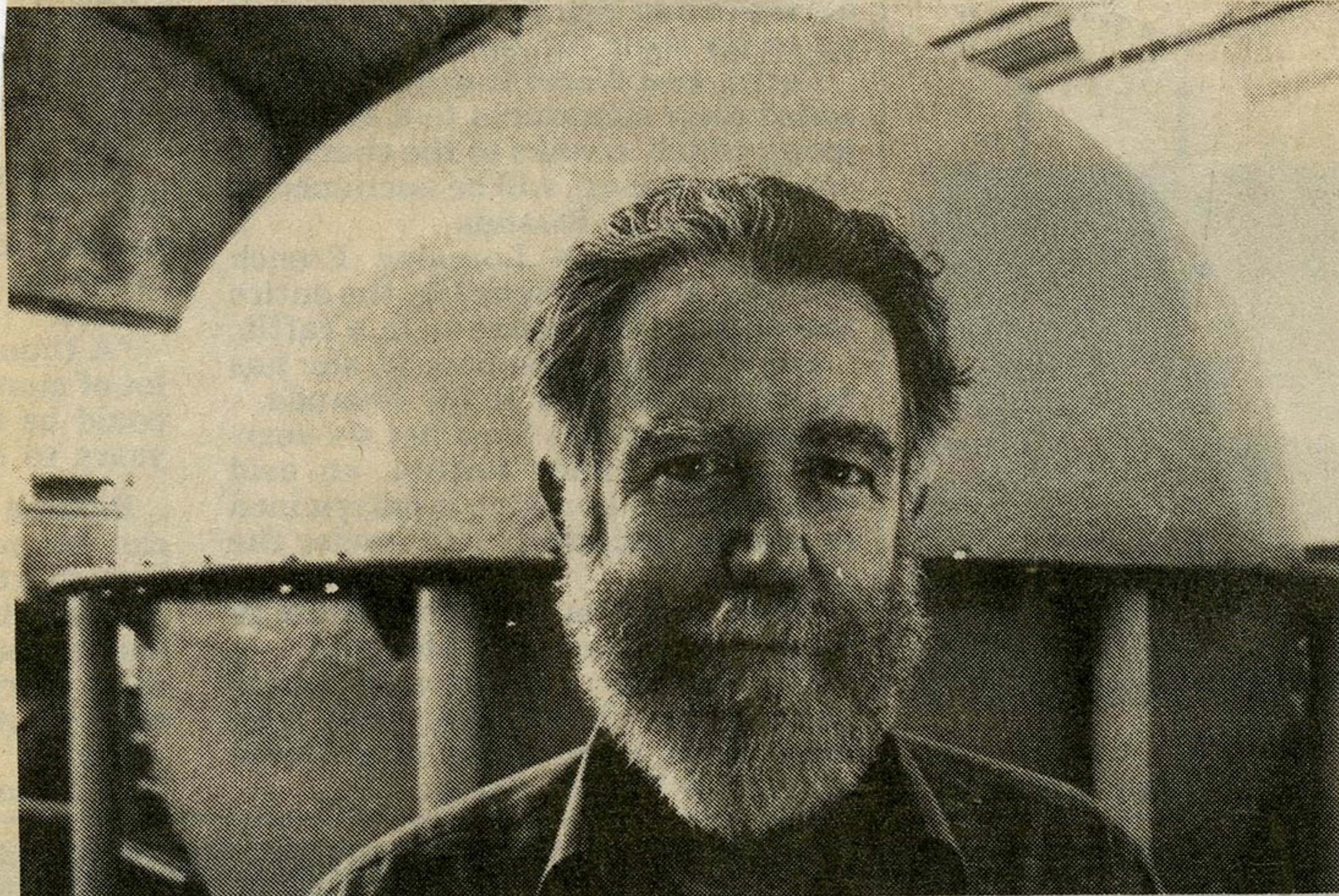
In the Sculpture Factory, for instance, you lie flat (face upwards, of course) on what resembles a stretcher and are drawn slowly inside a metal sphere which is called the Gasworks. There, for a space of perhaps 12 to 15 minutes — I did not time it — you watch slow, deep colour changes flood quietly about you, interspersed with brilliant nebulae-like flashes. It may sound claustrophobic yet the sensation is directly the opposite — that of floating in immaterial space.

The *Wedgework* installation in the Crawford, by contrast, has to be contemplated from the outside; you are not allowed (certainly not encouraged) to step over the outer boundary. There is little more than a single large rectangle of colour, though the empty space seems curiously vibrant as though particles of light and dust were circulating in it. Again, there is an odd feeling of not knowing quite where you are, and of being cast adrift from your normal physical moorings. In an adjoining room hang a series of austere, tasteful, almost Minimalist, geometrical prints, with little obvious colour apart from nuanced greys and whites (they were, incidentally, produced by the Cork Print Workshop).

Cork Examiner, Wednesday, August 3, 1994

Exploring the artistic circle

Des O'Sullivan looks at the work of the artist JAMES TURRELL



● JAMES TURRELL and the Gansfeld Sphere. PHOTO: Aldo Belmont

YOU experience and not just view the work of James Turrell, the first artist in residence at the Old Yacht Club in Cobh, now also on show at the Crawford Gallery and the National Sculpture Factory.

Californian born and resident of Arizona, his Crawford work is similar to one he sold this year to MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Other artists use oil, bronze, found objects, acrylics, mixed media and so on. Turrell uses light. With it he envelops the viewer and the senses.

You literally enter the Gansfeld Sphere at the Sculpture Factory in a way eerily reminiscent of the manner of despatch of the dead at a crematorium. You lie in a box which slides into the sphere.

For 20 minutes you view light effects. Within the small sphere, you are struck by the vastness, that sense that the world is so big and we are so little.

No surprise to learn that James Turrell is a pilot who, at a particularly

volcanic part of the Arizona desert, has moved thousands of tons of earth to harness the sky and use it to create an artwork.

The Wedgework Installation at the Crawford has that ability to leave you slightly stunned too. It is just so surprising. You walk into the gallery and wham, you undergo an experience that is completely unexpected and which at the same time bears a relationship to the print edition of Turrell's work on view earlier at the second floor gallery.

Two years ago Turrell was made a Chevalier des Arts et Lettres by the Academie Francaise, a rare honour for a non-French artist. Recent exhibitions of his work have been mounted at Dusseldorf, the ICA in Philadelphia and the Hayward Gallery in London.

The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where he had his first important European show in 1976, is planning a major retrospective for 1996 spanning 20 years of his career. Since 1989 Turrell has become increasingly interested in Ireland.

October 29, 1994

Turrell: The show must go on

James Turrell's Ganzfeld Sphere has been drawing a considerable and enthusiastic response from viewers at the National Sculpture Factory. So successful has it been that the factory has arranged with the Henry Moore Sculpture Trust to retain the installation in Cork until it moves to Frankfurt in February.

Viewing is complex and takes 20 minutes during which time the viewer is slid into the sphere on a box.

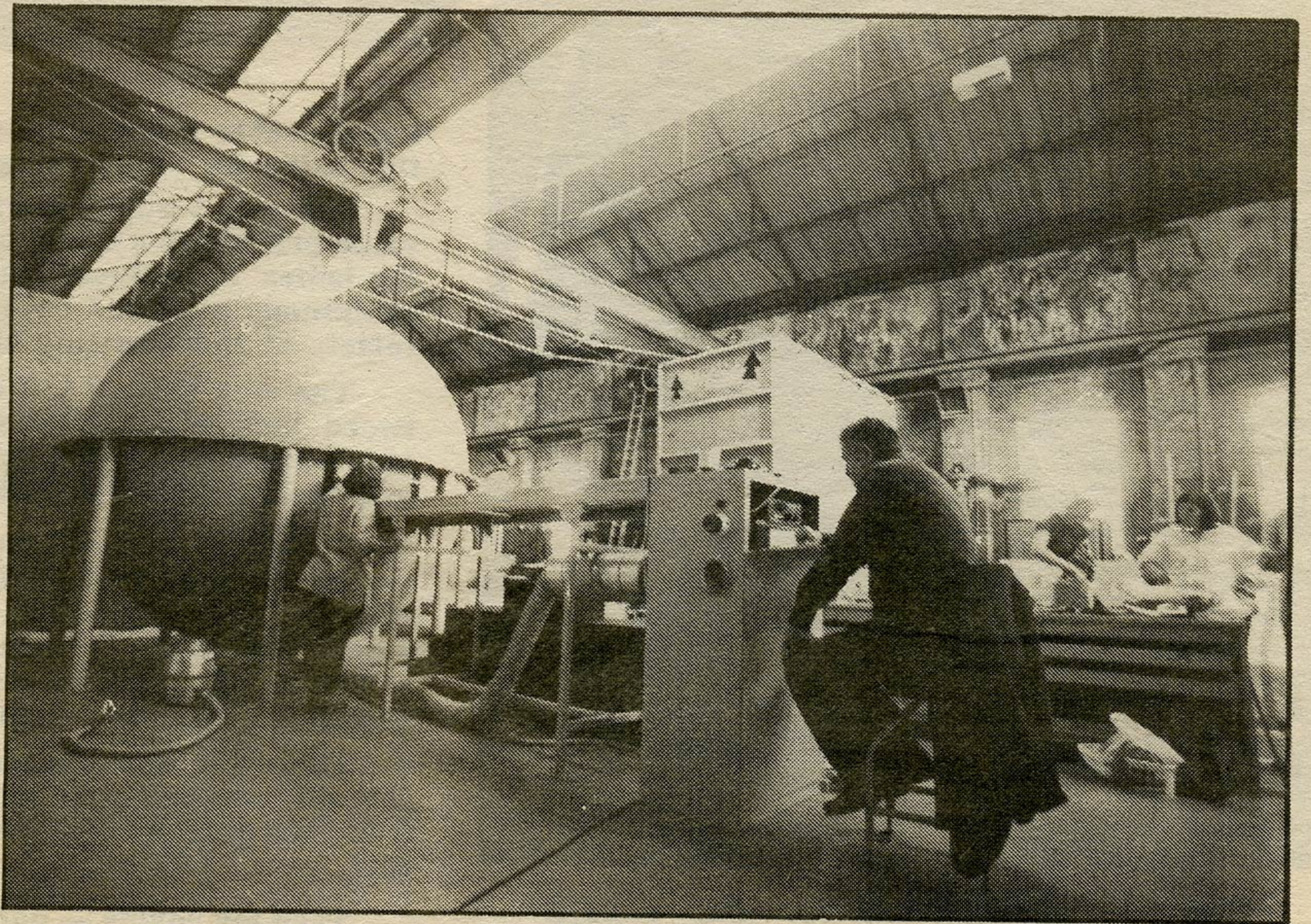
Reactions to it have been overwhelmingly positive.

The comments book runs to superlatives and contains words like "unbelievable",

"relaxing", "fantastic", "orgasmic", "amazing", "dazzling", "uplifting" and "spiritual".

It is available to view by

appointment at the factory from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day and opening has been extended to Saturdays from 11.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m.



James Turrell operating the 'Ganzfeld Sphere' at the National Sculpture Factory, Cork.

(Picture: Aldo Belmonte)

Cork Examiner - Weekend.

Far out experience

WANT to know what it's like to be cremated? Or maybe you fancy recapturing the psychedelic era of the 1960s (but without using LSD)?

Well, now's your chance, because the incredible Ganzfield Sphere is in town and it doesn't cost a thing to have yourself shut into it.

When I say 'in town' I actually mean in a little-frequented corner of Cork City — the old tramway power station at Albert Road which now houses the National Sculpture Factory.

Just inside the entrance is the Ganzfield Sphere. It's devised by artist James Tyrrell, who is also responsible for the Irish Sky Garden at Lis Ard near Skibbereen. The sphere is en route to various art galleries around the world

and had to be shipped to Cork from England in an oversized container.

Tyrrell is an artist who is fascinated with light and the Sphere is designed to subject you to the maximum in the way of a light experience.

To get into the Sphere you take off your shoes, climb a small flight of steps and lie down on a white, coffin-like bed. An operator, dressed all in white, rolls you along a conveyor through a narrow letter-box type opening until you are inside. The door is then firmly shut and all you can see is purple light.

This is not an experience for the claustrophobic!

If you wear glasses you are supposed to take them off, but I retained mine in the hope of seeing more. However, I soon found it made no difference

and took them off.

Everything was purple. Then, total darkness! This was followed by more colours in a display like one of those old-fashioned kaleidoscopes — except it was like being inside one.

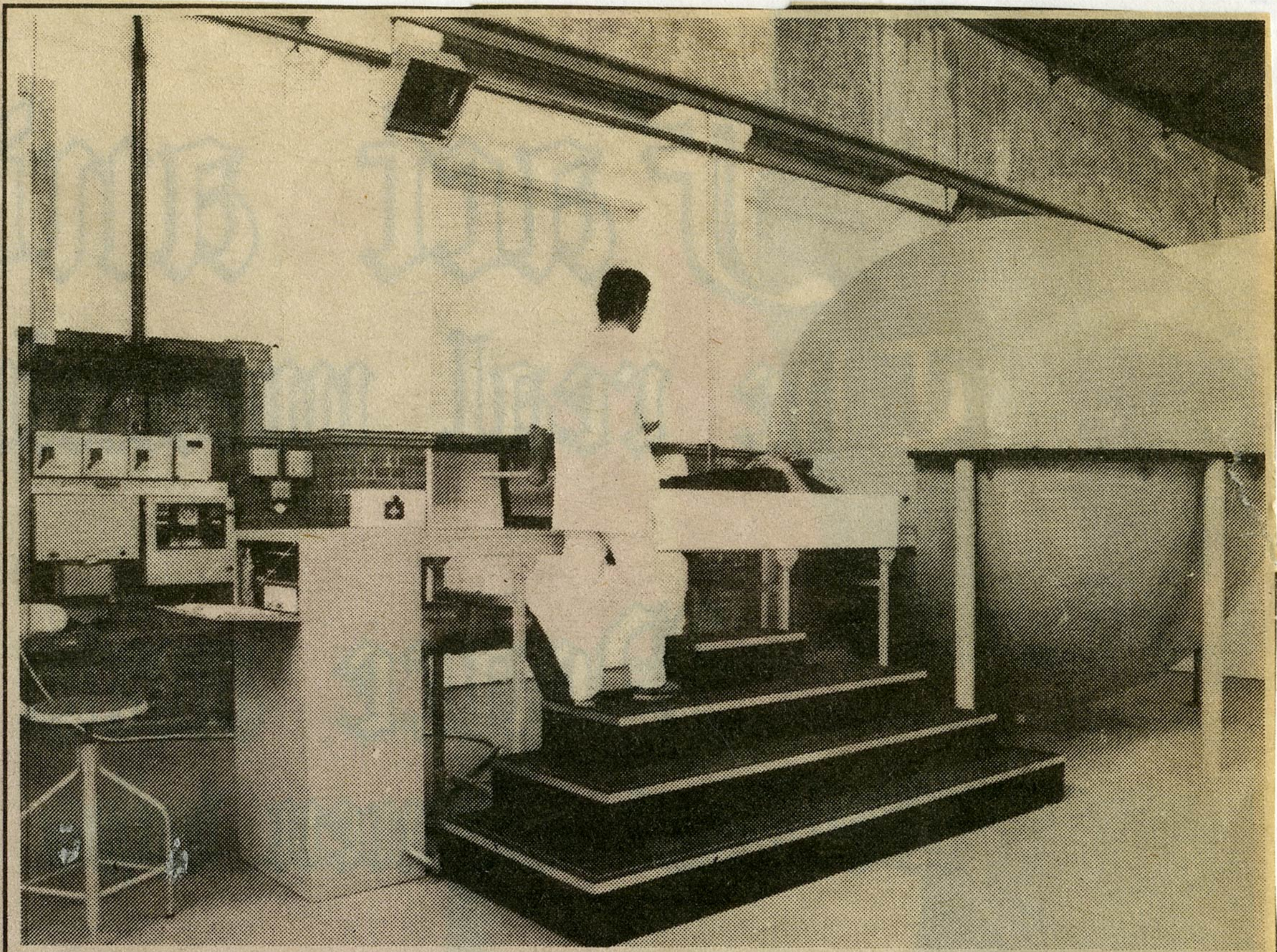
Just as I was getting used to this, the strobe lights came on. Fearful of the warnings about epileptic fits given in the disclaimer I signed going in, I shut my eyes. But help! It didn't make any difference. Even with my eyes shut I could still see the flashing lights and colours.

Time was up after about 20 minutes and I was wheeled out.

Worth doing for the weird experience, but not for the fainthearted, claustrophobic, pregnant, potentially epileptic, etc. **Peter Levy**



■ *Expe*



■ *Experimental: 'The Sphere is designed to subject you to the maximum in the way of a light experience.'*