

## Kayne Griffin Corcoran WSJ

### The Artist's Artist: Robert Irwin Continues to Create and Inspire

With multiple works on display at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., the Dia: Beacon in New York and a 13,000-square-foot installation in Marfa, Texas, 15 years in the making, the 87-year-old artist shows no signs of slowing down



**MR . LIGHT |** Robert Irwin in his San Diego studio with works in progress. 'He has covered the spectrum in terms of the realms of the art world,' says his former student, the painter Ed Ruscha. PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

THE ARTIST ROBERT IRWIN is pacing around his studio, an industrial space in a San Diego office park. Lining the walls is his ongoing body of work, which involves fluorescent tubes and multicolored theatrical gels. He and his studio manager, Joseph Huppert, are demonstrating how the hues in the room shift as the gels are rotated, switches are flipped and light is emitted, refracted and reflected. "Energy changes are going on, which doesn't happen in painting," Irwin says excitedly. At 87, he's still rangy and handsome, dressed in his trademark black T-shirt, jacket, baseball cap and jeans. "It's a game nobody's ever actually had a chance to play."

This is work that has grown out of a tenet Irwin arrived at years ago: "What made an artist an artist is a sensibility," he says. Without "the limitations of thinking about being a painter, you can operate anywhere in the world." That's why his oeuvre is so hard to characterize.

Today Irwin is best known for installations made with little more than scrim and natural light. These seem nearly invisible at first but then suddenly intensify viewers' perceptions of the surrounding space, such as a 1977 piece at

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New York's Whitney Museum of American Art: Irwin's minimal intervention, which included bisecting the fourth floor with just a line of black paint and a scrim panel, has gone down in art historical lore. He has also created a garden overflowing with hundreds of varieties of plants for the Getty Center in Los Angeles, which opened in 1997, and designed buildings, including the Dia Art Foundation's outpost in Beacon, New York, where in 2003 he shaped everything from the sky-lit galleries to the parking lot.

"Bob is a philosopher. He has led this life off on the edge, doing things that no artist would do today," says Michael Govan, Dia's former director, who hired Irwin for the Beacon project. Govan now helms the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which boasts an outdoor installation of primal palm trees by Irwin as well as a 36-foot-long light sculpture, *Miracle Mile* (2013), which glows behind them 24 hours a day.

Throughout his career, Irwin has been considered a pioneer of '60s and '70s Southern California movements, like Light and Space, which extended minimalism to phenomenology, and Finish Fetish, which involved high-tech materials and super-gloss, hot-rod-like surfaces. "Bob has gone in his own direction, into the world of perception," says artist Ed Ruscha, who studied watercolor painting with Irwin in the late '50s at L.A.'s Chouinard Art Institute. "He has covered the spectrum in terms of the realms of the art world." (Irwin is also the first visual artist to have won a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant, in 1984—an honor he shares with fellow Light and Space luminary James Turrell, who won it the same year.)



CALIFORNIA KID | 'Discovery is a very rich part of what I do,' says Irwin. PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

But in the beginning, Irwin made paintings. A few of those early works, most of them abstract oils on canvas, will soon go on view in *Robert Irwin: All the Rules Will Change* (April 7 through September 5), at Washington, D.C.'s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Comprising 29 works made between 1958 and 1971, the show covers the

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period Irwin refers to as "the phenomenological reduction," when he rigorously purged his abstraction of anything that suggested narrative or content. He reduced expressionistic marks to lines, then to shimmering dots, and eventually replaced the square, painted canvas with a single spray-painted plastic or metal disc. Hung away from the wall and lit so that its edges disappear, each disc appears to float. "This is as close as I could figure how to break the frame," he says.

The show will also include a refabrication of a 15 ½-foot-tall, clear, prismatic acrylic column from 1970, the year Irwin gave up his studio and set out on the grand conceptual project that has since occupied him: going anywhere he is invited to create what he calls "site-conditioned" work. "I knew if I stayed in the studio, I'd be a studio artist one way or another," he says. "So the only way to not do that was to get rid of the studio."

That, essentially, is how Irwin came to create the Getty garden, the plans for Dia: Beacon and countless other works. It also led him to the commission that will close the Hirshhorn show, an installation called *Square the Circle*. Using scrim, he is planning to transform one side of the museum's round gallery space, designed by architect Gordon Bunshaft, into a square. "This piece will be like all his work: impossible to describe, impossible to photograph, but great to see," says Melissa Chiu, the Hirshhorn's director.

The show is also the tip of the iceberg in terms of Irwin's many other projects. Up through May 2017 at Dia: Beacon is *Excursus: Homage to the Square*<sup>3</sup>, a reworking of a piece he first created for the foundation's Chelsea space in 1998. A gridded maze of chambers made from scrim, fluorescent lights and gels, the original piece filled an entire floor. The updated version has multiple exits and entrances, allowing visitors to snake back and forth, as if exponentially expanding the spatial possibilities implied by the title. "With these works, Bob's actually pointing at something much larger," says Jessica Morgan, Dia's director, "which is an ability to have an awareness of our environment."



2015's 'Excursus: Homage to the Square', at Dia: Beacon, which was designed by Irwin.

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Then there's Irwin's magnum opus, which he is planning to unveil in July at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. (The museum, which was founded by the sculptor Donald Judd on the site of a decommissioned Army base, will celebrate its 30th anniversary this year.) The 13,000-square-foot work, which Irwin has been developing since 1999 at Chinati's invitation, is based on the C-shaped footprint of an old hospital, with black and white scrim to shape the vistas and the light, and subtly tinted windows framing a thin strip of land and the expansive sky—what

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Irwin has called "a Dutch landscape-like view." At its center stands a grand Stonehenge-like grouping of basalt columns and paloverde trees.

"The opportunity for him to do this permanently is exciting, because his installations have been so ephemeral and temporary," says Jenny Moore, Chinati's director.

Though he's clearly energized by the Chinati work, Irwin is reluctant to talk about it in detail. "Discovery is a very rich part of what I do. And after 15 years," he says, laughing, "I just want to get it done."

ALTHOUGH IRWIN has spent much of his career making work elsewhere, he has always been anchored in Southern California. Born and raised in Long Beach, he speaks of his youth as a happy-go-lucky time, even though his father, who worked for a utility company, lost everything in the Depression, just after Irwin was born. In his memory, it was filled with fast cars, girls and endless refills of Coca-Cola. (He's renowned for his connoisseurial appreciation of the beverage.) "In New York you're supposed to be suffering," he says. "But growing up in L.A. was not like anyplace else. You got a car when you were 17, and the world was your oyster."



Irwin's Central Garden at L.A.'s Getty Museum PHOTO: © HAL BERAL/CORBIS

By the late '50s Irwin, who'd always had a gift for drawing, had served in the Army (he joined up in 1946 and narrowly avoided being deployed to Asia), attended three art schools on the GI Bill and visited Europe numerous times. He worked his way through a variety of painting styles before landing at what he calls his "growing-up" gallery: Ferus Gallery, the avant-garde Los Angeles hotbed founded in 1957 by Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps. There he found common ground with a group of artists that included sculptor Ken Price and painter Ed Moses, meeting late at night to shoot the breeze over beers and spending long hours in his studio by day. Inspired by Piet Mondrian's move from landscape painting to the purism of De Stijl, a style based on primary colors and perpendicular lines, Irwin began the long, hard road to make his work as abstract as possible. He'd spend hours

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in his studio staring at his paintings, reworking lines, readjusting them in relation to each other, changing the scale by minute degrees. "It was a real discipline over a period," Irwin says. "Not fun."

For money, he bet on the horses and briefly taught art at Chouinard, UCLA and UC Irvine. His teaching philosophy was the same one he'd established for himself: "Help them develop their sensibility." As well as "emphasizing preparation," recalls Ed Ruscha, and "delving into the science of vision and light, he'd push you off into your direction, not into his direction. He had an instant form of communication that told you that there's possibility out there and all you have to do is find it." It doesn't seem surprising that so many of his students became stars, including Chris Burden, Doug Wheeler, Vija Celmins, Larry Bell and Joe Goode—all known for wildly different sorts of work, from body art and performance to photorealism.

After 1970, once Irwin had given up his studio and possessions, he began traveling around the country visiting art schools and making work with scrim, and his installations became ever more ephemeral. Yet few people got to see them, unless they actually happened across them, because in 1965, he had issued a ban against photography. "I am concerned with specific and reject the generalities of photographs," he wrote in a statement published in *Artforum*. "Why do we insist on the language of duality by reproduction, negating the essential truth of the painting?"

"Bob put every obstacle in my way of bringing him together with the public," says Arne Glimcher, the founder of Pace Gallery, which started representing Irwin in 1966. "He felt the work was so specific to the viewer and the object and the room that he wouldn't allow us to photograph it." Whenever Glimcher could persuade Irwin to do a show, the work would sell—but usually to private collectors rather than museums. "It would always be a big success, but it would go into obscurity," say Glimcher. In 1968, when *Artforum* pirated a photo of an Irwin disc piece and ran it on the cover, Irwin was outraged, but "it was the best thing that could have happened," Glimcher says. "We pretended to be outraged too, but we were delighted."



Irwin's San Diego studio PHOTO: MARK MAHANEY FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

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Though Irwin's work couldn't be disseminated through photography or catalogs, his mythos spread through writing. In the 1970s, Lawrence "Ren" Weschler, an acquaintance who'd been meeting with him to discuss philosophy, became so taken with their conversations that he turned them into a manuscript. Excerpts of it appeared in 1982 in *The New Yorker*, where Weschler was a staff writer, and soon became a book, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, which remains so popular that over 30 years later it's still in print. Not only has it made Irwin a guru of art students everywhere, but it also introduced general readers to his life and philosophy ("Who cares about all this virtuality when there's all this reality," he says in the expanded 2008 edition).

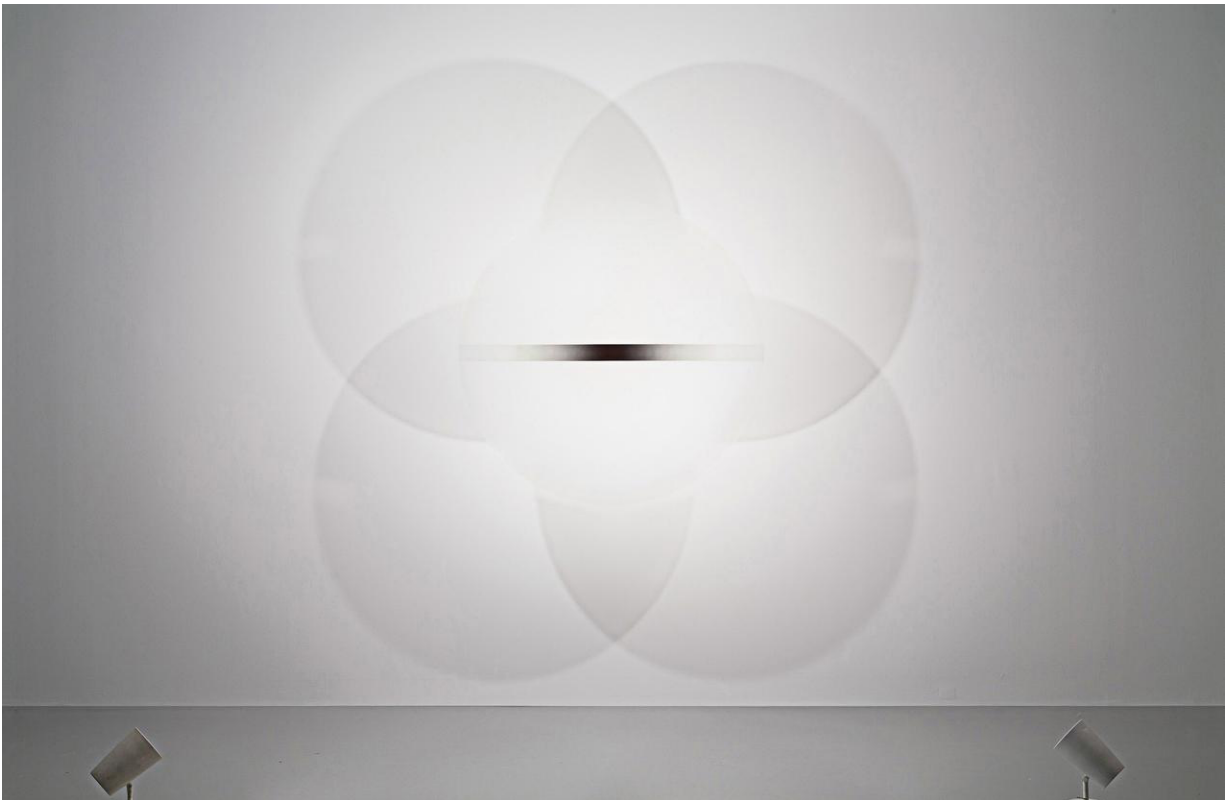
Irwin claims he's never read it. "Oh, God no. Are you kidding?" he says. "I don't have to. I lived it!"

Although Irwin carps quite a bit about the increasing need to revisit the past, borne in upon him by the book, his advancing years, the Hirshhorn show and other historical projects, like a *catalogue raisonné* that Artifex Press has undertaken, he is also clearly galvanized by the explosion of interest in his work. He is, as ever, most interested in what's in front of him and rejects the idea of polishing his image for posterity.

Asked if he cares what the art world thinks of him, he says, "Nope." How art history sees him? "Nope." How other people see him? "Nope."

What about how people encounter his work—does that matter? "That's important, of course," Irwin says, suddenly serious. "That's very important."

Asked later if he has a relationship with the art world, Irwin says, "A little." Then he reconsiders. "No," he says. "Because if I did, it would piss me off. Whenever you see the price of work going way up, what you're seeing is somebody buying history, not art. It's like baseball cards, only a lot more money. The idea of making work that transcends your death might be appealing," he says, "but it begs the issue of being alive in the world."



A wall-mounted disc piece from 1969. "This is as close as I could figure to break the frame," Irwin says now.

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Meanwhile, he's firmly tied to that world and also to San Diego by his second wife, Adele, who organizes cookbook signings and chef events ("She's 30 years younger than I am," he says delightedly), and their 21-year-old daughter, Anna Grace. Even so, Irwin is frequently on the road making site visits for new projects. "I got the best game in town," he says. And when he's not traveling, Irwin is creating new work in the studio—he's had one again for about eight years. Irwin met Joseph Huppert, his studio manager, when the artist was installing his 2007 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego. Huppert, then a museum guard, engaged Irwin in conversation. "Joey had never seen the work," Irwin says, "but he had read all my writing, and he wanted to argue about it. He's been fun."

Even more surprisingly, Irwin has also been working with his first-ever photographer, Philipp Scholz Rittermann, who has finally been able to capture the nuances of Irwin's work, thus calling an end to the photography ban. Irwin has been shocked to see how great the images look backlit on a computer screen—something that had never interested him before. "The one thing that's lacking in photography is energy," Irwin says. "But suddenly, on a monitor, these things have a whole new kind of presence. I thought to myself, This is only going to get better."

- Carol Kino