

Pivotal: Highlights from the Collection  
Orange County Museum of Art  
October 7 - December 31, 2017  
ARTIST INFORMATION

**Robert Irwin**

Born 1928 (Long Beach, CA), works in San Diego, CA

*Untitled (#2220)*, 1969

Cast acrylic and acrylic paint

For the past six decades, Robert Irwin has explored perception as the fundamental issue of art. Irwin, who began his career as a painter in the 1950s and pioneered the Light and Space movement in the late 1960s, was one of the earliest members of the Ferus Gallery, where he presented mostly reductive abstract paintings in a series of exhibitions beginning in 1959. Between the years 1966 and 1967, Irwin began painting aluminum discs, and in 1968 and for the next two years, his work consisted primarily of clear acrylic discs—white convex structures fixed to the wall and illuminated by lamps. In 1970, he began his work on a series of clear acrylic columns, which were the last of his autonomous objects, and these soon led him to begin working with light-based room-scale environments.

ROBERT IRWIN

b. 1928, Long Beach, CA  
Resides in San Diego, CA

1948-50 Otis Art Institute. L.A.  
1951 Jepson Art Institute  
1952-54 Chouinard Art Institute

Untitled, (#2220), 1969 (acrylic cast disc, acrylic paint)  
Untitled, 1970 (acrylic)

*"The intention of a phenomenal art is simply the gift of seeing a little more today that you did yesterday."*

Robert Irwin, a seminal figure in the Light and Space movement, the first major art movement to originate in southern California, has raised questions and posited theories about the nature of art itself for the past 35 years. His career can be viewed as a progressive deconstruction of the art object and a shift away from allusion and illusion toward an art defined by experience and the phenomenon of perception.<sup>1</sup>

He began as an Abstract Expressionist painter in the late 1950s, affiliating himself with the Ferus Gallery,<sup>2</sup> the center of creative activity in southern California in the late fifties and early sixties. Irwin began to see paintings as physical objects with certain unique elements. He first radically reduced the size of the canvas, making "hand-held" paintings in 1959 and 1960. Subsequently, he moved toward purging his compositions of any superfluous or image-evoking gestures. By 1960 he had arrived at the straight line as a neutral element for developing spatial illusion; applying layer upon layer of pigment, building up a fluid field, he laid evenly-spaced horizontal lines drawn out nearly to the picture edge. These line paintings (1961-4) were followed by a series of dot paintings (1964-66) in which Irwin created less a painting than an energy field by covering canvases with thousands of dots in opposite colors (e.g., green against red).

DISCS

*"The question for the discs was very simple. How do I paint a painting that does not begin and end at an edge but rather starts to take in and become involved with the space or environment around it?"<sup>3</sup>*

*"The reason for the circular disc as opposed to making the square was that that eliminated the four corners, corners being really powerful focal points, whereas what I was after was an evenness of presence."<sup>4</sup>*

Next, Irwin did away with the delimiting rectangular edges. With his disc paintings of 1966-69 the edge and frame -- the remaining elements simultaneously containing and defining painting -- had finally dissolved, freeing Irwin to move his art out of representation and relocate it as a presence.<sup>5</sup> Fusing his concern with the center with an increasing interest in visual perception, he began work on discs fabricated of aluminum (and later acrylic) and subtly sprayed with concentric clouds of closely hued, pale pigments. The discs were mounted on a concealed tubular arm which projected them two feet from the wall. They were lit by natural light or four

<sup>1</sup> Kerry Brougher, Robert Irwin (Los Angeles: MOCA) 1993. Exhibition essay.

<sup>2</sup> Ferus represented John Altoon, Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Ed Moses and other L.A. artists.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Irwin in Lawrence Weschler, Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees. (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1982, p.99.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.101.

<sup>5</sup> Brougher.

spotlights (2 from below, 2 from above); the shadows cast upon the wall are as much a part of the work as the painted surface. The discs appear to literally dissolve into light. The edges dematerialize, creating an ethereal illusion.

Cast acrylic discs such as OCMA's Untitled (#2220), 1969, are thin like the aluminum pieces, but slightly smaller in diameter and are not uniformly convex. They gently bubble out in the center. The smooth and translucent qualities of the plastic compelled Irwin to mitigate them -- with a meticulously sprayed three-inch high horizontal bar of gray color which lightened gradually from the center toward the rim. When installed in the same manner as the metal discs, this bar appears as a virtual three-dimensional incision rather than as a two-dimensional mark. In effectively eliminating the edge and frame from the art object, in dissolving the frontier between art object and environment, Irwin explained, "*After the discs, there was no reason for me to go on being a painter.*"<sup>6</sup>

### COLUMNS

*"I wanted to make an art without any art object, but I didn't know how to do that. The columns acted as the bridge for me. . . The column was an indication of my wanting to get out and treat the environment itself. . . of dealing with the quality of a particular space in terms of its weight, its temperature, its tactileness, its density, its feel -- All those semi-intangible things that we don't normally deal with."*<sup>7</sup>

Even less materially substantial, the acrylic columns which followed the discs were short-lived (1969-70) attempts to capture and give shape to light. The last objects Irwin made before he began to do environments exclusively, they were also significant as the first works he presented away from the wall -- in open space.

OCMA's Untitled, 1970, is a 12-foot prismatic column. Ideally installed, the column dematerializes as concrete object, acting instead like an invisible optical instrument to transmit and focus light and color. Nearly invisible, refracting the light of the area which surrounds it, its reflective quality causes the edges to disappear and bring the surrounding space into contact with the viewer.

By 1971 Irwin had forsaken the art object altogether. His principal materials became the circumstantial ones of light and space, manipulated by yards of scrim and string, and fluorescent light deployed in architectural settings. Having dissolved the object of art, Irwin molded light and space into weightless situations that were not defined by materiality but rather by the beholder's perception.

Since the '80s Irwin's progressive journey away from the object in search of ways to re-establish art's presence in the world has led him out of gallery and museum spaces and into the public realm. Site-determined projects have been realized around the country making use of diverse materials -- from Cor-Ten steel and plastic-coating fencing to natural plantings -- any materials that seem to have a relationship to the site.<sup>8</sup>

-- Phyllis Kleinberg, 1/97

<sup>6</sup> Wechsler, p.107.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.114.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Irwin used Kolargaard fencing to create a thin veil of violet color that melds with a forest of eucalyptus trees on the grounds of UC San Diego (Two Running Violet V Forms).

## ROBERT IRWIN (ADDENDUM)

### Untitled, 1960

oil on canvas in wood frame (15-3/16 x 15-3/16")

"... I started out with abstract expressionism as a point of belief, and at one point, looking at my paintings, found too many arbitrary things in them, too many things that had no reason for being. I began to question the depth of the act – and myself."<sup>1</sup>

"... I started out painting the same paintings [exhibited at Ferus in 1959] on a very small scale, where I could really control every gesture, so that each one was very much an intended thing."<sup>2</sup>

It was as a painter that Robert Irwin first pursued his growing fascination with perceptual processes that remain today the focus of his activity. He traces his artistic origins to the prevailing Ab. Ex. of the 1950s, when his paintings were typically large and gestural.

By 1959, the artist questioned the traditional means of experiencing painting; the rendering of figure and ground could not continue. Moreover, his large-scale Ab.Ex. paintings seemed too uncontrolled. Between the fall of 1959 and the spring of 1960,<sup>3</sup> he painted a series of hand-held objects (which he later dubbed his "mud pies"). The early hand-helds were smaller and more colorful than the late works, e.g., OCMA's Untitled, 1960, which employed a mixture of brush and knife. For the most part, each was completed in a single session, was devoid of imagery and was utterly opaque. The gestural concern at this time began to be replaced by a textural one.<sup>4</sup>

Custom-framed and backed in polished wood,<sup>5</sup> the smooth, warm softness of the wood contrasting with the canvases' thick swirls of paint, these paintings were meant to encourage intimate, meditative, tactile contemplation -- to be picked up and held for close inspection and placed on edge or laid on their backs on a table.<sup>6</sup> Irwin elaborates, "Those hand-held paintings got very quote-unquote 'Zen-like' in a meditative sense. While the gestures were there, they were very subtle, almost like Zen calligraphy, terse gestures where the emphasis was on the control of nuance. And the fact that you were meant to hold them meant that they could only be experienced privately, intimately."<sup>7</sup>

These small-scale works,<sup>8</sup> which were meant to relate more to the viewer than to the gallery space, indicated the direction Irwin's artistic investigations were to take: experimenting with the relationship of viewer and object, altering the shapes of his paintings, paying precise attention to their physical construction and exploring the painting as an object in space. Subsequently,<sup>9</sup> Irwin altered the states of light, color, form and format to test the conditions and limits of perception.<sup>10</sup>

-- Phyllis Kleinberg, 1/00

<sup>1</sup> Irwin in Robert Irwin (Chicago: MOCA, Chicago) 1975. Exhibition catalog.

<sup>2</sup> Irwin in Robert Weschler, Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees, a life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1982, p.57.

<sup>3</sup> During this time, Irwin shared a small apartment in West Hollywood with Billy Al Bengston, who was making small, thickly painted images of flags, stars and hearts.

<sup>4</sup> Weschler.

<sup>5</sup> Irwin's lavish attention to every detail of their making extended to pairing individual paintings with different hardwoods to complement their color and to rubbing skin oils from his hands and face to give the wood a subtler patina front and back. The larger hand-helds, such as OCMA's Untitled, 1960, were stained by the framer with lacquer or fast-drying stains, or they were sealed with clear lacquer.

<sup>6</sup> John H. Neff, "Hands on Irwin and Ab.Ex.," Robert Irwin (L.A.: MOCA) 1993, p.60. Exhibition catalog.

<sup>7</sup> Irwin in Weschler, p.58.

<sup>8</sup> According to Irwin biographer Lawrence Weschler, the small hand-held boxes were not intended to be displayed, but were solely developed for the artist's own research.

<sup>9</sup> While years away from defining his activity phenomenologically, the ramifications of his attempts with the hand-helds anticipate the experimental/perceptual issues in the subsequent line paintings.

<sup>10</sup> Ira Licht, Robert Irwin (Chicago: MOCA, Chicago).