



Artwork: Untitled. 2006

Artist: Jim Isermann, American, born 1955

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Contemporary Art Council, 2006

Medium: Painted vacuum-formed styrene

Completed and installed in PSAM: September 2006

Artwork Context: This large wall installation created specifically for the PSAM staircase represents a new international movement which blends utilitarian design, interior decoration, and architecture. This piece embraces influences from Bauhaus, Minimalism, and Op art by uniting creativity with manufacturing, the use of a minimal color palette, modern optical designs, and simple algorithmic permutations to generate a pattern of maximum interest and complexity. Untitled, 2006, consists of 235 vacuum-formed cells arranged in 10 interlocking modules to accommodate the dimensions and angular nature of the staircase wall. An art piece this size could be heavy, but Untitled, 2006, is surprisingly lightweight due to the styrene-based plastic components and vacuum-formed techniques used in the creation.

Background, Importance, and Impressions

Isermann believes the populist ideal that art is for everyone, needs to function in the real world, and may not initially be read as art, but as illustrated by Untitled, 2006, as something integral to a building. The hands of many visitors to the PSAM come within inches of the piece as they use the railing to ascend or descend the mezzanine/Chase Wing staircase. Being so close, many may actually overlook the piece or assume that it is part of the building. Yet, Untitled was created to belong where it is: a large-scale, vivid, wall-defining work balancing composition and mathematical proportion along with color, line, angles, and subtle geometry accentuated against a vast dark charcoal green wall. At the time of installation, Isermann decided that the original wall color needed to be changed to make the artwork pop. The design seamlessly steps up the staircase wall creating a beautifully irregular site-specific bottom edge of the piece.

From north end of the Chase Wing, the connection between the E. Stewart Williams 1996 addition and Isermann's artwork is clearly evident. Isermann took inspiration from the deep rectilinear-triangular grid in the expansive ceiling translating it into the gentle geometry of Untitled, 2006. From a distance, the impression of this piece transforms to a series of vivid, glossy curves cascading down due to the subtle indentations of the cells and satinfinish.



The artwork changes character depending upon the viewing angle and time of day. The color choice is industrial in nature, yet harkens to natural elements of the desert such as the intensity of the sun and the brilliant blossoms of Palo Verde trees or brittlebush which influenced Albert Frey's color choices for Frey II.

Jim Isermann is a prolific Palm Springs-based artist living and working in a fully restored Donald Wexler 1962 designed home with a thoughtfully integrated art studio added in 2000. His education includes a Bachelor of Fine Art, 1977, University of Wisconsin, and a Master of Fine Art, 1980, California Institute of the Arts. Since 2003, Isermann has served as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art at UC Riverside.

Why I Selected this Artwork

I had an immediate connection with this artwork on my first visit to PSAM in 2008. While on the stairway closely examining the triangular-rectilinear cells, I marveled at the indentations and thickness of the piece and knew instantly how it was made. Growing up, our next door neighbor playmates had a Mattel Vac-U-Form in the mid-1960s.

This toy permitted children to create 3D objects by utilizing heated plastic sheets, metal molds of many designs, and a hand-actuated vacuum pump. It was magical to watch the flat hot sheet become a dimensional heart or flower after a few swift pumps of the vacuum handle. I would take my pieces home, cut them up, and glue them into realistic (small intricate houses) or abstract (wild star-like) creations. Although Isermann's vacuum panel pieces are industrially produced, he says "The funny thing about mass produced elements is they are not perfectly identical. Through the manufacture and installation they continue to exhibit a human hand." Working with the small toys pieces I made helps me to understand his point that his industrially made pieces involve many people to setup and execute. Assembling these pieces with their variations and imperfections requires patient problem-solving. Yet, when completed, the commercial and lifeless industrial materials like the styrene plastic of Untitled, 2006, are transformed into a work of shimmering sun drenched vitality.



Sources

- Bose, Lilledshan, Jim Isermann on Creating Public Art, 2015, Magazine of UC Riverside.
- Hickey, Dave, Jim Isermann: Utopia Now, 2002, UCLA Hammer Museum.
- Johnson, Ken, Art In Review; Jim Isermann, September 2005, The New York Times.
- Knight, Christopher, A Balancing Act of Industrial Form, February 2017, Los Angeles Times.
- Nichols, Kimberley, Beyond Mod with Artist Jim Isermann, January 2015, Desert Sun, Desert Magazine.
- Video: Jim Isermann Discusses Structure, 2012, Princeton University Art Museum.
- Conversation with Denise Finch, PSAM Docent, November 2018