

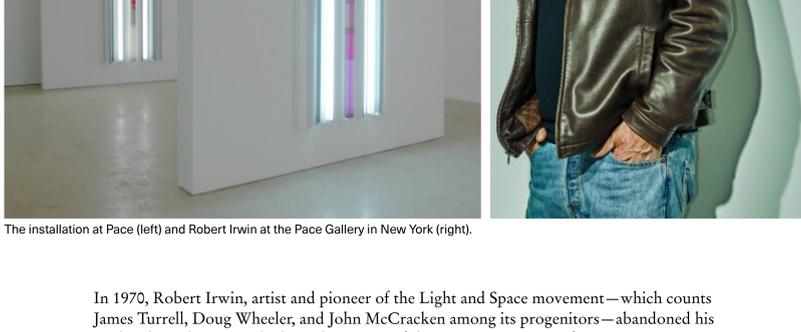
ART

In Conversation with Robert Irwin

We speak with the artist about his six-decade career exploring abstraction and the phenomenology of light, color, and space.

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The installation at Pace (left) and Robert Irwin at the Pace Gallery in New York (right).

In 1970, Robert Irwin, artist and pioneer of the Light and Space movement—which counts James Turrell, Doug Wheeler, and John McCracken among its progenitors—abandoned his studio altogether as an ideological rejection of the construct as a site of creative practice. Despite this, he continued to produce work. Beginning with painting, then creating light sculptures, large-scale installation, and landscape projects, Irwin has worked across a progressively expansive range of mediums in his six-decade career exploring abstraction and the phenomenology of light, color, and space.

This year and the next mark milestone moments for the 86-year-old legend, who's set to open a string of solo shows throughout the U.S. Last month, Pace Gallery—which has now represented Irwin for 50 years—showed “Cacophonous,” a collection of his new light works; this month, he'll unveil a reinstallation of a site-specific work he presented at the Dia Center for the Arts 15 years ago, this time at Dia:Beacon (for which he also consulted on the museum's master plan and landscaping). Next April, he will install a series of outdoor scrim installations around the iconic Gordon Bunshaft–designed building of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. And finally, now in the works for 13 years, Irwin's magnum opus—a 10,000 square foot, permanent installation housed in a former army barracks' hospital—promises to debut in 2016 at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, following a monumental groundbreaking for the \$5-million campaign for the site's renovation earlier this year.

The born-and-bred Californian met with Surface in New York recently to speak about maintaining a studio, the act of wandering, and what's in store for the next several months.

You famously abandoned your studio practice altogether in 1970, and this year you have a number of big installations and projects in the works.

Philosophically, I had taken the whole thing apart and realized one day that I was doing certain things that were very simple—and I realized that's not how we see the world. We don't see the world in a frame. And pretty much my understanding of the history of modern art is that it took itself apart, dismantled the whole idea of a pictorial reality. I realized that if I stayed in the studio I would do something like studio work, or make something.

A studio is not an accident. It has a long, hard tradition. I thought, “If I stay in studio, I'm not going to be able to pursue this.” So I got rid of everything, sold everything, sold the studio, and kind of went out into the desert for a while, because the desert is not made of objects; it's more expansive. I sort of hung out around Four Corners and said, “I got all the time for anybody, for anything.” Except nobody asked for a long time.

How has traveling and wandering impacted your explorative practice?

In the early years, for some reason, I started being a question addict; in fact, I still am. I mean, questions are more profound than answers because when you finally get an answer, they immediately ask another question. So all the energy is really moved by the question, the quality of the question. If you have a really good question, and if you seek some kind of resolution to it, you usually have something pretty interesting on your hands rather than the way we normally perceive, looking for answers. I knew that if I stayed in the studio, I would do something akin to what everybody else was doing. But all my questions led me into another direction.

You also spent some time in New York and North Africa.

I spent a lot of time wandering. At one point, I sort of lived on Ibiza when it was an abandoned island, before it became a hotspot. In fact, it was very much not a hotspot: It was just local fisherman and local farmers. It was a nice experience. A lot of the stuff I produced then, I didn't do well, and can't say that I conceived to do it. I sort of fell into it backwards, because my questions sort of led me in that way. I didn't talk—I hadn't talked to anybody for 10 months. I didn't speak the language, so basically I just walked every day. If you do it long enough, there's a point where you start to examine your own mind.

I did that for a brief period of time. There was a little theater that used to show films about once a month. I had never gone. I was there for seven months, and one day, I went by and they were playing *Singing in the Rain*. So I went in, and—poof!—the spell was broken! Since it was all sets, I knew it was shot in L.A., where I'm from. And when I saw it, I thought, “L.A., wow!” I'm as “L.A.” as you can get.

You were born in Long Beach, studied and taught at numerous schools in Southern California, and have lived in San Diego for a number of years now. As a pioneering figure of the Light and Space movement, which began in Southern California, how has the region informed your work?

You know, one of the things that pisses people off in New York is that you had a happy childhood. They think it's gotta come from pain and suffering or something—and it does, to a degree. But in California, man, you just have a different quality of life, a quality of being in the world. People would always ask me about the light. I mean, what do you mean about the light? It'd be hard to try and describe it.

But when I did the project at [Dia:Beacon]—I was the architect and transformed the space, stayed here for a few months working on it—I looked up across the river and found a little town called Cornwall-on-Hudson. I was there for well over a year. It's very nice, and my wife thought it was terrific. I thought it was, but I was kinda busy: I was going back and forth to New York and working around Dia. It has a fabled beauty, the Hudson River School and all that. By the end of the year, I was really depressed and realized that it was the light: It's very melancholy. It's an interesting thing to have this melancholy. But I much preferred and realized that L.A. is not melancholy—very far from it.

Living there and growing up there was a very different kind of experience. I had no sense that I was going to be an artist when I was young. I had a happy childhood. Every summer, I'd lifeguard. The world was my oyster, and once I got a car, I'd spend time on Saturday night riding around. The feeling of freedom, just driving—it's the best.

The natural beauty and leisure of California you're describing seems intrinsic to a lot of your works, which interact with and respond directly to nature.

It starts with the light, and teasing it, because what happens with real light is—it's not artificial. It changes. A cloud goes by and—whoosh!—all of a sudden, the sun comes back. It's full of life, full of energy, full of incredible-quality things that were so much more than any kind of artificial light you can make

It's interesting that the spectrum of your your work—and the varying scales it has extended into—will be encapsulated in your four major projects this year, starting with the reinstallation at Dia:Beacon, to your shows at the Pace Gallery and the Hirshhorn Museum, to the huge permanent installation currently underway at the Marfa's Chinati Foundation, which has been in the works for more than 13 years.

I'll give you the whole story. Years ago, I decided to, just for the fun of it, follow the coast, just drive down. I was in L.A., down to San Diego, stayed as close to the Mexican border as possible, and went all the way around the United States, which was a very exciting trip.

You circled the entire country? How long did that take you, and did you have companions?

The entire country. Three and a half months. All alone. I do my best when I'm alone. When somebody's there, you have to tend to them, so you're not paying attention. At one point, I went through Marfa, because when you leave El Paso, the road goes away from the border, the border kind of curves away like that, and so I had to get back to the border. At Van Horn, you turn right, go down and swing around to Marfa, and then at Marfa, that stop sign, you turn right and go right down to Big Bend. And then you're back on the border and then down to the Gulf [of Mexico].

So you went around the edge of Texas?

Not around the edge of Texas—the end of Texas. The end of Texas, Mexico, and then along the coast all the way down to the Florida Keys, and then all the way up the East Coast to Maine, and then across and along the Canadian-American border. It was incredible. When you stop and think about it, in a way, that kind of trip is always interesting, because more stuff is going on at that point of the border than any other place. But anyway, let's get back to it: I went through Marfa. I was actually sitting on a bench, getting a gallon of gas and a Coke in Marfa—and Donald Judd came walking by.

Just by chance?

Yeah, by chance. He used to vacation in northern Mexico, way out in the middle of nowhere. But apparently, he was out there looking at that town. We had this funny conversation: He told me what he was doing, and I told him what I was doing, and then we left—and I hadn't been back there for a long time. They asked me to come back for different reasons, which I did, and they considered the idea that they wanted to do something. Basically, I started with the idea of being outside. In fact, for the first eight years or so, I refused to be inside, because there's really something quite magical about Marfa. I think it's probably the quality of the sky.

The site-specific aspect of your work involves intensive architectural considerations. How does a work change both for you and the viewers when you present it in other venues? You're showing an earlier work from 1998, “Excursus: Homage to the Square,” at the Dia:Beacon this summer, for example.

Most often you can't. You have to start over again. In this particular case, the room that [“Excursus”] is going to be in, it's made for it. It's going to be the same, but it's going to be different.

I was the architect on that project—I did the master plan [for the Dia]. I was there and detailed everything along the way, working with Michael Govan as a team. I realized that the whole process of entering was very important. For most people, you don't want them to know they're being led to this thing, but in my mind they start at Grand Central Station. I'm thinking in the sense of New York, who in the whole, most don't go out of New York except in the summertime to Kamp Kippy. So you get on the train and you're going along, right along the Hudson River, it couldn't be better. Slowly the city is fading away and it starts becoming rough on the edges and then it starts becoming the country. And it gets richer and richer, all the way up. So you're going through, being like, Whoosh! Do you know what I mean?

It's like a detox of sorts.

Yes, exactly. The moment of arrival in anything is one of the pivotal experiences you're going to have, so it's an opportunity, and you really don't want to blow it, don't want to throw it away. You don't want to clever it up. But anyway, I'm very proud of it.

This year is a milestone moment for you in several capacities: In addition to the opening of the installation in Marfa, next year will mark 50 years with the Pace Gallery, and you just exhibited your 18th solo show there. With that perspective, how has your practice evolved? Will you continue to keep a studio?

We're in the studio right now, going through this editing process, and we're finally getting to the end of it. I've got 80 pieces or something. Now we're reviewing every one of them and we're making them, then we're gonna put it in a box and close the studio down, because I don't need it anymore.

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