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The Quintessential American Artist

Robert Irwin Breaks Down Barriers



Installation view of Robert Irwin: New "SCULPTURES/CONFIGURATIONS" (until 17 August). Courtesy Pace Gallery. Photo credit Tom Barratt. Art © 2018 Robert Irwin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Mark Waldhause

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Often with art, a change of context inevitably results in a change of content. Marcel Duchamp's placement of a urinal on a pedestal, which he repurposed as a sculpture, is one of the more obvious instances. The message and intent behind John Currin's paintings when he switched galleries from Andrea Rosen to Larry Gagosian in 2003 is another, which somehow switched one's perception of his work from a critique of representation to its embrace. Today, please indulge me with a third instance for your consideration—how art can be viewed very differently when seen through the lens of political and societal shifts, such as those taking place in America today.

For those not so familiar with Irwin's work, well, shame on you

Perhaps I was thinking about this as we were conceiving of our annual America issue when I recently viewed new work by Robert Irwin, which is currently on view at Pace gallery ("[Sculpture/Configurations](#)", until 17 August), from a very different perspective than I ordinarily would. For those not so familiar with Irwin's work, well, shame on you. He is one of the greatest artists of the past 60 years.



Robert Irwin, *South South West* (2014-15) © 2018 Robert Irwin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Philipp Scholz Rittermann

What is nowadays a commonly understood field of artistic exploration—the perceptual field—was pioneered, defined and is, dare I say, still owned by Irwin. In the 1950s, Irwin was making Abstract Expressionist paintings. He was really good at it, but in around 1960 decided he would rather make art about what he didn't know, switching his content from gesture to perception, and from the form of a painting to the experience of it. In the early 1960s, he made minimalistic paintings that lived well outside of Minimalism, insofar as their colors and lines were as much about the experience of looking and perceiving as they were about their colors and lines. He went on to make dot paintings that caused the perceptual field of the painting to blur and trail off toward the canvas edges.



Installation view of Robert Irwin: New
 "SCULPTURES/CONFIGURATIONS" (until 17 August). Courtesy Pace
 Gallery. Photo credit Tom Barratt. Art © 2018 Robert Irwin/Artists
 Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo credit: Mark Waldhause

By the middle of the 1960s he had abandoned conventional painting and was making works in the form of disks of acrylic or painted aluminum mounted in front of the wall, as though suspended in space. Their edges would virtually disappear, defining a perceptual field for the work of art that extended well beyond the physical limits of the object. From there, Irwin went on to make installations out of light and scrim that were so immaterial in form that they became infinite in experience.

Irwin pioneered a course in art that flipped our understanding of the work from the object to the experience of perception that the object triggers. In doing so, he gave rise to several generations of artists, mostly working in Southern California, who are often referred to under the rubric Light and Space.

These are monuments to fragmentation and blurred edges

In his current show at Pace, Irwin puts the perceptual back into discretely scaled objects of precisely defined physical boundary, which are freestanding sculptures made of colored acrylic and assembled into clustered columns (or rather, what could be read as columns that have been fragmented into component parts). While these works are amongst the most physically delimited Irwin has made in many years, they nonetheless trigger optical effects that dissect and reform one's

sense of structure. The works are made from sheets of acrylic assembled at right angles which, gathered together in clusters, somewhat resemble an I-beam—if an I-beam were translucent and reflective.

Upon first glance, the different layers of different colors of acrylic form a concentrated whole when gathered together. Closer inspection shows them to be fractured in form because of these various layers of material and their reflections into and through one another. The works are filled with playful contradictions about what you see and how you experience them. I kept circling the works to try and understand the assembly of the whole; of these corners that do not mark two ends of anything; supports that support nothing, but are instead forms in and of themselves.

These new works are a natural evolution of Irwin's lifelong exploration of perception and, like many of his works, are of a scale that naturally links to the language of architecture. But I also couldn't help but view them in societal terms, seeing them as monuments to fragmentation and blurred edges. One can see through these huddled masses of corners, margins and translucent barriers and ponder them from a 360-degree perspective, without being able to penetrate them.

Irwin is, after all, a quintessentially American artist, formed by the scale and experience of the West; and these timeless works can be seen very much as a product of times in which America is a society, culture and political system whose structure seems detached from what it is meant to support and sustain.