Arts and Leisure: Robert Irwin's spent a lifetime 'capturing lightning in a bottle'

by Robert L. Pincus

One word matters more to Robert Irwin than any other: wonder.

Young children possess it in abundance, whether they're focusing on a flower, a toy or a video game. And Irwin has spent a good deal of his adult life creating art that aims to make a viewer of any age feel much the same way.

ROBERT IRWIN - Robert Irwin, whose new museum exhibition is his biggest in 14 years, stands in an empty gallery that now houses work created for the show. CNS Photo by Nancee E. Lewis. His work manages to restore that heightened appreciation for the world around us, whether be it the light in a room or an expanse of sky or ocean. But you'll never find him speaking in mystical terms about art or life. Irwin rejects spiritual rhetoric, the idea that you should take your shoes off, or something along those lines, to enter a space where you find one of his installations.

"That sets up a whole bag of stuff," Irwin says, sitting in the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego where he's preparing to open his biggest museum show in 14 years. "It turns art into a sort of religious or ritualistic experience and then you're not walking in fresh."

He talks about his approach in philosophical terms, about "perceiving yourself perceiving," which to Irwin's way of thinking, is about becoming keenly aware of how the artist is altering a room or framing the natural world. And he is committed to seeing how the radical ideas introduced by modern artists like Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich, when they reduced the picture plane to geometric forms, can be applied in the world at large.

He's done just that, as he sees it, with such works as his piece for the University of California San Diego campus, "Two Running Violet V-Forms" (1983), with its high-flung chain-link fences, and the Getty Garden (inaugurated in 1997), which envelops you in its concentric path and flora. But you don't need to know the ideas behind his garden to enjoy it - and that is another of Irwin's gifts.

Hugh Davies, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, believes Irwin's way of following out that set of possibilities has made him "the most important artist the West Coast has ever produced."

Some might see formidable competition in the form of, say, James Turrell or Edward Ruscha.

Davies has been convinced of Irwin's standing for decades. In 1976, he met the artist for the first time, as the recently hired director of the gallery at the University of Massachusetts. (Davies came to the MCASD in 1983.) The artist, who was then making art on-site in response to invitations, arrived to create a piece for a big exhibition called "Critical Perspectives in American Art."

"I am not a dispassionate art historian when it comes to Bob," says Davies, who is also the curator of "Primaries and Secondaries." "I am a huge advocate.

"I moved to California in part because of him. Having gotten to know Bob I was fascinated by what was happening in California. And the history of the last 25 years has reinforced that decision for me."

Irwin has developed particularly close relationships with a small number of museum heads. Richard Koshalek, the first director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, curated Irwin's 1993 retrospective for that showcase. Michael Govan, now director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, was at the Dia Art Foundation when he asked Irwin to be the lead designer in the transformation of an immense old factory into what is now a museum space, Dia:Beacon, outside of New York City. And Irwin is currently working on an outdoor piece for Govan in Los Angeles.

Davies is the other director who fits this description for Irwin.

"The museum world is tight-ass," he insists. "Even on its best day, it's pretty conservative. But every now and then, someone comes along in the business and doesn't bottom-line everything. I feel really fortunate that these special people have supported me."

For Davies and the MCASD, commissioning work is one form of support. If you've been in the Krichman Family Gallery in the museum's La Jolla space and looked at the expansive windows when they've revealed rectangular apertures at their corners, then you've experienced Irwin's "1 2 3 4." It frames sections of ocean, as if they were pictures that exist in real time. (The piece goes on view periodically, but isn't installed at the moment.)

Another major gesture of support is collecting his art in depth, which the MCASD has done and is one reason why it can present an exhibition like "Primaries and Secondaries."

EXITING THE STUDIO

In his exploration of what he describes as radical premises of modern art, Irwin left behind painting and sculpture altogether and gave up any semblance of a traditional studio in 1970. He shut it down without any sense of what was to come next. But in the ensuing decades he's emerged as one of the most highly regarded of living artists.

Nonetheless, Irwin contends, "I never thought about history at all. I never thought much about a career. I do what I do."

Even if the making of paintings and sculpture is nearly four decades behind him, the artist, who lives with his wife Adele, and daughter, Anna Grace, in San Diego, has never abandoned exhibitions in galleries or museums. And the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego recently opened "Primaries and Secondaries," an

exhibition that begins with his abstract expressionist paintings of the 1950s and culminates, as any Irwin exhibition must, with installations created in response to the spaces in which he creates them.

"The whole point in doing these things, like I'm doing downstairs (at the museum), is get a hold of the drama that can be created with light. But there's no way to know for sure what will happen. It's like capturing lightning in a bottle.

"If I do succeed, there's a wow feeling. It's like finding the gold, like that John Huston moment (in 'The Treasure of the Sierra Madre') when he does a little dance and says 'I found the gold.' Every time I get there, it's different, better than I could have imagined."

He's trying to locate the lightning again with new works like "Who's Afraid of Red Yellow & Blue," with its painted aluminum panels in primary colors, suspended horizontally, high and low, which reflect much of what surrounds them. And he'll be doing updated versions of older works in his trademark scrim, the fabric he uses forms semi-transparent walls, along with other new works.

All of his creations after 1971, when he crafted the last of his clear cast-acrylic columns, are what Irwin calls conditional or site-conditioned art. They are created in response to a place, be it a gallery or public place - and all are part of his line of inquiry about where art might go next.

"I came to it backwards," Irwin says of the story of modern art to which he is fervently committed. By this, he means his own dogged pursuit of the lessons of abstraction. The discoveries in the studio came first and the readings in philosophy as well as his own compelling writings came later.

The artist, born in Long Beach, Calif., in 1928 and raised mostly in Los Angeles, trained at the Otis Art Institute, the Jepson Art Institute and the Chouinard School of Art. He came of age as an artist in the glory days of abstract expressionism of the late 1950s and still believes in the lessons he culled making paintings loaded with gestural brushwork.

FINDING THE ESSENCE

As much as Irwin loved painting, he had the sort of mind that compelled him to pursue the essence of abstract painting more than any style. He proceeded to reduce the brush strokes to a few rough-edged lines on canvas, then to parallel lines, and then to a field of dots that appeared to create dynamic play of color.

In perceptual terms, the edge of the canvas started to seem like a false boundary to him. This insight led Irwin to create his now iconic disk paintings of the late 1960s, formed from hard acrylics, which look as if they have no edge at all. They appear to merge with their own shadows.

"The idea that we could have the whole dialogue within the frame of the edges of the canvas, as wonderful as paintings are, was suspect," Irwin recalls of the issues surrounding painting in that era. "Could we really do that? Isn't that a highly stylized structure?"

For him, this insight, coupled with the making of the disks, was the end of painting and the beginning of what has became a remarkably varied body of work.

"Modern art took away the old framework," Irwin says. "It flattened out the established pictorial hierarchies when it destroyed the figure and the ground. I find that thrilling, but I realize it can also be alarming. I use the word 'wonder' to describe it, but some think of it as nihilistic, irrational and antisocial."

Irwin is what you might call a conscientious radical.

"You don't throw away existing knowledge without a goddamn good reason. These new ideas had to be tested. And still have to be tested."

Art world trends can be short, Irwin insists, but history is long.

"The concepts in modern art are a couple of hundred years old now. But we're only at midstride in this experiment. It'll be another 200 years before we discover whether it was a good idea or not."

The concept of postmodernism, he says, is pure folly: "It used revisionist tactics to work in an old scheme of things rather than following out a set of possibilities that modern art represents."

In our time, he has defined those possibilities as much as anyone.

"There's been a remarkable consistency to his work," Davies says. "I admire the rigorous, rational way he has worked with issues. But at the same time I never could have predicted where it would go beforehand - and where it will go in the future."

The only certainty is that Irwin is open to any kind of setting, if it appeals to him, and the medium will be determined by his response to the site itself. By working in that way, his sense of wonder never diminishes.

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