Robert Irwin
MATRIX/BERKELEY 15

University Art Museum
October - December

Robert Irwin has requested
that his work not be re-
produced for this brochure.

Robert Irwin, who began his career in L.A. in the late fifties as a robust abstract expressionist, modeling vast canvases, today confines himself to spare gestures--subtle manipulations of line, scrim, light--specifically suited to the particulars of the site and context of each new project (the University Art Museum itself will play host to such an installation early next year). His trajectory over the past twenty years has consisted of a complete transformation of intent and product: nothing could seem further from the work he was doing in 1958 than the work he does in 1978--and yet that transformation has been progressive and organic, a consistent series of responses to a sequence of unfolding questions, an unfurling self-dialogue. Each phase of activity addressed the questions raised by the previous phase, just as it raised new questions for the next. The pivotal moment in this journey of inquiry came for Irwin during a period of incredibly intense work in the early sixties with the gradual metamorphosis in the line paintings which compose this MATRIX presentation. Everything that would follow was in many ways already implicit in these works.

Although Irwin had enjoyed considerable success as a student in art school and as a young artist (he had a show at the prestigious Felix Landau Gallery as early as 1957), he insists that his real education only began as he fell in with the group of artists gathered around L.A.'s nascent avant-garde Ferus Gallery. He credits such colleagues as Billy Al Bengston, John Altoon, Craig Kauffman and Ed Moses with first introducing him to the horizons of abstract expressionism and exposing him to the work of the New York school. By the late fifties, Irwin was producing his own, large, richly impastoed abstract canvases.

But he was already bothered by the arbitrary, undisciplined character of his endeavor. "In those days," he recalls, "you just got yourself in a good zen mood and emoted. But six months after the 'emotions' of my involvement with those paintings, much of what I had done just didn't seem necessary." Furthermore, many of his canvases began to seem riddled with physical contradictions. As he became exposed to the works of master abstract expressionists--de Kooning and Guston are two that he frequently cites--he began to discern laws of spatial composition as binding in the painting world as the laws of physics were for the larger universe. Just as two people couldn't occupy the same chair at the same time, for example, so two gestures (no matter how emotionally wrenching) couldn't occupy the same space in a painting. Initially contracting his canvases in a series of small, handheld works, and then enlarging them again, he worked to develop his control. In the process he came to think of paintings as showing two faces, one as interpretable image and another as physical presence, and he saw the former as bleeding the intensity of the latter. To the extent that a canvas could be subsumed as a "painting of something," it was no longer being confronted as an energy field in its own right. And what Irwin was increasingly after was this pure physicality. In this context he began to think almost in terms of a calculus of the physical: each gesture required a certain quantum of attention (say, 0.4), and it had better be giving back more energy than it was costing (say, 0.8) or it had no business being there at all. There was no such thing as a neutral gesture: every mark either contributed to or detracted from the presence of the canvas. Working from this mind-set, Irwin began throwing out everything that didn't contribute. Meanwhile, he continued to be bothered by the Rorschach Effect, the tendency of virtually any abstract mark to read as image (as "cloud," for example, or "swan") and hence detract from the canvas's immediate physicality, until, as he describes it, "in one of those 'Aha!' moments," he hit upon the straight line itself as the least Rorschachable gesture.

His earliest line paintings, around 1960, were executed in the same richly impastoed fashion as their predecessors, and Irwin today characterizes them as "a painterly game of pick-up sticks"--the thickly worked lines splayed at various cross angles. Although these paintings could no longer be Rorschached, they could still be "read" in the same fashion as a Renaissance painting, that is pictorially, the viewer's eye flowing from one part of the canvas to another across a field, almost a map, of articulation. This articulation of form likewise seemed to detract from the immediate physical presence of the paintings. So gradually Irwin moved toward the syntax of a few parallel, horizontal lines hovering over a monotone field. These middle line paintings, executed during the early sixties, were no longer "articulable" but still trafficked with such pictorial concerns as color composition and spatial illusion. Parallel orange and yellow lines would pop forward or recede, in any case interact, depending on the color of the field: they still read as figure to the field's ground. They seemed to be what the painting was "about" ("Oh, that's a painting of four lines and how their colors create an optical illusion") when the whole point was to create a painting which wouldn't be "about" anything.

Irwin was coming to realize that his real concerns were altogether more inclusive. He was gradually becoming hooked on his curiosity about the nature of perception itself. Beginning in 1962, Irwin holed himself up in his studio for twelve and fifteen hours at a time, seven days a week, for months on end, ultimately for two years, painstakingly exploring his own perceptual experience and honing his sensibilities. From out of this passion emerged his late line paintings, ten canvases, each consisting of two lines handsplayed over a monotone, tactile ground into which they virtually disappeared. Their placement had been carefully calibrated--through a process of trial and error--so as to suspend any sense of incident.

"On a certain level of reading," Irwin noted recently, "the pictorial elements in the late

line paintings are essentially the same as in the earlier works--straight lines on a single colored ground. On a literate level, it's like a variation but within the same framework. But structurally speaking, on an experimental level, they are in an entirely different world. They are now addressing the root questions, which as in philosophy and physics are not about the play of superficial ideas or incidents at all. They're about the basic relationships of the three or four primary aspects of existence in the world--being-in-time, for example, space, presence. When you stop giving them a literate or articulate read (the kind of read you give a Renaissance painting) and instead look at them perceptually, you find that your eye ends up suspended in mid-air, mid-space, or mid- stride: both time and space blend into a continum. You lose your bearings for a moment. You finally end up in a totally meditative state. The thing is you cease reading and you cease articulating and you fall into a state where nothing else is going on but the tactile, experimental process.

"One of the things about reading these paintings," he continues, "is that they have no existence beyond your participation. They are not abstractable in that sense." You can take, for example, an Ellsworth Kelly of a certain vintage, and you can talk about it as a square space bisected by a flowing curved line of a particular equation), painted green to one side and orange to the other--and although of course the experience of actually confronting the canvas in person is unexcelled, there's still a large part of the experience which is abstractable. Later that day, at the bus station, you can still summon that painting, the idea of it, to your mind's eye. This is impossible with one of Irwin's late line canvases. They only "work" immediately: they command an incredible presence--"a rich floating sense of vacuum," as Irwin describes it--but only to one who is in fact present. At the bus station, you may remember what it felt like to stand before the painting--the texture of the meditative state it put you in--but the canvas itself, its image in your mind, will be evanescent. This is why for many years Irwin declined to allow his work to be photographed, precisely because the image of the canvas was exactly what the painting was not about.

In 1964, the questions were set. In the years which have followed, Irwin has continued to explore these issues, gradually breaking down each of the extraneous requirements of the art act (jettisoning linear mark in the dot paintings, frame in the discs, focus in the room experiments, and finally even the superstructure of studio and galleries and the requirement of object production). After 1970, he began touring the country, engaging scientists, psychologists, philosophers, aestheticians, students, and fellow artists in a dialogue of inquiry. In conjunction with these travels, he occasionally modulates the environment of particular sites, but his primary interest today is in the ever-rich possibilities of human presence; and he contends that perception itself, rather than any object, must be the true subject of art. Nonobjective art, he today feels, leads toward non-object art.

"All my activities after those line paintings are in a sense a result of how those paintings taught me to look at the world. When I look at the world now, my posture is not one of focus but rather of attention. It's like a floating kind of feeling when I work in a situation now." Irwin's next on-site project will occur at the University Art Museum, Berkeley this Marcn.

Irwin was born in Long Beach in 1928, attended various L.A. art schools in the early fifties and was a celebrated teacher at those and still others in the late fifties and through the sixties (notably at Chouinard and UC Irvine). During the sixties he was part of what has become known as the Ferus Group. After 1970, he abandoned his studio and toured the country for several years. Today he confines himself to an activity of pure inquiry with occasional on-site digressions. He continues to live in Southern California.

Lawrence Weschler

Mr. Weschler, who has edited and written various articles on Robert Irwin, is currently working on a major biography of this artist with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

This exhibition was organized by Assistant Curator Michael Auping and is scheduled to travel to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

Statements in the text attributed to the artist were taken from conversations with the artist in September, 1978.

Works in MATRIX:

Bands in Boston, 1962, Oil on canvas, 5' x 5'. Lent by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Untitled, 1964, Oil on canvas, 7' x 7'. Lent by Edward and Melinda Wortz, Pasadena, California.

A Way Out West, 1962, Oil on canvas, 66" x 65". Lent anonymously.

Untitled, 1962, Oil on canvas, 84" x 83". Lent anonymously.

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Felix Landau Gallery, L.A. '75; Ferus Gallery, L.A.'59; Pasadena Art Museum, CA '60; Ferus Gallery, L.A. '62; Ferus Gallery, L.A. '64; Pace Gallery, NYC '66; Pasadena Art Museum, CA '68; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence '69; La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, CA '69; Pace Gallery, NYC '69; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '70; Pace Gallery, NYC '71; Ace Gallery, L.A. '72; Fogg Art Museum, MA '72; Galerie Sonnabend, Paris '72; Mizuno Gallery, L.A. '72; Pace Gallery, NYC '73; Wright State University, Dayton, OH '74; University of California, Santa Barbara '74; Fort Worth Art Museum, TX '75; Mizuno Gallery, L.A. '75; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago '75; Walker Art Center, MN '76; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '77.

Selected group exhibitions:
Art Galleries, University of California, L.A., Fifty Paintings by Thirty-Seven Artists of the Los Angeles Area '60; Ferus Gallery, L.A. '61; Ferus Gallery, L.A. '63; Sidney Janis Gallery, NY '64; The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, The Responsive Eye '65; Sao Paulo, Brazil, VIII Sao Paulo Bienal '65; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Robert Irwin/Kenneth Price '66; The Jewish Museum, NY, Gene Davis, Robert Irwin, Richard Smith '68; Walker Art Center, MN, 6 Artists, 6 Exhibitions '68; Kassel, Germany, Documenta 4 '68; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Late 50s at the Ferus '68; Fort Worth Art Center, TX, Robert Irwin/ Doug Wheeler '69; Stedeliijk Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, Kompas IV; West Coast U.S.A. '69; The Art Institute of Chicago, 69th American Exhibition '70; Tate Gallery, London, Bell/Irwin/Wheeler '70; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Permutations: Light and Color '70; Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, 200 Years of American Sculpture '76; Venice, Italy, 37th Venice Biennale '76; San Francisco Museum of Art, Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era '76; The Fort Worth Art Museum, TX, American Artists: A New Decade '76.

Selected bibliography by Irwin:

Artforum, vol. 3 (June '65) p. 23.

Artforum, vol. 6 (Feb. '68) p. 4.

Selected bibliography about Irwin:

Plagens, Peter. "Robert Irwin, the Artist's Premises," Artforum, vol. 9 (Dec. '70) pp. 88-89.

Butterfield, Jan. "Part I. The State of the Real: Robert Irwin Discusses the Art of an extended Consciousness," Arts Magazine, vol. 46 (June '72) pp. 47-49."Part II. Reshaping the Shape of Things," Arts Magazine, vol. 46 (Sept.-Oct. '72) pp. 30-32.

Butterfield, Jan. "Robert Irwin: On the Periphery of Knowing," Arts Magazine, vol. 50 (Feb. '76) pp. 72-77.

Smith, Roberta. "Robert Irwin: The Subject is Sight," Art in America, vol. 64 (Mar. '76) pp. 68-73.

Weschler, Lawrence. "Robert Irwin's Whitney Project: Retrospects and Prospects," LAICA Journal (July-Aug. '77) pp. 14-23.

"Robert Irwin," Catalog including "Notes Toward a Model: The Process of Compounded Abstraction," by Robert Irwin (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art '77).