

A walk through Robert Irwin's new 5,000-square-foot sculpture



Untitled, 2017-2018 Synthetic fabric, wood, black pigment, tint, honeycomb aluminum, polyester primer, Irwin black, natural light (Robert Wedemeyer / Robert Irwin and Sprüth Magers)

Every morning when we wake up, we put the world together anew, Robert Irwin marveled in an interview with me more than a decade ago. The painter-turned-pioneering artist of light and space had been probing how perception defines reality since the 1970s, but there he was, nearing age 80, and clearly still driven hard by that wondrous process.

Irwin is now approaching 90, and his astonishing new installation at Sprüth Magers leaves no doubt that he himself remains astonished.

Irwin has reimaged the gallery's 5,000-square-foot ground level space as an immaculate, immersive sculpture. In the center of the room stands an enclosure with floor-to-ceiling walls of translucent white scrim, which he has long favored for its capacity to both define a plane and dissolve into luminous atmosphere. This inner sanctum is subdivided into six square modules. The slender white pillars that articulate the structure are echoed by another set that wraps broadly around it in a crisp, orderly rhythm, punctuating the viewer's passage.

As you walk around the room-within-a-room (white cubes within the white cube gallery), your focus is drawn to a sequence of large black squares at eye level on every wall and perimeter window. With each step, the relationship between the parts changes.

The environment reinvents itself — or rather, we reinvent it — through shifts in light and perspective: Now, the squares on the scrim wall nest within each other, charcoal planes growing more opaque with each receding layer, vividly conjuring Josef Albers' celebrated series of paintings and prints, "Homage to the Square." Now, the shapes skew at contrary angles. Now, they are the fixed points around which the life of Wilshire Boulevard unfurls outside the window.

Irwin turned away from studio-based object-making in 1970, toward "site-conditioned" responses to given environments, like the untitled installation here. About 10 years ago, he started making things again: wall-mounted assemblages of fluorescent light tubes sheathed in colored gels and arranged in symmetrical patterns of vertical stripes.

Upstairs at Sprüth Magers hang four recent pieces, handsome enough in their own right and downright entrancing when seen through the black scrim wall that Irwin interjected through the center of the room. Through the dark veil, the industrial fixtures become distilled; they turn soft-edged and diffuse, their gleam muted and granular.

A concurrent show of plans and models for Irwin's outdoor projects runs through April 15 at the University Art Museum at Cal State Long Beach. The installation downstairs at Sprüth Magers is the artist at his catalytic best, providing the reductive architecture for an expansive experience. The work's cool geometry sets the stage for a perceptual power surge, a reinvigorating jolt to the body, mind and eye.

Sprüth Magers, 5900 Wilshire Blvd., L.A. Through April 21; closed Sundays and Mondays. Because of the installation's dependence on natural light, gallery hours are limited to 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (323) 634-0600, www.spruethmagers.com



Installation view of fluorescent light sculptures, 2015-2017 Light + Shadow + Reflection + Color variable dimensions (Robert Wedemeyer / Robert Irwin and Sprueth Magers)