

AT

Robert Irwin's installation in Marfa is a modernist Minimalist Stonehenge on the high West Texas plains

LONG

BY LAWRENCE WESCHLER

LAST

“YOU WAKE UP

“EVERY MORNING,” the California artist Robert Irwin would often begin the talks he used to give, coming on 45 years ago now, to anyone anywhere who would have him, “and a whole world is delivered instantaneously to your senses—and you hardly give the sheer marvel of that fact a thought, it’s so taken for granted. The sights, sounds, textures, smells come flooding in, or rather maybe your awareness of, your attentiveness to the world floods out, and you just get up and go on with your day as if this were the simplest fact there could be, which of course it is not.”

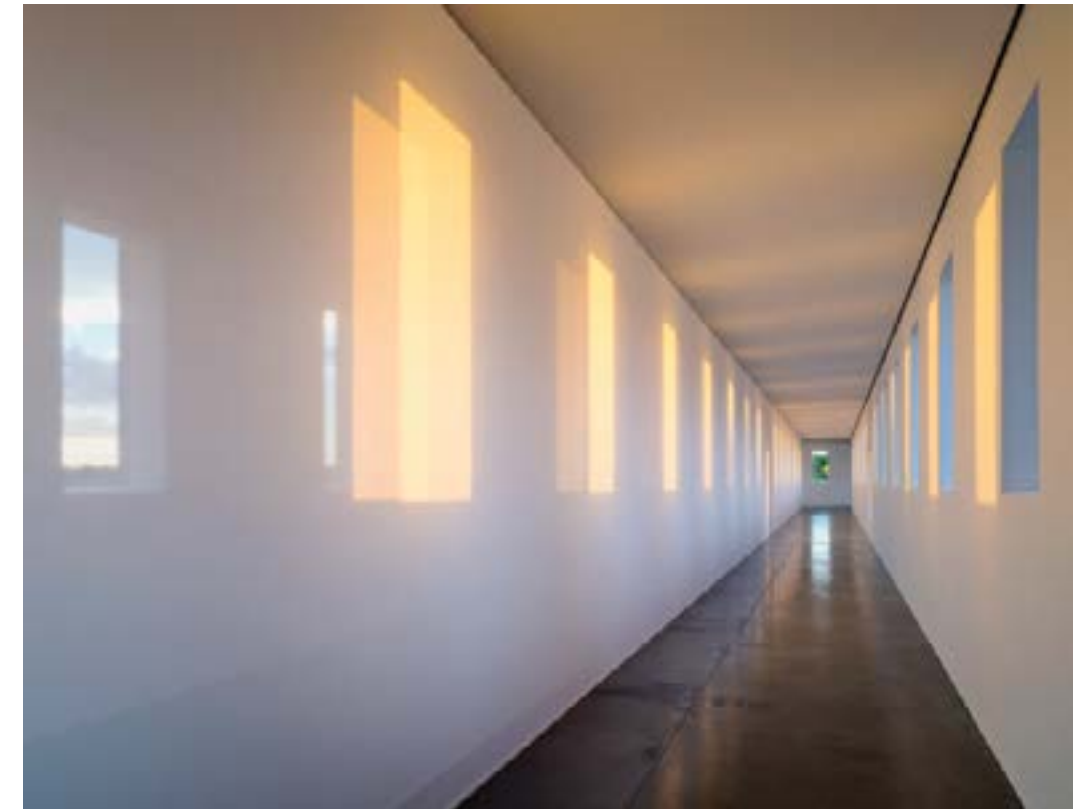
“Available in Response,” he used to call his artistic practice back in those days—and that was pretty much all that was left of it. Across the 1960s and into the early ’70s, starting out as a figurative and then an abstract painter, he had basically dismantled every other aspect of the painter’s traditional activity, systematically dispensing one by one with image, gesture, focus, canvas, frame, signature, and presently even transportable (saleable) object. As one of his last acts, he’d cleaned out his Venice, California, studio—emptying the space, plastering and smooth-sanding and repainting the walls, buffing the floor, cleaning the skylight (the painstaking process took weeks)—and as a final gesture, he simply walked away.

He got in his car and took off eastward into the desert on the first leg of a tour of the country’s borders (across the South, up the Atlantic, then back along the northern perimeter and down the Pacific)—for some reason that seemed a sensible thing to be doing, for starters—in pursuit of presence, as he’d sometimes say, perceptual presence, the core and almost sole truly valid artistic subject, as he’d come to feel. And so it came to pass that, in 1971, pulling into Marfa, Texas, a once thriving little high-desert ranch town about three hours southwest of El Paso that had lately been emptying out precipitously

(what with the postwar closing of the nearby Fort D.A. Russell military base and consequent shuttering of the town’s lifeline train stop), outside the town hall, he came upon his old New York artist pal, the Minimalist master Donald Judd (one of the few New Yorkers who’d been taking their California counterpart seriously), and suitably startled, each simultaneously asked the other, What are *you* doing *here*?

Irwin explained the general idea behind his trip, noting that the sense of presence (the sky, the clouds, the light, the clarity of the air, the knife-sharp horizon falling away in the near-far distance) seemed especially strong in these parts; and Judd, agreeing, explained how he’d lately been thinking of relocating his entire New York operation out to somewhere around here. They doffed caps, Irwin continuing on his way: completing the circuit, launching into his years of responsive availability, lecturing, reading, promulgating a series of subtle temporary specifically site-conditioned artistic interventions in locations all around the country and presently the world, becoming one of the first artists to receive a MacArthur Fellowship and, a few years after that, getting selected to spearhead one of the grandest public art projects of all time, the Gardens at the Getty Center back in Los Angeles. Judd, for his part, began buying up the town (the abandoned supermarket, the empty bank, a slew of vacated warehouses, and presently the entire mothballed and crumbling former military base), and filling his new properties (with the military base recast as his Chinati Foundation), on a permanent basis (the way he felt things ought to be seen and preserved), with his own work and that of his friends (separate buildings or barracks for the likes of John Chamberlain, Dan Flavin, Claes Oldenburg, Roni Horn, Carl Andre, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, and John Wesley, among others), slowly

BOTH IMAGES: PHILIPP SCHOLZ RITTERMANN, THE CHINATI FOUNDATION, AND ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



Interior views of Irwin’s installation *untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016.



Exterior of the installation *untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016.

HE GOT IN HIS CAR AND TOOK OFF EASTWARD INTO THE DESERT ON THE FIRST LEG OF A TOUR OF THE COUNTRY'S BORDERS—IN PURSUIT OF PRESENCE, HE'D SOMETIMES SAY.

turning the place into an art world mecca and a magnet for a growing community of young artists. Judd himself didn't live to see all of it, dying in 1994, leaving the directorship of Chinati to his late-life partner, the brilliant charismatic German curator Marianne Stockebrand (who, as it happened, had hosted an Irwin traveling show back in her own Cologne museum that very year—indeed Judd had first fallen ill during a celebratory dinner with Irwin and Stockebrand for that very show), while the stewardship of the remaining Judd properties in the town of Marfa and back on Spring Street in New York went to his two kids from an earlier marriage, Flavin and Rainer.

After the Getty commission, Irwin moved to Upstate New York for a few years to design and help realize the transformation of an abandoned Nabisco paper-box printing plant into Dia Beacon, but he kept dropping by Marfa, and meanwhile Stockebrand and her lieutenant, Rob Weiner, in the midst of their myriad other initiatives, kept returning to Judd's own late-life resolve at some point to invite Irwin to undertake a long-term project there. By 2001, the various pieces seemed to fall into place and Stockebrand was able to offer Irwin the site of the old Fort D.A. Russell hospital, off on the town-side perimeter of the former military base. In the event, it would end up taking another 15 years of planning, conceptualizing, re-conceptualizing, and, most importantly, fundraising (a good part of that under the auspices of Chinati's new director, Jenny Moore) for the now 88-year-old Irwin's scheme to come to fruition, but this past July the completed piece, *untitled: dawn to dusk*, finally saw the light of day, amid much community and art world celebration.

Though the artist himself was not there.

The hospital, back in 2001, was a severely dilapidated ruin: The walls were still there, barely, but the roof and floorboards had long since been pillaged for firewood, it was said, and the window slots were gapingly raw and empty, the whole complex resembling something out of Pompeii. Still, it couldn't be denied, the place had *presence*—it had that in brimming amplitude—and Irwin resolved to salvage what he could of the complex's original footprint: a slightly elongated square, the lateral corridors longer than the front and back ends, with a separate structure (the infirmary) slotted into the spacious courtyard patio in the middle. The original structure had responded to the gentle upward slope (front to back) of its site, by requiring several steps up at the entry and then leveling the floor through the whole structure as it moved toward the rear, where it almost met the risen ground. But the floorboards were no longer there, and the effect, when one walked the scabbly dirt of the interior corridors, was that the narrow vertical windows up front and along the beginnings of the lateral sides were up high, their ledges almost at the eye level of an average-sized person, such that one only barely made out the far

stretching desertscape all around (granted, toward the back of the up-sloping corridors, the windows seemed to subside to more conventional knee-height, in turn divulging a more conventional view).

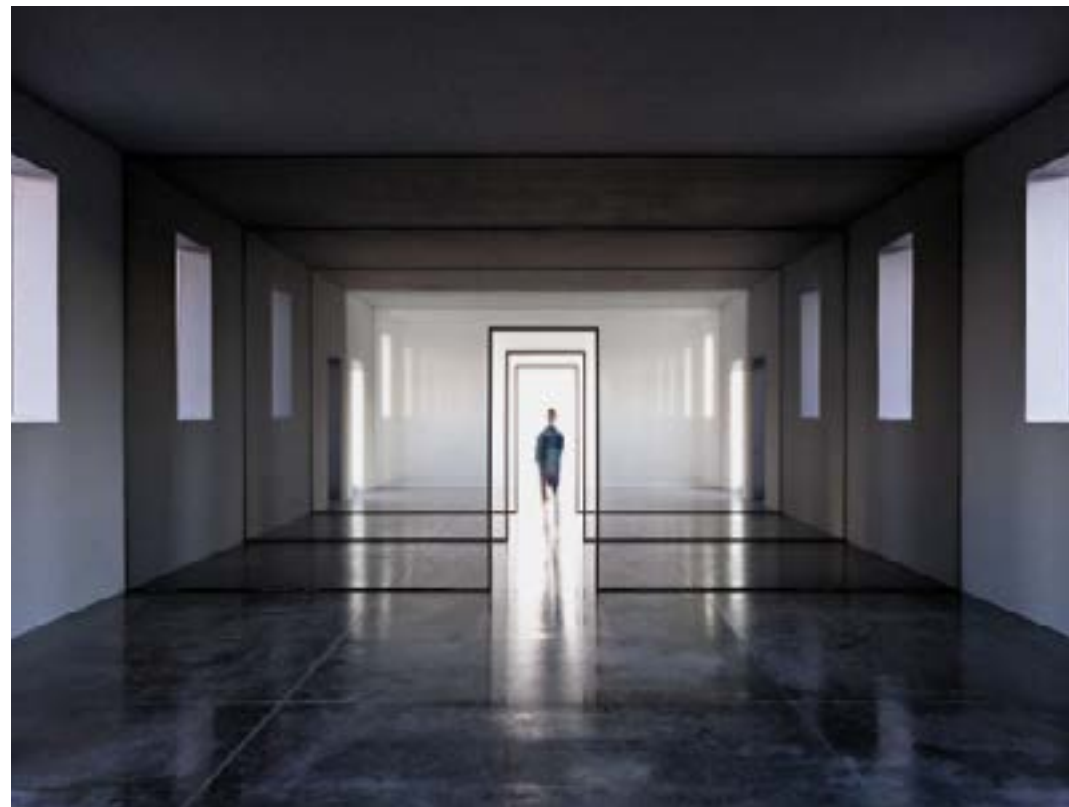
Up at the front, though, gazing through the window slits, it was mainly the sky that stood out—and Irwin had come to feel that the sky itself accounted for much of the magic of the place: It was wide and usually dazzlingly crisp and blue but appeared low, owing to the white puffy cumulus clouds that were constantly scudding by just overhead, so thick their underbellies were often scored deep gray.

At first Irwin hoped to integrate the dramatically crumbling walls themselves into the final structure, but it soon became clear they could no longer support the weight, at which point he decided to tear them down altogether, and in his first major gesture, to wedge the structure's former footprint into the rising slope, retaining the low floor and high windows of the original front of the ruin through the entirety of the recast structure.

Over the years, the planning went through many iterations ("Many, many iterations," Weiner now laughs, wincingly), but early on Irwin decided to slice an opening through the front, street-facing side of the squarish perimeter into the empty courtyard space beyond: He wasn't yet sure what he was going to put in there—that, too, went through many, many iterations. As for the corridors, though, at first he played with the idea of a steadily darkening and then lightening sequence of colored films spread over the windows and a system of long skylights above (a differently unfurling spectrum of colors along each of the lateral sides). He was still in thrall back then to his recent experience of the infinite plenitude of hue and value he'd encountered amid the flowers of his Getty Garden, a revelation he'd recently begun replicating across a series of variously colored-film-wrapped fluorescent bulb arrays in projects elsewhere.

But gradually here he dispensed with the idea of colors and, perhaps referencing those eerily self-italicized clouds passing overhead, he decided to bisect the squarish rectangle longitudinally, rendering the interior walls and ceilings of the east side dark gray, and those of the west side gleaming white. At the outset, approaching from the street, the visitor would be invited to choose which side to enter, left or right: To either side there would first be an open-ceilinged foyer, as it were, with walls and empty window holes but no roof and open to the elements above, a notional souvenir of the site as it had first been encountered. Then, as one entered through glass doors, the immersive experience would truly begin: Down the middle of each of the lateral corridors, Irwin and his team had stretched a long sheer transparent scrim, floor to ceiling, black on the east side and white on the west, or actually a double scrim, two like-shaded scrims five inches apart, and, come to think of it, by no means always transparent. Depending on the angle from which they were viewed and the time of day and

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHILIPP SCHOLZ RITTERMANN, THE CHINATI FOUNDATION, AND ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



The courtyard and interior of *untitled (dawn to dusk)*, 2016. The volcanic basalt columns in the courtyard were discovered by Irwin on a drive through Washington state.

BOTH IMAGES: PHILIPP SCHOLZ RITTERMANN, THE CHINATI FOUNDATION, AND ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

the resultant slices of light (or lack thereof) splaying in from the crisp windows to either side of each corridor, the scrim could read as anything from solid walls to nothing at all: sheer air. The main thing the scrim served to do, however, as with so many of Irwin's other signature projects (including the 2013 reinstatement of his legendary 1977 *Scrim veil—Black rectangle—Natural light*, Whitney Museum of American Art at the New York museum's old location) was to catch, momentarily hold, and then gradually release the raking light streaming through the whole length of the lateral corridors. (Speaking of the length of those corridors, incidentally, the street-facing windows looked out onto the midtrunks of trees rising outside, whereas, mysteriously, those to the back of the structure looked out onto level earth almost as high as the window ledges and continuing to slope up off into the distance.) On the far side, the back corridor for its part was painted half black (east side) and half white (west), with three taut single scrim to each side slicing perpendicularly across the corridor (black to the east and white to the west), each of the six scrim in turn bisected by narrow rectangular openings, allowing free passage, pinched hourglass-like, from one side of the installation to the other.

Up until the last minute, Irwin had not been sure the piece was going to work. As usual with his pieces, there would be so many countervailing aspects of the eventual experience, a virtual infinity of them, the way different features would be interacting and intersecting with each other, that the whole thing could just have collapsed into undifferentiated chaos, and he wouldn't be able to know for sure until the whole thing had been completed. ("It's always like trying to capture lightning in a bottle," he warned, still fretting, a few weeks before the inaugural weekend, during one of his countless evaluative visits from his San Diego home.)

In the event, however, it worked superbly: Irwin and his construction crew had nailed it. If you happened to enter the space by yourself (say, a few hours before the official opening), there was a sudden hushed splendor to the whole experience: an in-held breath. But the experience was even better if there was a smattering of other individuals ambling through. (For all its emphasis on the phenomenology of individual perceptual experience, Irwin's is also a deeply social practice: the sense of presence it affords often heightened by the intersubjective presence of others having a similar experience.) Rounding the bend there toward the back and into the splay of six intervening scrim, three black and three white, time and again one heard the same gasps, and often the very same exclamation: "It's like we've all died and gone to heaven," with the other visitors, similarly stilled there in the distance, seemingly floating in the light-drenched indeterminate haze, like so many fellow angels.

Only it wasn't like that at all. Or rather, it was as if the determinedly

atheist Irwin were insisting, "This here, this place right here right now, like every other place at every other time, is *already* heaven, if we had but eyes to see, a heaven from which only death may eventually remove us." For one thing, unlike with transcendental heaven in all its much-vaunted timelessness, Irwin seemed to be suggesting, crucial to the splendor of our wordly portion were the very workings of time itself, with all its continuously albeit subtly registering changes.

And indeed, as many were pointing out that inaugural weekend, what Irwin had fashioned here on the edge of Marfa was a huge uncanny timepiece: Rolex, eat your heart out! A modernist Minimalist Stonehenge on the high West Texas plains. If, as the *untitled's* subtitle recommended, you were privileged to obtain access to the installation at dawn (the rooster from the neighboring hardscrabble farmstead crowing away), you could watch the sun's rise register incrementally, first on the darkened east side—a series of blushes, then widening bruises, and little by little down-furling rectangular curtains of light spaced out along the darkened double scrim and onto the still darker wall beyond, and a few minutes later, as the sun rose higher and broached the roof of the eastern side of the building, the same sequence would be repeating itself across the whitened western corridor of the structure. (Where tree trunks or branches intervened, the projected rectangles of light could momentarily register as silhouetted Chinese scrolls, shimmering with the breeze.) In the evening the opposite: the lowering sun pouring in through the out-facing windows, across the doubled scrim, and in (crisp rectangles of blazing orange light) casting itself onto the darkening far white walls between the blue-blushing bays of the windows facing into the interior courtyard: a steady trill of orange-gray-blue-gray-orange-gray-blue the length of the entire corridor (the intervening orange rectangles rising infinitesimally by the moment with the setting sun). The respective sun-facing corridors of the building could grow quite warm early and late in the day (there are no artificial temperature controls anywhere in the structure, and all the light is natural), but curiously, at blazing midday, when there are hardly any shadows at all, the whole space on both sides an aquarium of seemingly undifferentiated light, the corridors are remarkably cool, thanks to the gleaming corrugated slanted tin roofs. The point is, the piece is changing all the time—gloomings and gleamings, gutterings and glow, floating from one vantage to another with the passing day—a meticulously thought out mechanism, as it were, for occasioning heightened attention. Attention, which—just look out through those windows!—one was being invited to train out onto the whole rest of the wide, wide world: Just look at what the light was doing with those clouds, or for that matter to that otherwise undistinguished stand of sagebrush over there.

More so it seemed to me than with earlier Irwin pieces, however, there was with this one a heightened sense of mortality, and not just

THERE WAS A SUDDEN HUSHED SPLENDOR TO THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE: AN IN- HELD BREATH.

View of the entry
courtyard of *untitled*
(*dawn to dusk*),
2016.

because Irwin himself is doubtlessly entering his own sunset years. Dawn to dusk, indeed. The center of the interior courtyard, as I say, had gone through countless iterations (at one point Irwin even thought of replacing the infirmary with a white cube space for displaying some of his own earlier pieces from the '60s), but in the end (and it was really only during the last several months), on a drive through Washington state, Irwin had happened upon a stand of orangeish-brown rust-colored volcanic basalt columns (natural pentagonal and hexagonal stone plinths jammed together and rising majestically, Devil's-Towerlike, into the sky). Whereupon he'd traced out a 20-foot square of the things and asked the good folks at Chinati to figure out some way of hauling the whole combine over to their site. There, and only in recent weeks, with the help of his regular stone guy, the consummate Laddie Flock, Irwin and the rest of his crew reinstalled the towering plinths into a compact monolith, or rather (technically) polyolith, rising mute like some mysteriously anonymous monument—talk about a sense of occasion—in the middle of the courtyard which he now overspread with a wispy shimmer of low thin Blue Grama wild grasses and eight Palo Verde trees, four on each side of the courtyard. As it happened, on the far interior side of the polyolith—invisible from the street, but quite striking when one ambled about the geometrically arrayed, low Corten-girdled walking paths—Irwin had strikingly left a sole stone plinth spread horizontal along the ground: a fallen totem.

Which was the thing I happened to be looking at, having just arrived the day before the official opening and headed right over, when one of the Chinati folk came and informed me that Irwin himself would not be coming for the inaugural festivities: Back in San Diego, the night before, he'd collapsed and been rushed to the hospital, in as yet indeterminate but possibly quite serious condition. They thought it might have been a stroke.

Damn Irwin: He positively hates it when I free-associate like this (through the coming on 40 years of our friendship, much of our relationship has devolved to our looking at some common object and my saying "That reminds me of..." and his vesuviating, "Can't you just shut the fuck up about what it reminds you of and simply experience the thing, for once, plain and direct!?!"), but what was I supposed to do, gazing on that fallen plinth?

Even though he never did make it to the opening, things weren't as dire as all that: His dramatically lurching bouts of vertigo and vomiting turned out to have been caused not so much by the exhaustion of the prior months of frenzied activity (and for that matter the months before that, 2016 being one of his most prolific years ever, with other major installations at both Dia Beacon and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.), but rather by some kind of inner-ear disruption.

Had Irwin experienced any sudden loud noises recently, his doctor



asked him, once he'd stabilized a bit. And, turns out, he had. One evening a few nights earlier, back in Marfa, he'd been walking in the alley between his hotel and the gas station convenience mart next door (on the prowl, as ever, I'd bet you, for his perennial cup of Coca-Cola, the syrup perfectly calibrated, the ice crushed just so) when not more than five feet in front of him a tremendous lightning bolt had slammed crashingly to earth. Might that have had anything to do with it, Irwin now wondered. Um, yeah, replied the doctor, self-evidently.

Not to worry, though: Steadily on the mend now, Irwin will be back to check things out in Marfa sometime in the coming months. Meanwhile, now that I'm back home as well, I wake up and find myself noticing the uncanny blush of dawn in the corner of my shade-darkened bedroom, and the rainbowlike arc of color reflected somehow off something, already decomposing, and now that sudden spear of light stabbing along the ceiling, slowly widening, and it's all, all of it, so heartrendingly beautiful, and so very, very present: a gift. MP