

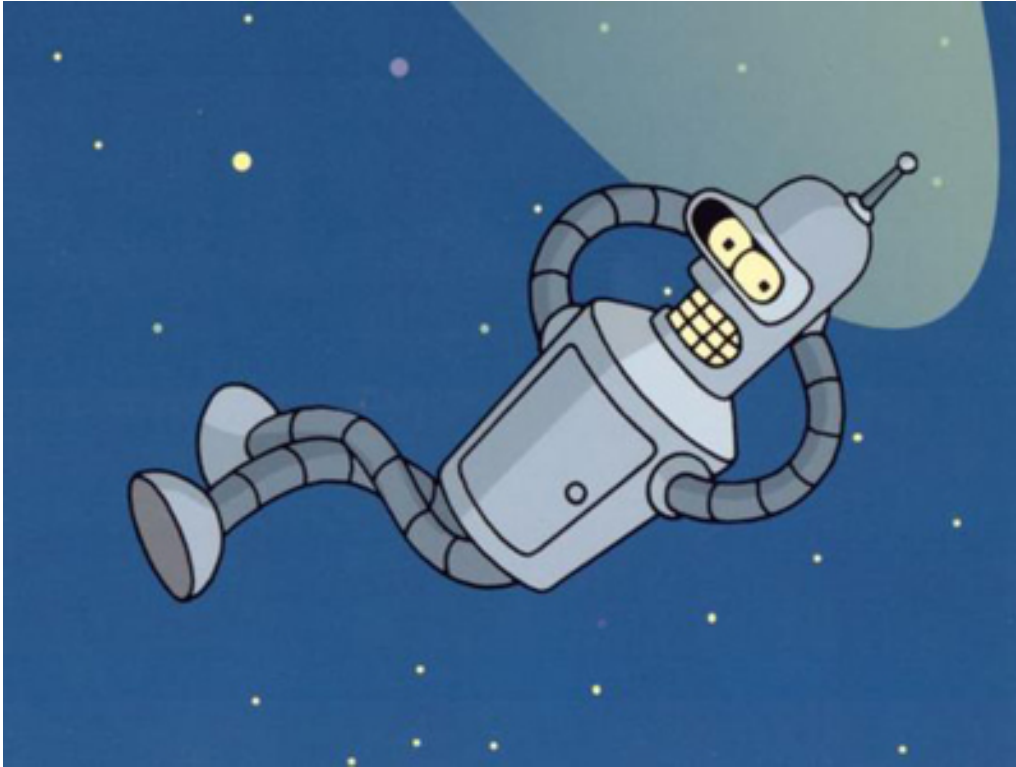
The Highlights - The Voodoo of Robert Irwin

"The coldest bodies warm with opposition; the hardest sparkle in collision." -Junius

Robert Irwin recently snuck into New York City and installed one damn good art show. It may have slipped under the critical radar of some, but oh well. It seems to me that Irwin has always played with the contrasts of a bang and a whisper, or soft bangs and big whispers. So perhaps it should have been no surprise that *Red Drawing*, *White Drawing*, *Black Painting* was loud, gaudy, enormous, quiet, transcendent, and infinitesimal all at once.



Drawing of front room in gallery.
Image courtesy Jason Tomme



Android in outer space from *Futurama*.

At the 22nd Street Pace Wildenstein gallery, Irwin divided the giant space into two rooms, housing two similar but contrasting installations. Walking into the space, you are first confronted by the white light from a huge constructed wall nearly the width of the room, adorned with a jagged, non-repeating pattern of dozens of cool white fluorescent lights. In one of Irwin's signature moves, each fluorescent tube is doctored by a thin strip of translucent film, partially veiling the light and changing the dispersion. The effect is subtle but significant. This is the first of two "drawings" you encounter in the space.

In this same room, serving as a foil or a reset to the lights, hangs a large, vertically rectangular, black, glossy painting (polyurethane on aluminum). Technically, the painting appears to be *perfect*, conjuring up thoughts of industry and craft. I couldn't help thinking of this "painting" (the musing quotation marks here I imagine to be Irwin's own, same for the "drawings" in the show.) in more ominous terms. The idea of an android painting, in terms of both its maker and its presence, stuck in my head. An ominous beauty, it's also worth noting that this painting creates a very attractive black hole in the space, sucking in then spewing out the light, and you.

Behind the wall of lights is a second large room, where a new wall of red - colored fluorescent lights reveals itself. Directly across from this glowing wall, to your back, hang two additional big square black hole android paintings. In this room, the entire show clicks, becoming a performance of contrast, where you are immersed in a completely different field

of energy, light, void, color (the red - glow of digital alarm clock numbers, to me), and dare I say emotion?



Digital alarm clock numbers on an iPhone.

Well, yes. Because here's the rub: Irwin's work *is* emotional. Not in a wearing-it-on-your-sleeve kind of way, but in a deeper, better, between-the-legs-and-buried-in-the-pants kind of way. The location of this emotion (or let's say "voodoo" if you're squeamish) needn't be pegged on the intent, but rather on the effect - an interesting by-product of Irwin's spatial and mechanical tinkering. The result, when confronted with an awesome Irwin, is that the perceptual duties of the mind and body sway between the poles of *exile and exuberance*.

At first, this wild swing takes a toll on those delicate sensors of the body and brain, and gives little chance for the gut to get a grip. Eventually however, it does get a grip, stands up and tells you what it's thinking. Which is another way of telling you how *you* feel.

On this day, among other things, it's saying that it's okay to really dig an artwork, an artist, fluorescent light bulbs as art objects (don't fight it), or even a gallery space in Chelsea for a few minutes. And when the room asks, 'Would you like to spend some quality time together?' You of course say, ahem, 'Yes!' Gasp... Dude, that's emotional affirmation. Voodooism at its finest.



The Beach at Palavas, Gustav Courbet.



Skate boarder Christian Hasoi.
Photo by Jason Oliva.

These variables of contrast, this shift, and this 'Yes' are made palpable by simply entering and reentering these two rooms (as many times as you'd like). It reminded me of sliding in and out of the ocean. The analogy is passable, I think, because once the body is immersed in one of those volumes (dry body into water, wet body into air) there is that certain shock or relief of entering, followed by an eventual acclimation.

My acclimation enabled all sorts of sensitive musings about energy, color, edges, Flavin, Kubrick, Irwin, digital alarm clocks, New York, L.A., Las Vegas, outer space, inner space, winning, losing, longevity of an artist, mojo, death, giant rooms in Chelsea, the desk guy's bullshit attitude but great hair, power supplies, friends, installation crews, ominous android paintings, the ocean. And of course musings about...nothing at all.

It also allowed me to quietly watch a group of enthused teenage skate kids try to take a sweet photo of each other standing triumphantly in the space. My guess is that the sweet photo was a harder take than they anticipated, but they looked f-in' great tryin'.

In short, a room like this allows you to wander and be immersed in the discoveries of both you *and* the artist. And beyond the gallery, it allows you to continue to take part in discovery - any will do - as you walk a little slower, waiting for your eyes to adjust.

Here's another voodoo quote I came across:

"The luster of diamonds is invigorated by the interposition of darker bodies; the lights of a picture are created by the shades; the highest pleasure which nature has indulged to sensitive perception is that of rest after fatigue."

-Samuel Johnson