

ARTFORUM

Robert Irwin

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street
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In 1970, Robert Irwin quit his studio and made for the Mojave. Abjuring the canvas's obdurate frame and the Rorschachability of abstract gesture, the erstwhile painter vowed to create work in response, whether to a particular room or a sight line in the desert. None of the resulting site-generated projects were sold and, until now, none lasted longer than an exhibition's run.

Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977, originally created for the artist's 1977 retrospective, has been reinstalled as the museum's tenure on Madison Avenue wanes. A prelude to Irwin's still nascent post-studio practice, this installation, made specifically for the Whitney's beetling fourth floor, parsed the architecture of a gallery criticized for hedging the art it houses. Its conceit is simple and, like Breuer's design, structurally transparent. A white scrim, plumb and weighted with a three-inch black band, bisects the room lengthwise, descending twelve feet from the ceiling's open grid to rest at roughly eye level. Its polyester plane extends from the bay of Breuer's iconic inside-outside window (the space's only) to the center of the opposing wall. At either end, its subtending band forks into a painted black strip that traces the contours of the gallery's four walls, which are finished in either white or blached gray.

At once limpid and opaque, the scrim accords material presence to light. Its diagonal recession into space, coupled with the ceiling's parallel thrust, transforms the gallery into a schema of Renaissance perspective: a mapping of space onto space itself. Viewed along its surface, the scrim appears solid, as if Richard Serra's *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy*, 1969–71, had been made to hover. Seen straight on, it renders the space behind in humid smudge while casting the room's peripheral details—a wall's warp or a corner's lurch—in sharp relief. Its material austerity imbues subtle spatial inflections with dramatic charge: As the light fades the room's gray scale tinges with rheumy yellows; as the body shifts shadows are cast by a wall's pock. Though pitched at epic scale, Irwin's intervention achieves an exquisite sort of understatement, its existence a plea for us to pause, linger, and actively look.

— Courtney Fiske



Robert Irwin, *Scrim Veil—Black Rectangle—Natural Light*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1977, cloth, metal, and wood, 12' x 114' x 49".

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