

Robert Irwin's *Primal Palm Garden*: False Perceptions and a  
Tree's Role in Peddling Los Angeles

(working title)

This document serves as the thesis proposal for myself, John Aaron Katzeman, a senior in the Honors Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I am an art history major who is also working toward a certificate in environmental studies. The content of this thesis will be based on traditional academic research standards, specifically focused on California artist Robert Irwin's *Primal Palm Garden* (2010) installation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). This research thesis will be completed in the spring 2018 semester.

*Primal Palm Garden* is located on the campus of LACMA and is one of Irwin's site-conditional landscape projects. It consists of a rotating collection of species of palms, cycads, and ferns spread throughout the museum's outdoor walkways. Irwin was initially drawn to the idea of the palm as a representational symbol of Los Angeles, as well as its importance as a prehistoric species and, therefore, its connection to the La Brea Tar Pits located next to the museum. He traveled extensively, searching for the right combination of plants from brokers, collectors, and growers. Irwin worked with the landscape architect Paul Comstock on the project to address logistical challenges, such as the fact that the "garden" is virtually directly above the museum's underground parking garage. The installation was commissioned by Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of LACMA. Govan was previously the director of the Dia Art Foundation, an organization which primarily collects and maintains a large number of significant site-specific art and land artists.

Irwin does not talk much about any environmental concerns regarding his landscape projects. It can be argued that he is primarily focused on aesthetic appreciation of natural materials without taking into consideration the actual harmfulness or impact these materials have on the land. As an artist who has repeatedly used natural materials as his medium, it is dangerous to assume all natural materials can be judged solely by their aesthetic qualities; instead, it is important to take into consideration the environmental effects of materials used. However, Irwin has often skirted this issue, choosing instead to focus solely on the aesthetic perceptions of the materials he uses.

This thesis will address this view of Irwin's and breakdown the environmental importance of *Primal Palm Garden's* materiality. It will focus on contemporary environmental issues related to the palm in Los Angeles and compare how other artists are addressing these concerns compared to Irwin. It will also consider the palm's role in defining Los Angeles as a supposed desert climate and how the danger of perpetuating this idea undermines the city's real historical water issues.

At a time when politicians and the general public are becoming increasingly aware of the palm's issues, including its need for water, lack of shade provided, and little to no food and bark use, why does Irwin choose to import more to the city? Given the palm's non-nativeness, its confusing history, and current environmental awareness, how can Irwin defend using the palm under his own definition of "site-conditional" art? How is *Primal Palm Garden* truly site-conditional to Los Angeles if the plants are not indigenous? Is it dangerous for introduced species to become symbolic of an area? As a museum, has LACMA missed a prime educational opportunity by not breaking this stigma of the palm? This thesis will tackle these questions at

this important historical turning point for Los Angeles' environmental challenges and its future symbolic identity.

### **Background Information**

Robert Irwin is an American artist who has spent the majority of his personal life and professional career in Southern California. He was born in 1928 in Long Beach, California, and studied at the Otis Art Institute, the Jepson Art Institute, and the Chouinard Art Institute, all located in Los Angeles. Irwin began his career as an abstract painter. His practice eventually led to him questioning the physical limits of the canvas, and he began creating sculptural hanging works which reflected light in a way that changed the boundaries of the work depending on one's viewing angle.

Irwin was a pioneer in the burgeoning California Light and Space movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The movement consisted of a group of artists whose work was generally concerned with how distinct shapes and altered use of light could affect both the surrounding environment and perception of the viewer. The theoretical underpinnings of this movement were translated into Irwin's entire practice, which began to transition its focus away from individual "pieces" of art and more toward site-conditional work. He gave up his traditional studio-based profession in 1970 to focus primarily on creating installations which played with viewers' sense of perception and space. These early installation works often included strategically placed scrim which would altar the experience of a particular place. A primary example of these works was Irwin's *Scrim veil-Black rectangle-Natural light* (1977), exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This piece was designed and made specifically for the Whitney's fourth-floor gallery of their previous Marcel Breuer-designed location, which featured a large window and plenty of natural

light. The piece consists of only the empty gallery, a black rectangular line painted above eye-level around the gallery's walls, and a scrim that hangs from the ceiling and runs the entire width of the gallery. While the materials were stable and non-changing, the light pouring through the window constantly altered the piece, while its scale allowed visitors to walk around and experience it from multiple perspectives.

With works like this, Irwin helped define the idea of site-specific art, a concept which was brought to the attention of the contemporary art world with the Land Art movement. Land Art uses the natural landscape to create site-specific structures, art forms, and sculptures. It emerged from the development of Conceptualism and Minimalism and the desire to de-commodify the art market. Although Irwin's earlier studio-based work and first installations involving scrim could not be defined within the scope of Land Art, it can be argued that his later landscape projects (including *Primal Palm Garden*) can. Since around 1980, Irwin has made more of a concerted effort in focusing his time and energy on larger installations and landscape projects. Irwin's work has progressed to the point of nearly pure theory, and he has spent much of the past 30 years designing plans and installations for projects which never came to fruition. Over the course of Irwin's career, he has received numerous prestigious awards and recognitions, such as the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1976 and the MacArthur Fellowship in 1984.

The palm tree, although now ubiquitous in the minds of most when thinking about Southern California, has a questionable history related to the area. Only one species, the *Washingtonia filifera*, is native to Southern California, but its natural habit is limited to areas far inland in comparison to Los Angeles, such as Joshua Tree and the Mojave Desert. And, although located in these desert landscapes, the *Washingtonia filifera* is still a water intensive plant,

needing oases such as springs and streams to survive.

The palm's symbolic domination of Los Angeles' visual identity began with Spanish missionaries who brought palm species from far away to the area where the city now stands today, citing biblical references for the plant's importance. The Victorian era's fascination fetish for the "exotic" at the turn of the 20th century continued the planting of palms, which was meant to make Los Angeles a more easily accessible version of far away lands, both tropical and desert. However, it was not until a planned planting effort before the 1932 Olympics that over 40,000 palms were systematically added to the city. Since then, the palm's reputation has been cemented into Los Angeles culture. The majority of those same palm trees planted for the 1932 Olympics are still alive, yet some have already begun dying. The city will soon face a difficult choice that could alter the future identity of Los Angeles: replant the palms despite their environmental issues or opt for more environmentally-friendly indigenous species.

### **Goal of the Study**

This thesis will situate *Primal Palm Garden* in Irwin's own oeuvre and consider the piece's ramifications in the larger representation of Los Angeles as an "exotic" desert location. It will rely on both art historical classifications and environmental science. The study will essentially focus on a few distinct but overlapping topics: Irwin's career as an artist, the progression that led him to give up painting and take up natural materials to create large landscape installations, the site-specificity of *Primal Palm Garden*, the historical relationship between the palm and Los Angeles, Irwin's focus on aesthetic appreciation versus environmental concerns, and the past and present environmental concerns of Los Angeles, specifically revolving around water and temperature.

The thesis will provide background information on Irwin's career path as an artist, starting with his abstract paintings and continuing to his more sculptural practice inspired by the Light and Space movement, of which he was a primary figure. It will then explain the conceptual development that led to his landscape projects, which were still inspired by his past work's desire to alter perception. Within his landscape projects, the thesis will briefly touch on a few, including the *Two Running Violet V Forms* (1983) and the Getty Center's *Central Garden* (1997), using them as past references to help explain Irwin's theoretical process that led to *Primal Palm Garden*.

The thesis will then focus on *Primal Palm Garden* itself, classifying it within the realm of site-specific art and considering its potential role as environmental art. I will be using works by other artists within these areas to compare to *Primal Palm Garden*, as well as Irwin's own writings, to best situate the work within a larger classification system. Does Irwin want the work to be part of these classifications? Could the critical dialogue and public programming surrounding *Primal Palm Garden* change its meaning to the public? Should it? Some comparable historical works to *Primal Palm Garden* include Alan Sonfist's *Time Landscape* (1978) and Josephy Beuy's *7000 Oaks* (1982). By comparing these works, Irwin's goals can be more easily defined and better understood in a wider art historical context.

The thesis will continue to breakdown the piece, discussing the landscape architecture planning and reasons behind the different palm species used. It will delve into the historical importance of the palm on the cultural psyche of Southern California as a whole, discussing its nativeness and discovering its true role in the history of Los Angeles' development. What does it mean for Irwin to continue to use these trees now despite the awareness of their environmental

ramifications? How does *Primal Palm Garden* continue to perpetuate the idea of Los Angeles as a desert instead of addressing its water issues and historical “water wars”?

Irwin insists *Primal Palm Garden* is site-conditional to LACMA. He uses a few arguments to hold up this proposition, specifically referencing the nearby La Brea Tar Pits and their “primal-ness,” an idea that relates to the many species of palms used by Irwin. A corresponding light work by Irwin at LACMA entitled *Miracle Mile* directly references the museum's campus, its location on Wilshire Boulevard, and *Primal Palm Garden* itself. This work is more symbolic of Irwin's earlier Light and Space work. On LACMA's campus, the piece is also juxtaposed with Chris Burden's *Urban Light*, a sculpture featuring old lampposts from around Southern California at the first half of the 20th century. The similarities between *Urban Light* and *Primal Palm Garden* reinforce the idea of the palm trees as sculpture. Irwin uses all of these as a way to explain how *Primal Palm Garden* is site-conditional to LACMA's campus; however, he does not fully consider the nativeness of the species, which would argue that the piece is not naturally “conditioned” to the area.

By touching on all of these topics, a comprehensive understanding of *Primal Palm Garden* within Irwin's own historical work and theories can be reached, as well as a more critical response to the piece's materiality and the lack of awareness placed on environmental issues at a time when they are arguably most important.

### **Significance of the Study**

Robert Irwin is a prominent contemporary artist. He has been involved in many important art movements and theoretical developments, including the Light and Space movement and site-specific art. Irwin's *Primal Palm Garden* is the most materially paired-down work of his, while

also representing a conclusion of his entire career's philosophical developments. By examining and studying this specific work, the historical representational history of California as an "exotic" land can be broken down and reassessed.

*Primal Palm Garden* is the quintessential result of over 50 years of Irwin's career. However, critique of Irwin's work normally focuses on the theory behind the creation of the work, usually based on Light and Space conceptions. This thesis will touch on that but will mainly veer into understanding the material source used in the piece and its subconscious importance, as well as its supposed site-specificity.

Irwin specifically chose palms as his medium for his installation commission at LACMA while, at the same time, government officials are beginning to realize the negative impact of palms on the city and "decommissioning" them throughout the city. Instead of replanting palms, city officials are opting for native options that also provide more shade, need less water, and capture more carbon monoxide from the air such as oaks and sycamores. Arguably the most important environmental consideration regarding palms is their need for vast quantities of water since Southern California as a whole is often in the midst of water-rationing droughts.

This thesis will address Irwin's lack of focus regarding environmental issues in his work, as well as his somewhat late entry into the category of Land Art in comparison with the development of the movement and its most significant works. This thesis will also look at the history of environmental art and how artists focused their work around specific topics in comparison to Irwin's lack of interest in expressing any outright political or environmentally-conscious thinking regarding his work.

## **Methodology**

As a recipient of UH Mānoa's Presidential Scholar, I was awarded a one-time \$2,000 travel grant. I used this grant money to travel to San Diego and Los Angeles to view multiple site-specific works by Irwin and make contacts for future reference during the duration of my research. I was able to interview knowledgeable figures and collect numerous books necessary for the literature review and general research.

While in California, I visited Irwin's old studio location in Venice, where he made one of his first "site-conditional" pieces in the outside archway. I also visited LACMA, where I obtained a rare book of Irwin's own writings and saw one of his early paintings, *Miracle Mile*, and *Primal Palm Garden*. I spoke with the director of LACMA Michael Govan, who personally commissioned Irwin to make *Primal Palm Garden*. Govan spoke to me about the rotation of palms and how Irwin decided on which species to use. He gave me his personal email to contact him in the future about any important matters. I also visited the La Brea Tar Pits, which inspired *Primal Palm Garden* and are located right next to LACMA's campus.

At the Getty Center in Los Angeles, I took a tour of Irwin's *Central Garden*. The tour was an hour long and included the history of the piece, how Irwin and the architect for the building disagreed about the garden, and how Irwin meant for the piece to be experienced.

At the University of California San Diego, I met with Mary Beebe, the director of the school's Stuart Collection. Beebe was the one who commissioned Irwin to make *Two Running Violet V Forms*, one of his first landscape projects and an early example of his transition from his Light and Space origins into installation and land art. Beebe gave me first-hand insight into the history of the piece, including how Irwin initially decided on its location. She gave me two relevant books on Irwin, as well as the contact information for Mark Quint, who has long been

Irwin's gallery representative in San Diego.

Since returning, I have been put in touch with Yanet Martinez, LACMA's landscape designer who worked very closely with Irwin on *Primal Palm Garden*. I have also found Jennifer Zell's graduate thesis for landscape architecture at Louisiana State University which focuses primarily on Irwin's *Central Garden*. Zell also wrote an article on *Primal Palm Garden* in *Landscape Architecture Magazine*. I plan on getting in touch with her in the near future.

During the fall 2017 semester at UH Mānoa, I will be taking the Art Historical Methodologies class. Not only is this class a requirement for all art history majors, it will also directly help my research methods during the time period when I will be doing most of the research and writing of this thesis.

This research will necessitate a multidisciplinary approach. It will be mandatory to have a comprehensive understanding of modern and contemporary art history, especially important theories of minimalism, sculpture, site-specific art, land art, environmental art, and the Light and Space movement. This thesis will include a monographic overview of Irwin's career that leads into a critical discussion of *Primal Palm Garden*'s site-specificity and the many ways the palm tree is a confusing symbol of Los Angeles' global image and how it manifests in the both the past and current environmental discussions regarding the city.

While an art historical approach is critical for researching and writing about *Primal Palm Garden*, an anthropological approach is also necessary to fully comprehend the history of the palm tree and its varying environmental effects. I have taken previous anthropology classes, such as Introduction to Cultural Anthropology and Ecological Anthropology, that will help guide me in this aspect of the thesis.

As an environmental studies student, I have taken numerous classes that have provided me with the background knowledge to understand complex systems thinking and analysis regarding environmental issues, including Introduction to Environmental Studies, Oceanography: Global Environmental Change, Geology: The Natural Environment, and Biology: Energy in Living Systems.

The first-hand experiences of Irwin's work, combined with my background in art history and environmental studies and the following literature review, will provide the requisite skills and knowledge to fully consider every aspect of the proposed goals of this study.

### **Literature Review**

A deep understanding of Irwin's oeuvre and writings will be necessary in order to fully comprehend and decode *Primal Palm Garden*. I have already obtained multiple important books, including *Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, *Notes Toward a Conditional Art*, *Landmarks: Sculpture Commissions for the Stuart Collection at the University of California San Diego*, and *Seeing is Forgetting: The Name of the Thing One Sees, A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin*. These books include Irwin's own writings over the course of his career, allowing readers to follow the progression of his working philosophy.

While these are specific books on Irwin's career, it will also be important to have a historical grounding of contemporary art as a whole, the Land Art movement, and site-specific art.

Important texts regarding site-specificity and environmental art include Miwon Kwon's *One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity*, Jeffrey Kastner's *Nature (Documents of Contemporary Art)* and *Land and Environmental Art*, Linda Weintraub's *To Life!: Eco Art in*

*Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet*, and Andres Brown's *Art and Ecology Now*, Lucy Lippard's *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, T.J. Demos' *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Amanda Boetzkes' *The Ethics of Earth Art*, James Nisbet's *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, and John Beardsley's *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, among others. Texts such as Kwon's *One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity* can help deconstruct the meaning of Irwin's insistence of *Primal Palm Garden* being site-conditional to Los Angeles, while the other books can help frame Irwin's work in the larger sphere of contemporary environmental art and how other artists are addressing certain issues.

It will also be necessary to complete a literature review on the environmental history of Los Angeles and its climate, native species, and past water issues. Some important texts covering these topics include Jared Farmer's *Trees in Paradise: A California History* and Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water*, as well as recent news articles which have helped spread environmental awareness to the general public.

### **Mentor and Committee**

My mentor for this thesis will be Jaimey Hamilton Faris, an associate professor in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Department of Art and Art History. Hamilton Faris teaches critical theory and the history of contemporary art. Her research centers around issues of globalization, capitalism, and climate change.

I also plan on asking Gaye Chan to be a committee member for my thesis. Chan is currently the chair of UH Mānoa's Department of Art and Art History. She is a photographer and conceptual artist whose work includes collaborative anti-capitalist projects such as Eating in

Public. She is also involved with Downwind Productions, which examined Waikiki's process of change from its pre-colonial history into its current status as a tourist mecca. This thinking will help me fully deconstruct the importance of the palm tree on both the historical and cultural landscape of Southern California, especially considering how the *Washingtonia filifera* was utilized by native peoples compared to the general uselessness of Los Angeles' current crop of palms that now decorate the city.

While this research is completely independent of both Hamilton Faris and Chan's personal work, the topic is well within their respective individual expertise.

### **Timetable**

This thesis will be worked on over the course of the 2017-2018 school year. A rough draft will be completed around January, while the paper will be officially done in April. Through the Honors Department's required courses, including Honors 494 and Honors 496, a weekly plan will be established at the beginning of the fall 2017 semester. By following this timeline, progress on thesis will be consistent and not rushed. In the spring 2018 semester, the thesis will be finished and presented at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Undergraduate Spring Showcase.

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Also included is information on site preparation, locating quality plants, correct timing for planting, the planting process, root development, plant establishment, and methods for care after planting. The appendices discuss common problems of recently planted trees, watering and care, and development of planting specifications. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon.Â To ask other readers questions about Principles and Practice of Planting Trees and Shrubs, please sign up. Be the first to ask a question about Principles and Practice of Planting Trees and Shrubs. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia.