


Exhibition guide
Robert Indiana
The Sweet Mystery
Procuratie Vecchie
Piazza S.Marco, Venezia
20.4-24.11.2024

English edition
Curated by
Matthew Lyons
Organised by
Yorkshire Sculpture Park 
Supported by
The Robert Indiana Legacy Initiative


La Biennale di Venezia

60. Esposizione
Internazionale
d'Arte
Eventi Collaterali

ROBERT INDIANA



Robert Indiana at his Coenties Slip studio.
Image courtesy of
The Robert Indiana Legacy Initiative.
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THE SWEET MYSTERY

“My art is a disciplined high dive—high
soar, simultaneous & polychromous,
an exaltation of the verbal-visual ...
my dialogue.”

—Robert Indiana

Robert Indiana: The Sweet Mystery marks one of the most significant presentations in Italy to date of the work of celebrated artist Robert Indiana (1928-2018), who first emerged as a key figure in the Pop art movement. Indiana had an itinerant childhood in the American Midwest during the Great Depression; he often stated that he lived in 21 different homes by the time he was 17. After high school, he enlisted for military service, knowing that the GI Bill would afford him a higher education afterward. He began his art studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, which led to a summer at Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in Maine and further studies at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

In 1954, the artist returned from Europe and began the pursuit of an artistic career in New York, still using the name given to him by his adoptive parents, Robert Clark. Two years later, while Indiana was working at an art supply store, a chance encounter with Ellsworth Kelly altered the personal and professional trajectory of his young life. He soon found himself living in a loft on Coenties Slip, a forgotten pocket of lower Manhattan where the remains of a bustling maritime past rubbed up against the burgeoning financial sector. With little funds for art materials, Indiana began creating sculptures (assemblages) using the detritus of the seaport activity around him, while also developing his two-dimensional pictorial language in dialogue with a close-knit community of artist-neighbors including Kelly and other vanguards such as Agnes Martin, James Rosenquist, Lenore Tawney, and Jack Youngerman. In an act of reinvention during this fervent time, the artist renamed himself after his home state of Indiana. By the early 1960s, Indiana was producing bold canvases arranged with pure geometries, text, and numerals in unmodulated color, responding to the visual culture of an increasingly pervasive consumerism. “I am an American painter of signs charting the course,” he said.

Embedded with personal memories and biographical details, his works point to universal questions about the human condition and faith in a turbulent time of great socio-political struggle, while also processing issues of queer identity and the self.

Indiana’s particular form of Pop art extends a line of American radicalism with roots in the transcendentalists of the nineteenth century and the formal experimentation of the modernists, especially from the world of literature. Indiana engaged with the explorations between the self, the soul, and the natural world found in the writings of Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. Gertrude Stein’s circular language experiments were an everlasting influence, and Hart Crane, the tragically short-lived poet of the 1920s, provided a model for synthesizing the trajectory of the nation and the rapid changes brought in with the twentieth century from a queer perspective.

In his statement about the painting from which this exhibition takes its name, Indiana wrote:

“The Sweet Mystery: life and death.
The hereness and nonhereness. The
words: among my first cautious uses
of them on canvas, here muted and
restrained. THE SWEET MYSTERY: song
breaking through the darkness.”

Through a focused selection of works spanning more than sixty years of artistic output, this exhibition navigates Indiana’s use of self-referentiality to delve into profound metaphysical questions about the nature of life and frames Indiana for new audiences. It offers a portal to contemplate his distinctive and transcendental Pop perspective as we confront our own pressing existential dilemmas in this century.

ROOM 1

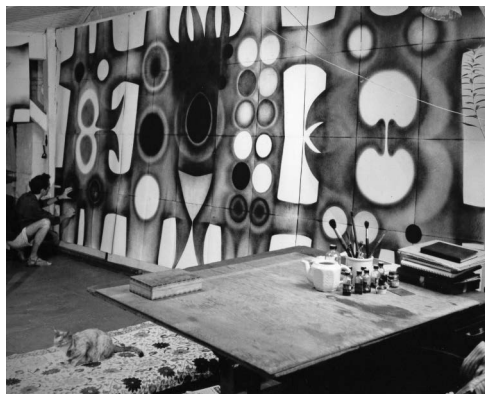
Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
 Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
 The City's fiery parcels all undone,
 Already snow submerges an iron year...

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
 Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming
 sod,
 Unto us lowliest sometime sweep,
 descend
 And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

—Hart Crane, *The Bridge*

From the window of his loft in lower Manhattan, Robert Indiana could see the Brooklyn Bridge rising over the low buildings at the edge of the seaport by the East River. Constructed between 1869 and 1883, the first of the bridges to connect the island to the borough of Brooklyn was the longest suspension bridge in the world at the time of its completion. Living in its shadow in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Indiana assembled a collective of works of art that resonated with him, at this early stage of his artistic life, in and about this very particular place. He knew Joseph Stella's canvases of the 1920s, in which the bridge was featured as a dynamic mass of Futurist vectors and the rush of modern urban life. Indiana's own representations of the bridge impart a cathedral-like sense of height and skyward impulse with its gothic arches surrounded by beaming light. Indiana also knew that major nineteenth century authors such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville had written about this terrain.

Although it predates the bridge itself, Whitman's celebrated poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" centers on the same landscape where the shorelines of Brooklyn and Manhattan are closest, just before the East River opens up to the harbor. Swept up by a sense of interconnectedness in this dynamic geography, Whitman wrote, "The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far away, / The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them, / The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others." Melville described his sense that all human-made pathways lead eventually to water, saying of this universal attraction, "There is magic in it." In the 1920s the poet Hart Crane wrote his masterpiece *The Bridge* riffing on national myths using this instantly iconic feat of engineering, which he could see also from his window on the Brooklyn side. From the shared sense of spiritual possibility and significance about this site with its potent metaphors for the new age of American industry and infrastructure, Indiana wove these intersections into his own concatenation of artistic influence that remained with him throughout his career.



Indiana working on *Stavrosis* in his studio, ca. 1958

Silver Bridge, 1964/1998
 Oil on canvas
 67 1/2 × 67 1/2 in. (171.4 × 171.4 cm), diamond
 Private collection

Ginkgo, 1960
 Gesso on wood panel
 15 1/2 × 9 in. (39.4 × 22.9 cm)
 Private collection

"I came upon the Ginkgo leaf, which is the tree which grows in the park in front of my loft, and I took it and made it into a—I doubled it and made it into a yin-and-yang form and spent, oh, many months working on a large number of variations of this form.."

— Robert Indiana

In late 1959, Indiana began his first constructions, working with scraps of lumber and found metal objects, and by 1960, was producing his first free-standing sculptures, which he called herms. *Ginkgo* (1960), painted in Gesso on a wood panel, forms a link between his 1959 paintings on plywood and his new assemblage-based sculptures. The work's mirrored Ginkgo leaf design, which Indiana first experimented with in a 1957 series of paintings on paper, was inspired by the Ginkgo trees he saw in Jeannette Park, across from his loft in New York City.

Zenith, 1960
 Gesso and iron on wood
 12 1/2 × 8 3/4 × 4 1/2 in. (31.8 × 22.2 × 11.4 cm)
 Private collection

Zenith (1960) was recorded in Indiana's studio records simply as *Early Piece*, but it was assigned the title *Zenith* sometime prior to its first exhibition in 1984 at the National Museum of American Art in Washington D.C. Given the references to celestial objects in his early constructions and the circular form in the upper half of the sculpture the title is likely meant to suggest an astronomical reading. The zenith is the highest point on the celestial sphere above an individual observer.

Soul, 1960
 Gesso, oil, iron, and iron and wooden wheels
 on wood
 50 1/2 × 16 3/4 × 13 1/2 in.
 (128.3 × 42.6 × 34.3 cm)
 Private collection

"When I was a student at the University of Edinburgh I took a course called Social Philosophy. I cannot remember the instructor's name but it was my most difficult course and I had to do a paper on the soul. And that was my original contribution to the definition of soul. It was my own writing."

— Robert Indiana

Stavrosis (the Greek word for crucifixion), is a 19-foot mural pieced together from 44 sheets of paper. Indiana began *Stavrosis* in January 1958, while he was working for the Rev. James A. Pike at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Among Indiana's duties was proofreading *The History of the Cross* by Norman Laliberté and Edward N. West. It was not the first time the artist undertook a religious subject.

Indiana's crucifixion depicts Christ between the two thieves, varying from the traditional depiction of Christ surrounded by saints. The work is also notable for its incorporation of botanical shapes. These forms were influenced by Ellsworth Kelly and inspired by Indiana's surroundings. The avocado seed shape, inspired by a seed sprouting in his studio, appears in the thief to the right of Christ. The mirrored Ginkgo leaf design, seen in the thief to the left of Christ, was inspired by the Ginkgo trees in Jeannette Park, which were visible from Indiana's loft.

After completing *Stavrosis* the artist changed his name from Robert Clark to Robert Indiana. In a 1978 interview with American historian Barbaralee Diamonstein Indiana explained "It happened at a psychological moment when, after struggling as a student, struggling for my own artistic identification, not for the main identity itself, things were coming together. I could feel that something was going to be happening shortly, and I didn't want to have something nice happen with the burden of a name I didn't like."

ROOM
2

ROOM
2



The Melville Triptych
1962, Oil on canvas

“Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see?—Posted like sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries.”

—Herman Melville,
Moby-Dick, or The Whale

During the time that Indiana lived near the waterfront on Coenties Slip, he went from being an unknown to a celebrated artist, and the centrality of geography, of place to one’s understanding of oneself was key to his artistic development. After all, he renamed himself after his home state and acknowledged his fascination with maps and the “cartographic quality” of his work. On this particular work, he noted “that very wide shape that I used in the triptych, *The Melville Triptych* (1962), to indicate Coenties Slip, I saw every day for eight years and I looked out my window, there it was and, of course, that made it very simple to recognize the straightness of Whitehall and, of course, Corlears Hook in itself in which suggests its own image and, therefore, these things seemed natural to work with.” These angles are also constituent parts of the peace sign, which had just been designed in 1958 as a symbol for the nuclear disarmament movement. The forms in the famed symbol derive from a combination of the semaphore for the letter N and the letter D.

ROOM
3

The Melville Triptych, 1962
Oil on canvas
Triptych, each panel: 60 × 48 in.
(152.4 × 121.9 cm)
Private collection

Indiana first recorded his intention to paint a “Moby Dick trilogy” in a journal entry dated June 5, 1962, where he wrote of stretching the canvases for his painting *The Dietary* (1962) and this triptych. On June 8, 1962, he wrote that he had made the first sketch for what would become the central panel (Coenties Slip). The design of the circular icon—which looks like an inverted letter Y within a circle—was inspired by the geography of Coenties Slip—a street that was divided and ran along both the east and west sides of Jeannette Park before merging into a single street to the north. This iconic image, as a representation of Coenties Slip, first appeared in his 1961 painting *Coenties Slip West*.

In his June 8, 1962, journal entry, Indiana commented on the similarity of this inverted y-shape to Brancusi’s *Torso of a Young Man* (1922). He had seen the sculpture during his first months in Chicago in the fall of 1949, during an exhibition of the Walter and Louise Arensberg Collection at the Art Institute. On June 25, Indiana returned to work on an old sculpture, painting the whole beam black save for two white orbs and rechristened the work *Ahab* (1962), after the fanatical captain of *Moby Dick*. This sculpture was conceived of by Indiana as a pendant to *The Melville Triptych*.

Ahab, 1962, cast 1991
Painted bronze
60 × 11 ¾ × 10 ¾ in.
(152.4 × 29.8 × 26.4 cm)
Edition of eight plus two artist’s proofs

Wall of China, 1960–61
Gesso, oil, and iron on wood
48 × 54 ¾ × 8 in.
(121.9 × 139.1 × 20.3 cm)
Private collection

Wall of China (1960–61), is one of Indiana’s few wall-mounted constructions, along with *Sun and Moon* (1959–60), *Four* (1959–62), *Marine Works* (1960–62), and *Jeanne d’Arc* (1960–62). Like his herms, these works were created from discarded objects found in the streets surrounding his loft in Coenties Slip. A journal entry recorded by the artist dated January 15, 1960, notes that *Wall of China* consists of his old drawing board and pieces of junk discovered around Water Street.

The construction’s title illustrates the multiple references that can be found in Indiana’s individual works, as well as his interest in literature and current events. *Wall of China* evokes the third line of José Garcia Villa’s poem “The Anchored Angel” (“Between, the, wall, of, China, and,”), the Taiwan Straits Crises of the 1950s, when tensions between the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China resulted in armed conflict, and the famous Chinese monument.

Joy, 1961
Oil on canvas
12 × 11 in. (30.5 × 27.9 cm)
Private Collection

Hardrock, 1961
Oil on canvas
24 × 22 in. (61 × 55.9 cm)
Gillian and Simon Salama-Caro, New York

Indiana lived in Coenties Slip, a neighborhood in Lower Manhattan, from 1956–65. There he turned to the local environment for inspiration, sketching marine scenes and taking designs and names on boats as a basis for ideas for his paintings.

Hardrock (1961) is inspired by an inscription on the side of a barge. The painting uses a variant of name Trap Rock, the name of a company whose barges Indiana often watched from the Slip. The star was featured on the funnel (or smokestack) of the tugboat Newport, a boat that Indiana can be seen drawing, in a 1957 photograph by Jack Youngerman.



Robert Clark drawing on a pier, New York, 1957
Photo: Jack Youngerman

ROOM
3

Exploding Numbers, 1964–66

Oil on canvas

Four panels:

1: 12 × 12 in. (30.5 × 30.5 cm)

2: 24 × 24 in. (61 × 61 cm)

3: 36 × 36 in. (91.4 × 91.4 cm)

4: 48 × 48 in. (121.9 × 121.9 cm)

Private collection

“Numbers fill my life. They fill my life even more than love. We are immersed in numbers from the moment we’re born. Love? Love is like the cherry on top of the whipped cream. Our very lives are structured by numbers. Birthdays, age, addresses, money—everywhere you turn, there are numbers. Your shirt has six buttons. The room has four walls.

Numbers surround us. It’s endless. Now you may not be intrigued by this, but look at those who are mathematically inclined. Take the astronomers. How many numbers have the astronomers got? My God, the universe has a veritable sky full of numbers for them. If you happen to feel that love is as equally important as numbers, then you’re an idealist, a dreamer. Everything we do is reckoned by numbers. Every day, every minute of every day—here, look at my wristwatch. Every second is a different number. Numbers are seething around us. Don’t you recognize them?”

— Robert Indiana



Indiana in his studio, in front of the painting, *Exploding Numbers*. Photograph by Hans Namuth/Posthumous digital reproduction from original negative/ Hans Namuth Archive, Center for Creative Photography © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate.

ROOM
4

Eat/Die, 1962

Oil on canvas

Diptych, each panel: 72 × 60 in.

(182.9 × 152.4 cm)

Private collection

Indiana’s *Eat/Die* (1962) fully asserts the power of the written word, as being sufficient unto itself as the subject for a painting.

Eat/Die was conceived of as a “major statement” on the theme of life and death:

“They were done unemotionally on my part. I was not intending “Die” or “Eat” as a command... This is not my intention. They are the briefest forms ... of two thoughts that I wish to deal with. It could have been “Life” and “Death,” but “Eat” and “Die” are more brief and one of the problems in my paintings, and particularly from the emblematic standpoint, I must always find ... that which is less, or that which is least, in length, and in bulk and in everything else. So therefore, “Eat and Die” is a reduction to the absolute minimum of an idea. Certainly not, certainly never intended as commands.”

— Robert Indiana

Eat, 1962, cast 1991

Painted bronze

58 5/8 × 15 × 12 5/8 in. (148.8 × 38.1 × 32 cm)

Edition of eight plus two artist’s proofs

Eat (1962, cast 1991), a painted bronze rendition of Indiana’s herm *Eat* (1962), was first exhibited in *Robert Indiana: Early Sculpture, 1960–1962*, at the Salama-Caro Gallery in London. Indiana considered bronze, along with marble, to be one of the noble materials in the tradition of European sculpture. Because of this, as well as the longevity of the material, the artist had long wanted to turn his herms into bronze. This dream was realized in 1991, when bronze versions of eight of Indiana’s early herms were created

ROOM
4

Womb, 1960–62

Gesso, oil, iron, and iron wheels on wood

45 × 16 3/4 × 16 in. (114.3 × 42.6 × 40.6 cm)

Private collection

Two, 1960–62, cast 1991

Painted bronze

61 1/8 × 18 1/2 × 19 1/2 in. (155.3 × 47 × 49.5 cm)

Edition of eight plus two artist’s proofs

“Two is just my own personal number. My studio that I lived at, the place that I lived at longest of all in New York was at 2 Spring Street on the Bowery, and it does require two for love, and love has been my greatest preoccupation.”

— Robert Indiana

Hole, 1960, cast 1991

Painted bronze

44 3/8 × 18 1/4 × 12 5/8 in.

(112.7 × 46.4 × 32.1 cm)

Edition of eight plus two artist’s proofs

“I started using this wood and these other found objects, the old rusted wheels, because very early on I simply didn’t have money to buy canvas; this seemed like a marvelous natural resource ... and *Hole* (1960), obviously there is a hole in that piece of wood, but I was very, very fond of Samuel Beckett. And in one of Beckett’s books [*Molloy*] the elderly gentleman and his son are bicycling along the English countryside. The bicycle breaks down and the old man sends his son into a little town named Hole. So this commemorates those two situations.”

— Robert Indiana



Robert Indiana in his studio,
Vinalhaven, Maine, 1998

ROOM
5

With limited resources to purchase high-quality art supplies during his years living on Coenties Slip, Indiana developed a sculptural practice using the discarded materials of the maritime industries which were slowly disappearing from the neighborhood.

“As the old warehouses, chandleries, and sail-lofts were demolished to make way for parking lots and skyscrapers, my need for cheap materials to work with was met.”

— Robert Indiana

Indiana used the old wooden beams that the seaport provided to make what he called herms. In ancient Greece, herms were carved-stone signposts dedicated to Hermes, the god of travelers. A herm could mark a crossroads or be placed at the entrance to a private home; they could serve an additional religious function warding off evil. Often featuring a bust of Hermes' head on top, many had male genitalia on the front. Indiana attached metal wheels to the sides, suggesting the winged heels of Hermes. Using found bronze stencils, Indiana adorned them with words and numbers as well as his evolving vocabulary of arrows, semaphore codes, circles, and stars. He described this way of working as an “attempt to be both a painter and a sculptor at the same time, working both mediums into one piece. I think of painting as a feminine object and a statue as a masculine object.” In exhibition contexts, he often paired a painting with a corresponding herm calling them “mates,” which holds both a nautical and sexual meaning.

A related series of columnal works were made from old wooden ship masts. The first series was ringed with short words stenciled in white paint: LOVE, EAT, HUG, DIE. The second series, on view in this gallery, was dedicated to his adoptive parents; the protagonist of Melville's *Moby-Dick* using the novel's famous opening sentence, “Call Me Ishmael”; the new surname he gave himself; the important place names in his life; and a notorious Depression-era gangster from his home state called John Dillinger. Decades later, Indiana added to these pairs of wheels, as on his herms, and bands of gold paint, suggesting an aspect of totemic veneration, as in a reliquary or a Byzantine icon.

Call Me Ishmael, 1964/1998
Gesso, oil, and iron wheels on wood
62 ¾ × 17 × 14 in. (159.4 × 43.2 × 35.6 cm)
Private collection

My Mother, 1964/1998
Gesso, oil, and iron wheels on wood
64 × 16 × 14 in. (162.6 × 40.6 × 35.6 cm)
Private collection

My Father, 1964/1998
Gesso, oil, and iron wheels on wood
70 ¾ × 19 × 18 in. (179.7 × 48.3 × 45.7 cm)
Private collection

Call Me Indiana, 1964/1998
Gesso, oil, and iron wheels on wood
63 ⅝ × 17 × 14 in. (161.6 × 43.2 × 35.6 cm)
Private collection

Dillinger, 1964/1998
Gesso, oil, wood, iron, and iron wheels on wood
75 ½ × 22 ½ × 21 in. (191.8 × 57.2 × 53.3 cm)
Private collection

Bob's Column, 1964/1998
Gesso, oil, and iron wheels on wood
63 × 13 ½ × 13 in. (160 × 34.3 × 33 cm)
Private collection

ROOM
5

In a statement by the artist, Indiana described the origins of his painting *The Sweet Mystery* (1960-62).

The Sweet Mystery came from these things:

1. My first I Ching reading: this occurred early on Coenties Slip with Ellsworth Kelly and his newly arrived friend from the Paris days, the Kentuckian Jack Youngerman, in his first loft on the waterfront which, curiously, was the site of a Chinese laundry at the time of my birth.
2. Yin and Yang: a wish to invest them with a new form.
3. The ginkgo leaf: the new form though of prehistoric Oriental botanic origin, not of a tree, but a fern, which—in the *not humid enough* climate of New York—unable to have normal prehistoric sex, the female specimen throws off a foul-smelling seed as if in anguished protest (sour/sweet *Mystery* with Chatham Square and Chinatown the next El stop away from Hanover Square when the Slip was transversed by the famous snake-curve of the recently vanished Third Avenue Elevated downtown).
4. One year of painting: various mutations of the doubled ginkgo leaf shape—my Yin and Yang—but very Westernly and dangerously in oil on paper, a medium claiming no permanency ... perhaps thinking of myself as a tree casting off leaves at autumn.
5. The cycle: from Spring's Permanent Green Light to Fall's golden leaves on the blue-black asphalt of Jeanette [sic] Park, even up to my own stoop next to the Rincón de España downstairs where a handsome dark-eyed barmaid named Carmen—like my “Mother” worked those eight years I lived above and sent Spanish music welling up the hoist shaft—but never the “Habañera”.
6. Yellow: my color, particularly in its darkened aspects, the browns and earths (my “Father”'s last property in Indiana was on Greasy Creek in Brown County).
7. “Vision binoculaire”: a phrase from Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*, a book I was reading at the time with a friend who, ironically, was destined to commit suicide later while living at 3-5, since the book is fixed on the character of Palinurus.
8. *The Sweet Mystery*: life and death. The hereness and nonhereness.
9. The words: among my first cautious uses of them on canvas, here muted and restrained.
10. *THE SWEET MYSTERY*: song breaking through the darkness.

Artist's statement, first published in McCoubrey, John W., and Robert Indiana. *Robert Indiana*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art and Falcon Press, 1968

In his early years living in New York, Indiana held a day job at an art supply store close to his apartment in Midtown. One day in 1956, Ellsworth Kelly saw a Matisse postcard in the shop window. He entered to purchase it, and the two young men became friends. Soon thereafter, Indiana relocated downtown to Coenties Slip, Kelly joined him, and together they formed their core circle of fellow artists. Drawing, an economical medium, was a regular social activity for the group. For Indiana and Kelly in particular, their drawing sessions became a way for the two to spend more time together, and their attraction soon developed into a romance which lasted several years. The pair sketched scenes in the neighborhood, such as the tugboats docked at the seaport. They drew each other and the organic shapes of the plant life that filled their lofts. Kelly also introduced Indiana to a hard-edge approach to painted forms which endured for the rest of his career. *The Sweet Mystery* was made at a time of heartache as their relationship was coming to a close. Contrasting danger stripes with the pair of mirrored ginkgo forms (Indiana's symbol of “union”), the painting reflects a cautionary tale on the dangers of love.

The Sweet Mystery, 1960-62
Oil on canvas
72 × 60 in. (182.9 × 152.4 cm)
Private collection

God Is a Lily of the Valley, 1961-62
Oil on canvas
60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm)
Sylvio Perlstein, Antwerp

Robert Indiana painted two canvases with the title *God is a Lily of the Valley* (1961-62), this work, and a second version in green. The paintings were inspired by a gospel song Indiana heard late one night on the radio. Although Indiana never could track down the song, the art historian Thomas Crow has identified it as “God Can Do Anything But Fail.”

The Dietary, 1962
Oil on canvas
60 × 48 in. (152.4 × 121.9 cm)
Private collection

The Dietary (1962), and its companion painting *The Eateria* (1962) (not on view), were conceived of as a diptych and were shown together in Indiana's solo debut in 1962 at the Stable Gallery in New York. The works were sold separately that winter to prominent collections. The title of *The Dietary* points to the link between diet, sustenance, and their opposite: Death. The word “die” is repeated in a circular format on alternating sections of black and white, these sudden shifts in tone suggesting a flashing sign or a spinning roulette wheel.

Risk and reward continue as a theme in *The Dietary* where, whether one lands on black or white, everyone lands on «Die» (eventually). Within the outer band of the circle are segments counting from one to eight. The number in this context is a reference to August, the eighth month and the birth month of Indiana's mother Carmen who inspired the duality of eat/die in his work.

“It's personal because as a child during the Depression my mother, my father left my mother, and in order to support herself and myself she opened a restaurant and for several years things like eat signs also were a prominent part of my life...The DIE...it's meant as the other side of the coin. Everybody eats, and everybody enjoys life, and everybody consumes, and very few people ever think about what all this is really leading to.”

— Robert Indiana

Flagellant, 1963/1969
Gesso, oil, iron, and rope on wood
H. 63 in. (160 cm)
Collection of the McNay Art Museum,
Gift of The Tobin Foundation for Theatre Arts
in honor of the close personal friendship
between Robert L. B. Tobin and Robert
Indiana (2019.5)

ROOM
6

ROOM
6

Permit me voyage, love, into your hands...

— Hart Crane, “Voyage”

Before Indiana became synonymous with the word, the second and most-public-to-date appearance of the word love in his oeuvre occurred in the diamond-shaped, 1964 painting *Love Is God*. Indiana was commissioned to create this piece by the collector Larry Aldrich for an exhibition of his private collection he was planning. Aldrich had secured an eighteenth century building in Ridgefield, Connecticut, which Indiana knew had been a Christian Scientist church at one point in its history. Aldrich and Indiana were at a party at Warhol’s Factory when Indiana worked up the courage to propose a new work as he was “a little piqued because he had no Indiana, and I thought he should.” Indiana explained to Aldrich that he had attended Christian Science services in his youth and could make something site-specific especially for Aldrich. In the Book of John, the Bible says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” Plainly decorated Christian Scientist churches have the phrase “God is Love” displayed in gold lettering behind the pulpit, which takes the place of the altar as this denomination is clergyless. Indiana inverted this phrase.

As Indiana experienced what we might now call virality with his *LOVE* image from the late 1960s into the 1970s, he began to pull away from New York City and its art world. By 1978, he had relocated to a small fishing village on an island off the coast of Maine called Vinalhaven, where he lived and worked for the remainder of his life. Only after settling in Vinalhaven did he realize that the painter Marsden Hartley had also stayed on the island. In fact, a building Indiana was using for additional studio space was the very structure Hartley had summered in decades earlier. This instance of coincidence sparked the *Hartley Elegy* series, which riffed on Hartley’s abstract vocabulary and parallels in their biographies. Hartley’s famed 1914 painting *Portrait of a German Officer* commemorated the World War I death of a Prussian lieutenant Karl von Freyburg through color, symbols, and numbers. It has long been interpreted as a symbol of their friendship or possible romance. Indiana takes on Hartley’s abstract forms and patterns and adds place names and dates associated with Hartley and von Freyburgh. The central mandala in *KvF XI (Hartley Elegy)* lists five placenames in which Hartley lived: Lewiston, his birthplace in Maine; New York; Berlin; Vinalhaven; and finally the Maine town in which he died aged 66, Ellsworth. Indiana lived most of his adult life in either New York or Vinalhaven, and the coincidence that Hartley died in a small town that shares the same name as one of Indiana’s great loves, Ellsworth Kelly, must have seemed predestined to him. Thus Hartley became the final member of Indiana’s queer lineage, with the *Hartley Elegies* series totaling 18 paintings made between 1989 and 1994.

Love Is God, 1964

Oil on canvas
68 × 68 in. (172.7 × 172.7 cm), diamond
Private Collection

“For I, as a child, was raised as a Christian Scientist, and the word *LOVE* was indelibly imprinted in the mind... It was in that church, too, that the circle was impressed upon me, as the symbol of life everlasting.... and almost every painting that I have done as Indiana has included the circle.”

— Robert Indiana

Leaves, 1965

Oil on canvas
60 × 50 in. (152.4 × 127 cm)
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio.
Gift of the Tobin Foundation (1999.111)

“Although it [*Leaves*] is a silhouette study of a plant which is right here in my studio, a corn plant or a dracaena, the point of the thing, of course, is that I was leaving Coenties Slip . . .”

— Robert Indiana

Leaves (1965) was the last painting Indiana made in his studio at 25 Coenties Slip, which was facing impending demolition. The painting commemorates, with its central image of a corn plant in Kellyesque blue and green, his “leaving” the neighborhood after ten years and acknowledges the influence of Ellsworth Kelly.



Star of Hope, Vinalhaven, Maine

LOVE, 1966

Oil on canvas
48 × 48 in. (121.9 × 121.9 cm)
McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas.
On loan from the collection of The Tobin Theatre Arts Fund

“..what I’m doing is equating my paintings with my poetry. In other words they are concrete. The *LOVE* is a concrete poem as far as I’m concerned. Just a one word poem. Repeated so endlessly by myself, and it’s a little bit like, shall we say, like Gertrude Stein. Just don’t stop using a word, you see . . . Remember there’s another aspect about love and of course this really comes through in [the poem] “Wherefore the Punctuation of the Heart.” Love is a noun and a verb and so one must decide what my love is. It’s a command, love, and it’s a subject, love. It is an exercise, and grammar is one of my favorite subjects.”

— Robert Indiana

KvF XI (Hartley Elegy), 1989–94

Oil on canvas
85 × 85 in. (215.9 × 215.9 cm), diamond
Private collection

Robert Indiana’s *Hartley Elegies* (1989–94) is a series of 18 paintings inspired by Marsden Hartley’s *War Motif* series, which Hartley executed as a tribute to the young German soldier Karl von Freyburg, who died during World War I and with whom Hartley had a deep friendship. *KvF XI* is one of three paintings in Indiana’s series that employs a grisaille palette. Both Indiana’s *Hartley Elegies* and Hartley’s *War Motif* series explore desire within the context of loss and mourning.

ROOM
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ROOM
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On February 1, 1957, in this loft on Coenties Slip, Robert Indiana typed out a draft of a poem whose first three lines read, "My love, my love has gone to you / Like two faces that cannot but turn / Into each other warm and fierce."

This was one year before he changed his name and seven years before he began experimenting with the motif of the letters L O V E stacked two by two with a titled O. Eventually, love became the theme and image most widely associated with Indiana. The ancient Greeks conceived of many registers of love, including *philia* (friendly affection) and *eros* (desire). The highest form was *agápē*, an unconditional, selfless love. In Biblical contexts, *agápē* is often used to describe the love of God for his people and vice versa. Some of these forms of love and translations of the word are named in *The Ninth Love Cross* (2001).

The initial popularity of the *LOVE* image was contemporaneous with the free love sentiment of the late 1960s, but Indiana's *LOVE* sculptures with their material weight and form signal a deeper spiritual journey through a Pop filter which could be both joyful and righteous. In an interview published in the catalog for this exhibition, AA Bronson recalled that for his collective General Idea, who began producing artworks with the word AIDS in Indiana's stacked manner at the height of the epidemic, "LOVE is about tenderness, compassion, love of humankind." This *agápē* form of love could also be manifest in Indiana's engagement with social justice, from his condemnation of racist violence in his *Confederacy Series* of 1965-66, to the large-scale bronze in the final room of this exhibition entitled *Ash*, cast in 2017 from the original 1985 wood construction, which had been made to honor the people lost to HIV/AIDS during a time of government inaction and public vilification.

LOVE, 1966–2006
Marble
22 × 23 1/16 × 13 3/16 in.
(58.3 × 58.5 × 33.4 cm)

"It was almost a kind of process of elimination, and that is, that with my work and particularly my early work, it's almost like the architectural dictum that less is more and in a sense I got down to the subject matter of my work, to its bare bones: the subject is defined by its expression in the word itself. I mean *LOVE* is purely a skeleton of all that word has meant in all the erotic and religious aspects of the theme and to bring it down to the actual structure of the calligraphy itself is like a skeleton. It's reducing it to the bare bones. It was really a matter of distillation."

— Robert Indiana

Reflecting on his visit to Florence in 1954, Indiana conceived a plan to realize his *LOVE* sculpture in marble. Indiana viewed marble as one of the two noble materials, along with bronze, in the Western tradition of sculpture. Between 2000 and 2014, he liaised closely with the Bottega Versiliese, a small sculpture workshop in Pietrasanta, near Carrara, Italy.

AHAVA, 1977–2004
Stainless Steel
48 × 48 × 24 in. (121.9 × 121.9 × 61 cm)
Edition of six plus four artist's proofs

AHAVA (1977–2004), a memorial tribute to Bishop James A. Pike, exemplifies the importance of the spiritual aspect of love to Indiana. Pike, who died in the Israeli desert and for whom Indiana worked at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, had much to do with the artist's involvement in and treatment of the subject of love. In *AHAVA* the effect of stacking the characters in a two-by-two arrangement, separating them with a vertical rather than horizontal line, points to the connection between divinity and love.

AMOR, 1998–2001
Bronze
18 × 18 × 9 in. (45.7 × 45.7 × 22.9 cm)
Edition of eight plus four artist's proofs

The Ninth Love Cross, 2001
Oil on canvas
Five panels, overall: 108 × 108 in.
(274.3 × 274.3 cm), cross
Each panel: 36 × 36 in. (91.4 × 91.4 cm)
Private collection

Indiana's interest in the subject of the cross arose while working at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where the artist transcribed a manuscript on the subject. This led him to create his 1958 mural *Stavrosis*, composed of 44 joined pieces of paper, and he later employed the cruciform format in *The Demuth American Dream #5* (1963) and in the painting *LOVE Cross* (1968).

Love is the theme for which Indiana is most widely recognized, and one which had great personal meaning to him. As in *The Ninth American Dream* (2001), the central panel consists of the numeral "9" within a circle whose outer ring contains the word "Love," repeated six times. The theme is continued in the panels to the left and right, whose outer rings contain different translations (amour, amor, amore, liebe, ahava) and types (agape, eros, lust) of love.

The top and bottom panels reference Indiana's properties in Vinalhaven, Maine, where he lived from 1978 until his death in 2018. The sail loft on Clamshell Alley was Indiana's sculpture studio, and the Star of Hope, built in 1883 for the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, was his home.



Artist in front of *The Ninth Love Cross*, 2001

ROOM
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“The technique, if successful, is that happy transmutation of the Lost into the Found, Junk into Art, the Neglected into the Wanted, the Unloved into the Loved, Dross into Gold.” — Robert Indiana

Ash, 1985, cast 2017

Painted bronze

98 1/2 × 38 × 35 7/16 in. (250 × 96.5 × 90 cm)

Edition of three plus one artist's proof

“ASH of course stands for Ashes to Ashes.”

—Robert Indiana

Ash (1985, cast 2017), is a painted bronze rendition of Indiana's Vinalhaven construction *Ash* (1985) which was one of the first in this series of large-scale constructions, for which he incorporated wood salvaged from old piers and from the old granite quarry on the island.

The American Dream, 1992, cast 2015

Painted bronze

83 7/8 × 35 1/2 × 11 13/16 in. (213 × 90 × 30 cm)

Edition of three plus one artist's proof

“I was really being very critical of certain aspects of the American experience. “Dream” was used in an ironic sense.... At first [the series] was very caustic—that might be a better word than saying “cynical.” [The cynicism] came out of a life that had spent much of its time in the Depression, a broken home, and all kinds of difficulties—the war.... But instead of being an idealistic thing, the “Dream” had been perverted into a very cheap, tawdry experience. And the whole Depression period was, from my standpoint as a child, bleak, cheap, and tawdry. My family was very badly affected by the Depression, and I was affected by it.”

—Robert Indiana

The theme of “the American Dream,” with its promises and disappointments, would shape the longest-running series in Indiana's oeuvre, with nine American Dream paintings completed over forty years. The earliest works in the series reflect the cynicism born of a broken home, a Depression-era childhood, and his parents' unfulfilled dreams. It was not until 1992 that the subject appeared as a sculpture, which can be considered a pendant to the series of paintings.

The Electric American Dream

(*EAT/DIE/HUG/ERR*), 2007–2018

Polychrome aluminum, stainless steel,
and light bulbs

Four components, each component:


78 × 78 × 7 in. (198.1 × 198.1 × 17.8 cm)

Edition of three plus one artist's proof

The Electric American Dream (*EAT/DIE/HUG/ERR*) is a continuation of Indiana's electric works, which include *EAT* (1964), created for the 1964 World's Fair, *The Electric EAT* (1964–2007), and *The Electric LOVE* (1966–2000). It connects four of the short, one-syllable words found throughout his oeuvre, both in his sculptures and paintings. The words “eat” and “die” began to appear in Indiana's paintings in 1962, stemming from the fact that the last word his mother said before she died was eat. Indiana then thought of the supplementary idea of “hug” and “err,” explaining that he couldn't go on doing “eat” and “die” forever, and that “‘Hug’ was a family word for giving affection and so forth, and so it began to suggest covering some of the more formal aspects of life—existence and love and survival and sin and what have you.”

Robert Indiana
The Sweet Mystery
Procuratie Vecchie
Piazza S.Marco, Venezia
20.4–24.11.2024

Curated by Matthew Lyons

Organised by Yorkshire Sculpture Park 

Supported by The Robert Indiana Legacy Initiative

The Robert Indiana Legacy Initiative

Founder: Simon Salama-Caro

Team: Erin Barnes, Clare Cosman, Emeline Salama-Caro, Paul Salama-Caro

Production: D.H. office & The Museum Box

Curatorial advisor: Suzanne Geiss

Exhibition architecture: Philipp Krummel

Graphic design: A.M.

robertindianavenice2024.com

