Richard Serra

THE INTERVIEW

He emerged out of a radical art scene in the 1960s and went on to become one of America's most controversial artists – provoking some New Yorkers to threaten him with death. Now 70 and hailed as the world's 'greatest living sculptor', he remains a combative figure in the art world. On the eve of his new London show he granted **Sean O'Hagan** a rare interview. Portrait by **Suki Dhanda**

Richard Serra's reputation precedes him: he is cerebral, single-minded, austere, as steely and uncompromising as his work. He may indeed be all these things but he is also, it turns out, a great storyteller. One of his best anecdotes concerns his turbulent years as a student at Yale in the early Sixties, where he came of age in an intensely creative milieu that included the artists Frank Stella, Chuck Close and Nancy Graves, a classmate who became his first wife.

'I was thrown out of Yale for something real stupid,' says Serra, suddenly transforming into a childlike grin. 'Robert Rauschenberg came up there as a visiting critic. Being a bit sparky back then, I thought I'd see what he was made of. I found a chicken and tethered it to a rope and put it in this box on a pedestal. It was a kind of prank at Rauschenberg's expense, right? But when he lifted the box, the goddamn chicken flew up above him and started shitting everywhere.'

You can see that Serra relishes the memory of that rebellious moment even though it almost cost him his fellowship. All the students were cracking up, and even Rauschenberg, to his credit, liked the gesture. But the faculty didn't see the joke. I was suspended for two weeks, but it was kind of worth it.'

He pauses, still grinning, then says: 'That incident sums up my attitude: I don't give a shit but I care quite a lot.'

Next year Serra will be 70. Like all great iconoclasts, he has lived long enough to see his supposed artistic provocations gradually accepted as groundbreaking statements. His towering curves and sheets of oxidised steel are now an artistic signature, as instantly recognisable as Giacometti's elongated figures or Rothko's swathes of deep, dark colour. When he installed his best known work, a series of huge rolled steel sculptures collectively entitled *The Matter of Time* in the Bilbao Guggenheim in 2005, the art historian Robert Hughes called him 'not only the best sculptor alive, but the only great one at work anywhere in the 21st century'.

Serra's work harks back to the American Minimalist movement of the Sixties and Seventies but it often seems to have emerged, from a mind in thrall to the industrial age. At times he has seemed as tough and intimidating as his steel plates, and his career has been punctuated by controversy. He once used the American government when a public art work of his was removed from its site in New York and destroyed. He enraged the American right by creating two posters protesting against the Bush administration and the abuses at Abu Ghraib, which sold in their thousands online. 'I don't consider myself a political artist,' he tells me. 'But anything I can do to make a difference, I will. America is a right-wing country and I'm essentially from the old left.'

Age has not withered him, nor dented what he calls, only half jokingly, his 'sceptical negativism'. When I ask him to describe his sensibility he says: 'I have a certain obstinacy, a certain willfulness that has got me in trouble but it has also got me through.'

Walking into the Gagosian Gallery in King's Cross, you see immediately what Robert Hughes meant when he wrote that Serra's achievement 'has been to give fabricated steel the power and density... the sense of empathy and urgency and liberation that once belonged only to bronze and stone'. The Gagosian show is called simply *Sculpture*, a title that does little to prepare you for the way Serra radically transforms any context in which he places his giant steel curves. The monumental weight of these burnished sculptures is tangible as soon as you enter the space. Though big and airy, it seems barely able to contain them.

In the main gallery there are two huge curved circles of oxidised steel, one convex, the other concave. The second is the exact inverse of the first but the experience of walking along – and around and through – each is radically different. One looms above you, the other seems in danger of falling away. One is womb-like in its sense of enclosure; the other seems to draw all the light into its centre. They seem, for all their hypnotic tonnage, to defy logic as well as gravity.

'These two pieces are collecting the space in certain ways,' Serra tells me when we meet at the gallery. One suspects he could talk all day about the abstract geometry of spheres, reversed curves and torqued ellipses. 'In one, you sense the volume moving out like a giant flowerpot or moving in like a giant lampshade. It's all about centralising the space in different ways. How people move in relation to space, that's essentially what I'm up to.'

In an adjacent room he has installed a towering steel wall, 10 inches thick, which stands, squat and uncompromising, in the centre of the rectangular space. Like many Serra sculptures, it looks as if it might topple over with enough people leaning against it. (A figure was crushed to death during the installation of a Serra piece in the early Seventies.) You realise, when confronted with a sculpture of such formal simplicity, such literal and metaphorical weight, that, for or all its familiarity, Serra's work still intimidates. There is something almost Orwellian about this piece, though he has turned in it in honour of Fernando Pessoa, the elusive Portuguese author of a meandering, semi-mystical novel called *The Book of Disquiet*. He says the connection is tangential: he was reading the book while making the piece, and centres that 'one should not read too much into my titles'. (In the past he has dedicated work to Charlie Chaplin and Hanne Darboven, the German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the art critic David Sylvester.) The Pessoa piece is powerful; it brings to mind foundries and shipyards as well as the Berlin Wall and the Israeli-built security fence that snakes through Palestine. You can see why it might cause consternation to those who prefer art to be in some way uplifting.

In the Eighties Serra created one of the most controversial works of public art of the 20th century, a curved wall of steel entitled *Tilted Arc*. It stood, 12 feet high and 120 feet long, in Federal Plaza in Manhattan for just eight years, while local opposition reached such a pitch that, after a combative public hearing in 1985, a jury voted for the piece should be dismantled and removed. Serra sued the federal government over the issue of ownership but, after a protracted and bitter court battle, lost his appeal. In May 1989 the piece was cut into three parts and consigned to a New York warehouse where it has languished ever since.

'I don't think it is the function of art to be pleasing,' a bruised but bullish Serra said at the time. 'Art is not democratic. It is not for the people.' His attitude did little to endear him to the New York public, even as the contemporary art world rallied around him.

Soon afterwards he found himself in another rancorous dispute over a big steel piece commissioned for the Sculpture Hall at Yale University. One lecturer academic wrote to the local press claiming, 'Serra's pieces are about as convivial as the walls of a Gulag.' He still bears the psychological scars of those epic battles.

'That stuff hurt,' he says. 'I was standing up for a principle. Artistic ownership. It's your work; nobody has the right to destroy it. Now, if you make a work for the American government, they can dispose of it the very next day. It's unheard-of.'

For a long time Serra's work was held to illustrate the tension that surround public art, its funding, its responsibility and its execution. 'Up until about 10 years ago I got a lot of stick,' he says. 'It reached a crescendo of sorts around *Tilted Arc*. At one point they had posters plastered all over my work with a photo of the Vietnamese guy being shot in the head and a slogan underneath that said, "Kill Serra". People were threatening to kill me because I was making art in New York City. That's a little bit extreme, right?'

Now, older and wiser but still combative, he senses a sea change in both the critical and public response to his work. What does he think caused the shift in attitude? How did he go from, as one critic put it, being a smoke parade in New York's favourite sculptor'?

He doesn't even have to think about the answer. 'It was the curves,' he says, laughing. 'It was definitely the curves. When I showed the first series of Torqued Ellipses in New York 10 years ago there was a definite sense that people were reacting to the work in a different way. People reacted to the curves in a way they didn't to the angles and straight lines. They hadn't seen that before. Modernism was a right angle, the whole 20th century was a right angle.'

Nodding his head as if in complete agreement with himself, he concludes: 'People were ready for curves.'

Richard Serra was born in San Francisco in 1938, the second of three sons to a Spanish mother and a Russian-Jewish father, who was a shipyard pipe fitter.

1964-6 Works in steel mills to support himself while studying Fine Art at Yale.

1966 Goes to Paris and meets friend Philip Glass. Frequents Brancusi's studio and becomes a self-confessed Giacometti groupie. Interest in sculpture is born.

1969 Begins creating sculptures out of solid materials primarily balanced by forces of weight and gravity. (Pictured right, installing work in Los Angeles, 1969.)

1981 Tilted Arc, a 12ft wall of curved steel, installed in a New York plaza before being demolished after complaints.

2000 Charlie Brown, a 60ft sculpture, honouring Charles Schulz and his comic-strip character, unveiled.

2005 The Matter of Time, his best-known work, opens at Bilbao Guggenheim.

They say 'Serra's sculptures give you a physical experience; it's not just about looking.' *Artist Jenny Saville*

He says 'I'm working at the edge of what's possible.' **IMOGEN CARTER**

'In the Sixties we rejected the mainstream. If you sold out a show everyone would commiserate'

Left to right: Richard Serra in front of Fernando Pessoa, 2007-8 at the Gagosian; Serra's anti-Bush poster; The Matter of Time, 2005, at the Guggenheim, Bilbao. Photographs by Seth Wenig/ Reuters, Rafa Rivas/AFP

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a variety of stuffed animals and, in one instance, a live pig. He was lost, he says, but on his way to reinventing himself as an artist whose work would hinge on the idea of 'the viewer being the subject of the piece'. He says he is still grappling with that idea today. 'In my later work, the person who is navigating the space, his or her experience becomes the content. So, the whole subject-object relationship is reversed. The content is you! If you don't walk into the work and engage with it, there isn't any content. That's really what I've been dealing with ever since I saw the Velazquez painting.'

In mid-to-late Sixties New York, Serra became part of a small but enduringly influential downtown underground art scene that included Chuck Close, the writer Spalding Gray and the minimalist composers Philip Glass and Steve Reich. He mostly hung out with dancers from the Judson Church group, including Yvonne Rainer and Serra's one-time partner Joan Jonas. 'The dancers were the real radicals. They taught me more about space and movement and gravity than anyone else.'

To fund his art, Serra started a furniture-removals business, Low-Rate Movers, and employed most of his struggling friends. For a while Philip Glass worked as his assistant, helping him install shows and lug furniture up and down the steps of brownstones. 'It was an extraordinary time, idealistic, communal, generous. I suppose it was a kind of radical underground scene insofar as we rejected the mainstream. If you sold out a show it was as if you'd actually sold out. Everyone would commiserate. The way we saw it was that if the dealers and the collectors liked the work it couldn't possibly be radical.'

He shakes his head and a wry grin spreads across his tough-guy face. 'It was the exact opposite of now. These days it's all about selling, all about the market value. Some time in the Eighties artists became Hollywood-style stars. The personalities started to take precedence over the work.'

In 1970 Serra helped kill close friend the late Robert Smithson to 'co-star' Spiral Jetty, Smithson's seminal earthwork that coils out into the Great Salt Lake in Utah. 'When Robert died,' he says, 'I felt like I had lost a brother. He was a guy I could get dead drunk with, and have a huge fight with, then wake up in the morning and straight away be friends with again. I still miss that deep connection we had.'

Serra has been married for 20 years to Clara Weyergraf, and they divide their time between Tribeca, New York and Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. When he was recently made a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters of the French Academy, the City of Paris restored one of his earlier works, Clara-Clara, to its original site in the Tuileries gardens. But this work has also become problematic, having since been marked around its base by the dusty footprints of lounging youths. 'It bothers me a lot the way they put their feet on it,' Serra told the *New York Times* recently. 'But I haven't gone up to anyone to pull them away.'

Like the great American novelist Philip Roth, who possesses a similarly sceptical, combative sensibility, Serra has averted the upset of old age with a burst of renewed creative intensity. There have been two big shows, last year's 40-year retrospective at Moma in New York, and this year's opening exhibition for the Monumenta event at the Grand Palais in Paris.

'Man, that was a tightrope walk,' he says. 'There was no way to stack it up, so vast was the space. We didn't know if the piece would work until the first plate went up. It was one of the most glorious experiences of my life when I saw that it was working. It was probably the first time I thought I had done something that was better than me as a person.'

Serra's own artistic monument may well turn out to be the epic work that is the centrepiece of the Guggenheim collection in Bilbao. *The Matter of Time* is the only artwork inside that competes in scale and ambition with the Frank Gehry-designed building, and is a kind of formalist corrective to Gehry's extravagant exterior.

The way Serra's work takes on, and alters, vast exhibition spaces like the Bilbao Guggenheim and the Grand Palais makes you wonder why he has never been commissioned to make a site-specific piece for the Turbine Hall in Tate Modern. I can think of no other living artist whose work would make such perfect sense in that cavernous space. When I mention this he falls momentarily silent. 'I'm not saying anything,' he says, but I'm happy for you to say it.'

For all his epic battles with the public, the art establishment, and even the US government, Serra seems finally to be mellowing, perhaps realising that his singular body of work can speak for itself.

Richard Serra: Sculpture runs until 20 December at the Gagosian, London WC1

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