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Colossal: "Promenade" was unveiled this week in Paris. Above left: its creator, Richard Serra

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Richard Serra: man of steel enters new arena

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Acclaimed American sculptor has created an extraordinary installation in Paris's Grand Palais. He guides Alastair Sooke around it

Richard Serra comes barrelling towards me down the cavernous central hall of the Grand Palais in Paris, the site of his latest awe-inspiring installation. Thickset and bullish, and dressed entirely in black, the 68-year-old American sculptor, acclaimed as one of the foremost artists in the world, stops in front of me. "Let's take a walk," he says, his blue eyes burning with the intensity of someone ready to spar.



Colossal: Promenade was unveiled this week in Paris

Walking is an essential part of Serra's new work, Promenade, which was unveiled this week. It's the second in France's Monumenta series, which invites contemporary artists to respond to the Grand Palais, a Crystal Palace-like structure built as the centrepiece of the 1900 Exposition Universelle.

The new piece is a triumph that would more than justify the cost of a Eurostar ticket to Paris. Standing at 100ft intervals along the central axis of the 13,500sq-m hall are five

massive steel sheets, each one weighing 75 tonnes. Processed in a steel foundry in the Loire, they lean towards or away from the central axis, producing an effect that is at once alarming and humbling. They look like giant dominoes about to topple over, or still-quivering thunderbolts recently hurled into the ground by the gods.

Standing beneath them feels dangerous: am I about to get flattened? A steel rigger was killed while dismantling a Serra sculpture in 1971. "The plates are safe, they're engineered," says the San Francisco-born sculptor. "The tectonics of them has been worked out to the millimetre."

Serra wants the public to walk around and between his austere metal slabs, so that their appearance will change in relation to each other and the space. "There isn't any preferred viewpoint," he says. "You have to walk the entirety of the field to understand what's going on. The plates are 17 metres tall, four metres wide, five and a half inches thick, and weigh 75 tonnes. And yet you don't register the weight. If anything, they appear weightless."

He has a point. You might think that large chunks of metal would feel sombre and ponderous, especially when framed by the sinuous Art Nouveau ironwork that supports the glass roof of the Grand Palais. But they don't. Soaked in sunlight, and ingeniously tilted, the plates come alive with energy. "They have uplift," says Serra, who will have a solo show of new work at the Gagosian Gallery in London later this year. "Some of them appear to have just sprung up, while others look stuck into the floor." At times they even seem to disappear. Side-on, all that can be seen is the plate's thin edge, creating the illusion that 75 tonnes of metal has vanished. "Seventy-five tonnes: gone," the artist says with a flourish.

Serra has been making colossal steel sculptures for decades, yet creating a work of art inside the Grand Palais was still a challenge. "When I first saw the space, I was a little overwhelmed. What I decided to do was a big risk," he says. "Until we installed the plates, I didn't know whether they would resound in the space."

Is he pleased with the result? "Any artist will tell you that the last work he's done is the best. But do I think I've redefined the space? Yes. This installation is singular - in my lifetime, and in this place. I don't think you're going to see the likes of it again."

Having successfully tackled enormous spaces in New York, Bilbao and now Paris, would he one day like to take on the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern? "This is a much more glorious space than Tate Modern," he says, gesturing around the Grand Palais. "I think the space in Tate Modern is a little banal, actually. And my relationship with the powers that be at the Tate isn't very good." Why not? "I have no idea. But did you ever see any work of mine in the Tate collection?" he asks rhetorically. "I've never had any support in England, which is why I never go there."

France, by contrast, is close to his heart. After majoring in English literature in California in the early Sixties, he studied painting at Yale, where he won a travelling fellowship to

Paris.

He arrived there with his friend, the American composer Philip Glass, in 1965. "I started out here," he says. "Up to that point, I wasn't too interested in sculpture. But for the first time, I really began to consider the medium's potential. I used to visit the studio of Constantin Brancusi [preserved at the Pompidou Centre after the artist's death], who seemed to me as good as anyone since Donatello. And Phil and I used to go to eat at La Coupole at night and sit across from Giacometti, who would come in from his studio at two in the morning with plaster in his hair. We were groupies."

Soon afterwards, Serra moved to New York, where he rubbed shoulders with many artists, including Donald Judd, Robert Smithson and Jasper Johns. He became known for his "splash" pieces, for which he artfully sprayed molten lead into the corners of rooms, and began to work with rubber, then slabs of lead, which he propped together into simple constructions resembling a precarious house of cards.

It wasn't long before he started to work on a grander scale, twisting sheets of steel into ellipses, spirals, curves and other improbable shapes, so that the taut metal appears to be as pliable as soft suede.

"I'm interested in the invention of form," he says. "And I believe that matter imposes its own form on form. If you make something in glass, that says one thing. If you make something in steel, it says another. I'm working at the edge of what's possible. I think it's an artist's obligation to extend the language of form. Otherwise we'd all be plein-air painters and we'd end up in the village square every weekend with our paint and palette."

He pauses. "Look, I'm only just beginning to understand the possibilities of steel. I wouldn't have been able to do this when I was 22. I'm almost 69, and I'm in better shape than I was 20 years ago. Why is that? I used to do alcohol and drugs, but I don't any more." He laughs. "So it doesn't feel to me like I'm approaching the end of my career."

Another sardonic chuckle. "Actually, it feels like I'm just getting started."