

## National

## Sculpture

## Super slabs and steely nerves: gallery makes room for heavy metal show

Giant of modern art Serra unveils new works for first London show in 16 years

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It is probably one of the most technically difficult exhibitions mounted in London for years: monumental slabs of steel weighing more than 300 tonnes hoisted into pristine galleries where walls have already been knocked down and rebuilt to accommodate the pieces.

Yesterday Richard Serra, one of the true giants of modern art, unveiled new works for his first show in London in 16 years made up of vast pieces of free-standing, weatherproof steel.

One of the works, *Open Ended*, looks like the hull of a ship but is a labyrinth and needs to be walked through – a thrilling experience for some visitors yesterday and, it seems, a disconcerting one for others.

Serra, who has been overseeing the installation at the Gagosian gallery, in north London, admitted it had not been entirely smooth: "Open Ended came in completely trashed because they moved it to a shop I hadn't used before. There was a lot of grease over it and I was relatively pissed off for three days." He praised the young people "inhaling toxic fumes" who cleaned it up.

The 68-year-old, San Francisco-born artist is on a run. His show *Promenade*, at the Grand Palais in Paris this year was critically acclaimed and followed a hugely popular retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, last year.

Anyone who has been to the Guggenheim in Bilbao will have walked through the enormous torqued ellipses and spirals in his work *The Matter of Time*, which are on permanent show.

Many commuters coming into London's Liverpool Street station might not realise that the 17-metre steel sculpture at the exit is a Richard Serra.

Serra is the darling of many critics. The Guardian's Jonathan Jones said of the Bilbao work: "This is as good as it gets. If you don't like this, you don't like modern art. If you do, you must revere Serra." Children particularly enjoy the Serra experience, liking the scale and interactivity and sense of the unknown.

In the Gagosian gallery the slabs are tacked together to create the final work. "I'm not a welded-steel sculptor. I've never welded in my life and I wouldn't know how to deal with it. It frightens me actually," Serra said yesterday.

The other works he unveiled yesterday included one named *Fernando Pessoa* (after the Portuguese poet), which is an enormous rectangular slab, and *TTI London*, two toruses of sandblasted steel. On the wall in the fourth gallery hang four works – a rectangle, a square



Into the labyrinths  
Visitors to the Gagosian gallery in London look at *Open Ended* by Richard Serra, below  
Photographs: David Levene



and a round piece and an octagon – each weighing 300kg (661lb).

Yesterday, as the artist talked about his work he peppered his conversation with words like weight, cantilever, stasis, balance, placement and gravitational lode. "Everyone who makes art has to invent their own procedures. If you're dealing with hand-me-down procedures you're probably dealing with the academy as it exists, and the thing with art is that it's not linear in that way. Every generation will invent their own procedures and processes for their own needs."

Serra, the son of a shipyard worker, said there had never been a huge sales potential for his work (where would

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you put it?) but he had always had sympathetic dealers, including Larry Gagosian. "Larry's always given me the benefit of the doubt because we have this brotherly hate-love relationship and he's always supported the work, even though the difficulty of placing it is obvious. My work is not market-driven, I'm interested in the experimentation and invention of form. For younger people starting out now, that could be problematic."

*Richard Serra: Sculpture*, is at the Gagosian gallery (King's Cross, London) until December 20. A concurrent exhibition of his drawings is at the Gagosian gallery (Davies Street) until November 22.