

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Taking in Richard Serra's Arresting Drawings

By Jonathan Curiel *Wednesday, Oct 19 2011*

Walking hurriedly through the galleries at SFMOMA, leading me on a tour of his life's drawings, Richard Serra suddenly stops in front of *Pacific Judson Murphy*, a giant, horizontal work that envelops two walls and an entire corner.



Richard Serra at work on *Alameda Street*, 1981.

The drawing is black — a veritable shrine to blackness — and a vivid contrast to the room's white walls. "It redefines the space in the space," Serra says to me. "And if you think about it, it prescribes a volume of space that you can walk into. Now, most people don't walk into drawings. Drawings are something that you look at on the wall."

"Looking" at Serra's drawings isn't the point, though. Like his celebrated steel sculptures, which coil and hover in multiple directions, Serra's drawings reiterate movement and are surprisingly interactive. Movement is everything to Serra's drawings, which may seem odd given how stark and minimalistic many of them are. Canvases of entire blackness? Humungous squares and rectangles that are completely black? Look closely, though, and Serra's sheets of darkness are directional. Charcoal panels tilt a certain way, bumping against other charcoal panels that also tilt ever so slightly. Lines swirl around and around, sometimes creating a curious spiral, more often creating a dense circle of viscous matter that resembles a tarry sun. Even an apparently static work like *Weight and Measure XI* (a white square atop a black one) breathes, similar to the way a dual-colored Rothko seems to vibrate.

At 71, Serra rarely slows down. In his teenage years he was an avid surfer who rode the waves off Ocean Beach. To earn money, Serra — who was born in S.F. and raised in the Outer Sunset — labored in East Bay steel mills. The work helped root him to the idea of employing heavy metal in art. Serra's steel creations, many of which reach close to two stories in height, are instantly recognizable, and have made him a celebrity in the world of sculpture. In 2005, when he went to Spain's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and completed "The Matter of Time" series — eight connected sets of curving alloy weighing more than 1,000 tons — art critic Robert Hughes called Serra "the best sculptor alive." A few years later, painter Chuck

Close, a classmate of Serra's at Yale (where Serra got a master's in art history and an MFA), said he was "probably the most important artist working today in any medium."

Still, Serra's sculptural brilliance has overshadowed the drawing he has done for decades. "Richard Serra Drawing," which was co-curated by SFMOMA's Gary Garrels and arrives from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, showcases these paint-stick pieces for the first time in a major exhibit. The work and writings on display go back to 1967, when Serra was becoming an artist of note and meeting people like Janis Joplin and Andy Warhol. Serra is a lifelong liberal — someone who, after the Abu Ghraib prison abuses came to light in 2004, made a "Stop Bush" drawing that was widely circulated. That drawing isn't included in the SFMOMA exhibit.

"I try to keep my politics and my art separate," says Serra. "When I'm called upon to be engaged politically, or if I think there's a reason to initiate something, I do."

"Richard Serra Drawing" features a small collection of Serra's sculptures, but in the exhibition guide SFMOMA recommends that visitors also take in *Ballast*, Serra's public sculpture at UCSF's Mission Bay campus, and *Sequence*, his sculpture at Stanford's Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts. A third option that's much closer to SFMOMA is his five-story sculpture in the lobby of Gap headquarters, at 2 Folsom St. by the Embarcadero. *Charlie Brown* incorporates four curving plates of gorgeous brown steel. On one side is a triangulated entrance. Go inside, walk around and look up. You'll see a square opening at the top, and if you speak, your words will echo across the sculpture's steel plates. Serra wants his work to have a personal effect on those who take it in. In many of the galleries at "Richard Serra Drawing," there's no place to sit down — no benches to get in the way of the art. By standing, visitors are forced to be as upright as the steel plates and the dark canvases that have made Serra's name.