

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Draw It Black: A Q&A With Richard Serra on His Daring New Retrospective at the Met

By Andrew M. Goldstein



Richard Serra standing with "Union," 2011, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

NEW YORK— With his new "Drawing" retrospective at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, **Richard Serra** is introducing the wider public to a body of work that, while underway for four decades, is as ambitious, challenging, and, in its way, avant-garde as any art being made today. Celebrated for his "Prop" pieces and monumental, walk-through environments in Cor-Ten steel, which famously led the **Museum of Modern Art** to purpose-build reinforced gallery spaces in advance of the artist's 2007 sculpture survey there, Serra has quietly been using the medium of drawing as a way of investigating analogous issues of weight, construction, art, and architecture — and in the Met show they come into view with the force of a conceptual wrecking ball.

Worked over, repeatedly and laboriously, with black paintstick, these monochrome drawings make palpable the joules of effort spent on their creation, true to Serra's history as a "process" artist. They intrude on the visitor's psychic space as well as physical environs, causing the galleries of the Met — which uncharacteristically plunges headlong into the contemporary with this show — lose their balance, like the point in a Mondrian where the composition seems about to swing. One is reminded, as one often is by Serra's work, that weight is a synonym for importance.

The exhibition has been organized by **Magdalena Dabrowski**, who contributes an essay on the artist's debt to **Malevich** in its insightful catalogue, and it will travel to **SFMOMA** and the **Menil Collection**. Other

curators involved with the show include **Bernice Rose** of the **Menil Drawing Institute and Study Center**, **Michelle White** of the Menil Collection, and **Gary Garrels** of SFMOMA.

ARTINFO executive editor **Andrew M. Goldstein** toured the galleries with Serra to discuss how these drawings were made, and how they function on the viewer.

You've been creating this body of work since the 1970s, and while academics and critics began to take an interest in it two decades ago, this is the first time that the drawings will be introduced to the wider public.

Yeah, but I don't even think the art subtext that views my work has any sense of the breadth of the drawings because the installation drawings don't appear that often. There's one up at Dia: Beacon and I've done them at various venues in the city but they were either seen while they were up or not, and they've hardly ever been reviewed. And the paper drawings people see now and then, but I don't think people have had a sense of the evolution of the body of work.

It clearly has a real integrity outside of your sculptural work that I think people are going to find very surprising.

Well, it's something that I do as a practice more than anything else. I draw all the time — I draw every day. That's just something I do, something I've done since I was a kid.

How did this very refined, highly specific way of drawing become a core aspect of your art?

I think all kids draw, and usually you draw either out of your fantasy or you draw something that's representational or you draw something to get a content out in front of you that you can relate to or talk to when you're a child. And I think as things go on, if you're interested in drawing, you come up against the problem of figure/ground. What is the mark going to be like on the page and how do you deal with the reversal of that process, or how do you deal with how one interfaces with the other. I started very early, like every student, just doing figure/ground drawing with charcoal, but I didn't show those. I showed them maybe in group shows, but I didn't have a drawing show until I started doing the canvas "Installation Drawings." With those, I realized that I had to get away from the limitations of that convention. Most drawing, if you think of it, is for painters usually a subtext for painting. It's not usually considered an end in itself, unless you look at some Seurat or Johns, some Picasso, some Matisse. But people don't take drawing on and redefine it as something in and of itself as a worthwhile investigation. Certainly, Seurat did. And I thought at a particular point that I wanted to be able to move my drawing into a practice that would enable me to take on the architecture, and that's how it started. I think it probably had a lot to do with when I was a student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and I hitchhiked to Guadalajara and I saw Orozco and Siqueiros, and they were muralists but they were able to redefine the architecture in terms of their social realism. They would take a column and turn it into fire, and actually destroy the integrity of the tectonics of the column by the illusion of the fire on the column. Or they would punch a hole in the ceiling by making not a literal hole but by making the illusionistic space. The fact that they took on the architecture with their painting seemed much more interesting than the people who were painting in a frame. I think when I finally got to making drawings that I thought could deal with architecture, probably in my mind's eye I thought about the power of that work and how you can actually make drawings to interface within the architecture and intervene in the architecture and have people be involved in the space and the place of architecture as it's redefined.

You draw continually in sketchbooks that you carry with you, limning everything from your surroundings to your finished sculptures. But you consider the black drawings that make up the majority of this show to be completely discrete from the drawings you do in your sketchbooks, is that right?

That's correct. The sketchbooks are notations for me to.... I think the eye is like a muscle and the more you draw the better you see. For me, it's a way of keeping my hand-eye coordination available everyday. People use different ways of apperception — people use cameras, people draw, people do all kinds of things to allow themselves to see into a problem. I think seeing is a way of thinking. And for me, to see is to think, and drawing's another way of thinking, it's another way of thought.

Is it true that you work with computer models rather than drawings when you're preparing your sculptures?

Yeah.

And no longer in sketchbooks?

No, I don't draw my sculptures. The sculptures are always made with models first, then we go to the computer. I think I've only made one or two where I've gone directly to the computer. We usually make the models by hand, then go to the computer to see how they're going to be able to be made — the tendency to overturn, how the line is going to have to be bent — and then that model is sent over to the manufacturer, and the manufacturer comes back to us and says you can do this, you can't do that. Then, we make another model, they make a model, they send us their model, then we redo their model, then we go there and we make the piece.

And this is intentionally divorced from your drawing, or even sketching, so as to be purely separate pursuits.

It's model-making first. There's no drawing that takes place first. A lot of sculptors draw something first, then they'll reproduce their drawing in a model and then have their model blown up or make the sculpture or whatever. Some people do it quite well. I think Oldenburg is who you think of. A lot of people who deal with figuration make a drawing first and have that drawing made three-dimensional. I don't work that way. I'm a model-maker. I make models, then the models are translated, and then, after, I make drawings, which is like a whole autonomous body of work. The drawings and the notations are sometimes a reference to ideas of the sculpture, but they're not representations to be used to make sculpture from.

At a time when the definitions of various artistic media have expanded — painting and sculpture, especially — is it critical to view these artworks in the context of drawing?

Well, let's just say that I've tried, and I don't know how successful the attempt is, to redefine how people think about drawing. I think it's obvious that these aren't paintings. It's obvious that they are drawings, and it's also obvious that they're drawings that you enter into. Well, there are probably very few drawings that you enter into that deal with the architecture in this way. In a sense, whether they're successful or not, they're asking the question of whether drawings of this kind can engage the architecture, can engage the viewer, and create meaningful experience in terms of what we call an aesthetic response. And if that's true, all good, for sure.

I see them as operating within a similar framework as your early sculpture, where there are opposing forces that create a sort of dynamic tension, except that in the drawings it occurs on a conceptual plane. Here, it's a matter of questioning where these fit into drawing, and balancing what you're looking at with what you're used to experiencing with a drawing, that creates the tension. Do you find that tension to be very productive, do you see this tension as an integral part of the work?

I think tension in sculpture or in relation to drawing is something that you don't necessarily anticipate, but if works are meaningful at all they usually arrive either at an equivalency, where there's no weight, or a tension where the weights juxtapose, create a feeling of force. So, if you think of gravity, actually, gravity is a force. It's not a tectonic principle; it's a force. So to be able to use the idea, the thought of gravity, in

all of its manifestations. And I've used gravity as my principle in sculpture, but in a sense gravity is also playing a part here in the drawings.

Do you mean as a kind of learned gravity, of seeing a shape hovering up high and knowing that if it was a physical object it would fall? Or is there an actual gravity?

I think in some of the drawings it's actually a perceived gravity. You perceive the force of the volume as you enter into it. You feel the contraction of the space. You don't realize that the light has diminished, but it has. The volume is being compressed. If we were in this room right now and I painted that wall black and this wall black [points to opposite walls], it would feel closer together. It would feel tighter. And if the curtains were taken off, the walls were painted white, the space would expand. It has to do with the absorption of the light in the room.

Drawing is such an elemental practice. Everybody draws every day, whether it be as a form of writing or other basic notation. I think it's interesting that you have titled the show "Drawing" rather than "Drawings."

There was a big discussion about that.

And what was the rationale behind the decision?

Because it is about drawing, it's not about drawings. It's about the act of drawing. So, when they wanted to title the show, I thought that would be the correct title.

Drawing is such a familiar act to everyone, but this show lifts that process into a totally different....

Well, it's putting it into a context.

Could you describe that context?

Well, here it's an architectural context. But everybody who makes a drawing every day uses a ground that's usually a piece of paper. Or, in some instances, it's a different type of ground. But you take somebody like Twombly — I think his practice of painting has a lot to do with drawing, only it's on canvas so they call it painting. But Twombly's practice has a lot to do with the idea of drawing. One could say that Twombly kind of draws with paint.

And yet, those are definitely paintings.

Because they're paint on canvas. I think the definition is really about the ground. Here, it's paper.

What about the "Forged Drawings," since those are the ones that are most similar to sculpture, could they be claimed as sculpture?

See, I didn't think of them as sculpture, and I didn't see them as relief. Somebody asked me this morning if they are objects. I guess they're objects, but I just think of them as the iconography of steel forging, something I've been familiar with for almost all my life because I worked in steel mills as a kid. I've been around it all my life, and I thought, why not just make this obvious to somebody who doesn't know anything about the process of forging, what the basic building process is. I don't see them as sculpture, I don't see them as making a claim to relief either. I see them pretty much as graphic signs. I think I see them as signs more than symbols — signs of the forging process.

Have you ever shown your drawings along side your sculptures?

No, this is an autonomous body of work, and one doesn't depict the other, or one is not an analogue to the other.

In the art historical arc of drawing that goes back through Picasso to Goya and Ingres and beyond, how does this show feed into that tradition?

I think it feeds more into Seurat and Johns. I think if it goes back to Ingres it has to do with the delineation of the line and the edge of the line, and a lot of drawing has to do with where the delineation of the edge of the line meets its boundary. So, in that sense, it has to do with the classical tradition. But in another sense it has to do with the layering of surface. And, it's probably a stretch to relate it to that tradition. I mean, no one comes across carte blanche, but I find that my activity of drawing — though after the fact you can make relationships to other people's work — I don't see a direct relationship to any other sculptors or painters in the history of the 20th century who have made drawings this way. That's not to say that they're good or bad, but I just don't see the relationship.

I think that's one of the major things that people are going to come away from the show with.

That this is an original attempt at making drawings, good or bad, we haven't seen before.

An interesting kind of precursor is Malevich, You've spoken about your link to him in the past, and right now your gallery, Gagosian, has a show up about his influence on American artists, you included.

For sure. When I first started I made a piece that's in the show, called "Heir," that the Modern owns, and I made that piece as a direct relationship to Malevich. Then I had to work my way through Malevich and left it behind in the 70s. But to begin with I thought of the practice of drawing dealing with the practice of construction, and those early drawings really are a nod to Malevich, particularly the one called "Heir" with the big diagonal line.

This work is also in the tradition of the monochrome, which Malevich and Rodchenko pioneered, with Rodchenko saying back in the early 1920s that his versions were the last paintings that could be made.

But there Rodchenko was painting. I'm not painting.

Outside of painting and drawing, these works also fit into the Minimalist tradition, which you have contended with from the beginning of your career, when you were labeled a Post-Minimalist. Do you feel that there's still room left for advancement in the Minimalist tradition? The monochrome?

You know, I think sequences only become irrelevant if artists don't take them on, but I don't think sequences close. I think at different points in history different things are going on, and some things may seem to no longer be relevant to a younger generation, but you don't really know because you make work and then the work not only deals with generations that have come before but also with generations that are going to come after. And you never know what unexpected thing youth is going to do. So, I would never count anything out, from [the Upper Paleolithic cave paintings at] Altamira to El Greco to Cézanne to Warhol. Why count anything out? It's all available, it's all out there. I'm not interested in, you know, thumbing my way through the history book of Postmodernism, but if you ask me about the language of art and does it close itself off, or is it irrelevant, or is the idea of the monochrome or abstraction irrelevant, it just takes a generation of people to make it relevant.

Looking back at Cézanne, his use of weight....

You know, you're the first person to say that, but his use of weight is absolutely apparent and very few painters had taken on the potential for weight. It's something that's totally almost absent in the American tradition. It's not in Abstract Expressionism. Maybe a little bit in Clyfford Still, but certainly not in Pollock, not in Newman — the notion of weight really doesn't appear. And Cézanne really laid out the proposition of weight, and Cubism sort of flattened it out and sat on it and dismissed it. So, it doesn't really appear again. I think, in my own mind's eye, that if I've learned anything from Cézanne, it's about how to deal with weight in relation to mass. And that's what's relevant about Cézanne, particularly if you go upstairs and look at the "Card Players" — it's right there.

Cézanne's paintings also described a time that was coping with the effects of the Industrial Revolution and its fragmentation of daily life. It seems that we're in a period right now of further fragmentation, a technological revolution, and I wonder how these works, which are very focused and concentrated, relate to the present day.

Well, I can't tell. All I can tell you is that you do work, you put it out there, and if people respond to it then you understand that it's having to do with a possibility of communicating an idea through the manifestation of form. I'm very interested in inventing form, and if people respond to it in a way that they haven't responded to other things then you think that to some degree you're able to communicate what we call an art experience. And I've found that, since the show's been up, people are very appreciative. They like the fact that they can walk and enter into drawings, and they're interested in what they are, they're interested in the fact that they're different from other things. On the other hand, working in this museum and walking through these halls every day, you have the cultural artifacts of history entombed here — it's humbling to put up a show here. You have the history of the world and the origins of art here staring you in the face every day, which could be a big burden and you tend not to think about it. But I understand that the juxtaposition of this work in this institution is a humbling effort. You would like to make it relevant, and if people find it relevant, all the better.

And Egypt is right downstairs.

Yeah, that's right. [laughs]

In the show's catalogue, Bernice Rose ventures that the works are an attempt to "redeem the human."

Yeah, I don't know what that means. I don't know but I had a hard time coming to terms with what she was getting at there.

Going back to Malevich, he had a literally iconic component to his work in that the paintings referenced Russian religious icons — there was a spiritual side to his art. But you've said your work is expressly secular, nonspiritual.

For sure.

What about in terms of the sublime?

I'm not interested in that. Other people may apply that to the work because they don't know how to figure it in terms of the lineage of art history, but it has nothing to do with that. If you think of what's been going on recently, the only person that's probably close to what I'm doing, and who is almost a realist, is [Robert] Ryman, because Ryman actually paints a stroke. He's painting the process of painting, which is a real activity. I think this work, if it's close to anybody, its form-making is close to Ryman. And if I had to mention any painter who I feel close to, it's Ryman.

To have a show of his work next to your show would be incredible. But one way to define the sublime is beauty mixed with terror and anxiety, and I think that's something that could be applied to your work.

I mean, terror's like a two-bit word, really. Although, I don't mind anxiety. If work produces anxiety, and it's taken anxiety to make and that comes across, that's good.

Could you tell me about your use of black in your drawings?

I think black is a property, a material. And as a property I think it's the best way to articulate drawings where you don't have to get into the metaphors present in the use of chartreuse or pink or anything else. And I studied with [Josef] Albers at Yale and I proofed his book and taught the color course and I really got it down to just dealing with black

And you see it as a material with a weight?

As a property. Because it absorbs light, it manifests itself as weight more than things that reflect light.

On an atomic level, there are some physicists who theorize that light could actually be said to have a weight, if only under certain ideal circumstances, as when a photon is trapped by four perfect mirrors.

That light has weight... I think that's right. I think that's absolutely right. It has a substance. When they talk about a void, I never think of a void. Voids always have substance. The only way we know this room is by its containment, but this space we're in with this low ceiling is different than the space that we were in upstairs, so that void is always being redefined in terms of its materiality and in terms of its weight — in terms of it being in a telephone booth or a football stadium. And I think some people aren't aware of it unless you make it apparent. If you make it apparent, then they understand. It's part of what they do everyday.

One drawing that came to attention recently, and which I was wondering if it would be in the show, is not in the show: your "Stop Bush" drawing, which was included in the 2006 Whitney Biennial.

Oh, that's not... I don't take that seriously. It's an agitprop sketch to tell Bush to get off it, and I made thousands of posters and I put it on the Internet and I wanted to see if we could stop Bush. After Abu Ghraib I was angry. I went to a lot of demonstrations and I thought, I'm not doing any more good at a demonstration than the other 100,000 people walking on the street. I could probably do something more useful here if I made a drawing. Do I think that it actually influenced anything? You can't tell, you don't know. I just felt compelled to do it.

And it's not something that you felt worth including in this retrospective, even in the vitrine section.

I don't think of it as art. It's straight propaganda.

Speaking of the government, the series of drawings in the show that references "Tilted Arc" — "The United States Government Destroys Art" and the others — makes me wonder what you think about the Smithsonian's censorship of David Wojnarowicz's piece.

It was ridiculous, just absolutely ridiculous — somebody trying to make a political football out of something that's totally harmless and beautiful to look at. I think that government really ought to stay out of the business of aesthetics. They really have no business being there.

You would think that the culture wars were a thing of the past.

No, because artists don't really have a political constituency. They don't count in terms of politics. But, they can be used by opposing forces for ridicule or whatever and to play on people's fears that somehow artists are up to something that's subversive and that we should be frightened of. And I think the Smithsonian is a good instance of that. It's basically homophobia in that instance, and homophobia still plays and the Republicans will still play it next year, and it'll go on as much as racism will go on.

Where are the remains of "Tilted Arc" now? Is it in storage?

I think it's flattened out in a police parking lot. I think they piled one plate on top of another and it's compressed. I think it's pretty much destroyed by now.

You've said that dance has been especially influential to your work, Yvonne Rainer especially. Does dance inform your drawings at all?

Well, when I first came to New York, the dancers were dealing with space and material in relation to place. It was a lot of holds and jumps and runs. And, I would watch them in relation to the manifestation of bodily movement: intention, cantilever, and lifts. It had a lot to do with the mechanics of my early props. Basically, I was learning more from watching Yvonne and Trisha [Brown] and Joan Jonas and people of that generation, and I was looking to them more, than the sculptors who had come before, even though I really admired [Donald] Judd and [Carl] Andre. The people I was around all the time were Phil Glass and Steve Wright and all the dancers, and I used to go to all their performances and I learned a tremendous amount from what they were doing. I think at that time they were the most progressive people in the city. Particularly Yvonne.

Does this pertain to these drawings or the way they could be experienced?

I think that was the beginnings of my moving into sculpture, so in hindsight everything kind of, but I don't think directly, no. I think people, myself included, tend to footnote things to make them more linear than they actually are. I think actually art proceeds by disjunction, not by continuities.

How does this show relate to your 2007 MoMA retrospective, or how do you want people to relate the two shows?

It's a different body of work. I'd like it to be seen as an autonomous body of drawing, good or bad, and just be judged that way, or be reviewed that way, or just be viewed that way. But if people start making relationships to the sculpture then they're really missing the point. It's about what they are in their definition as drawing. They're not trying to redefine what the sculpture is, and they're not pointing to the sculpture. They make spaces and places, but they're not sculptural spaces and places in the way that sculptures make their own spaces and places.