

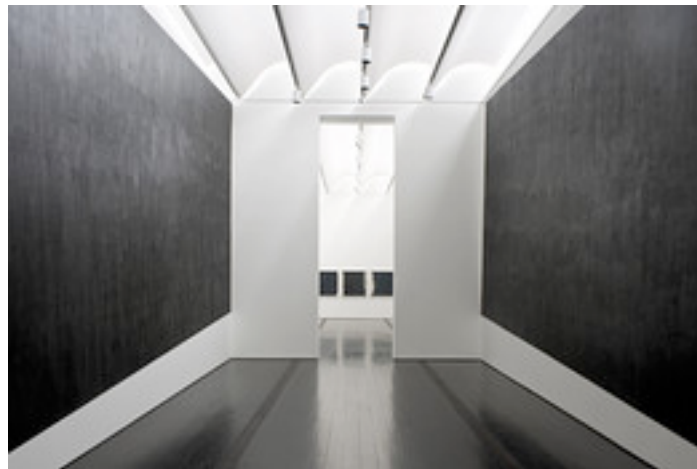
GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A Show That Draws You In

Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective

By Richard B. Woodward



Courtesy of the Menil Collection, photos by Paul Hester

Not every artist looks better at the Menil Collection than anywhere else. It just sometimes seems that way.

Richard Serra, for one, is not an obvious candidate for the benefits conferred by the museum's soothing ambiance. The aggressive persona of his art, most evident in 20-ton rolled-steel sculptures that balance sublime grace and terror, might appear to be ill-suited to the unassuming Menil, which keeps a low profile in a neighborhood of bungalows.

It's a surprise, therefore, that his traveling retrospective of drawings not only lodges comfortably here but engages so perfectly with the spirit of the place that this set of brooding abstractions deserves to have a permanent home at the Menil.

When hung at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last spring, the drawings had their moments. There was the room housing three fearsomely titled 1989 works: "The United States Courts Are Partial to the Government," "No Mandatory Patriotism" and "The United States Government Destroys Art."

In towering slabs of black paintstick, thickly embedded on linen, the group expressed in condensed form Mr. Serra's rage against the federal court that in the 1980s had adjudicated removal of his sculpture "Tilted Arc" from a public plaza in downtown New York. Other rooms in the show carried visitors between slender all-black rectangles, a face-off of massive solids and light-sucking voids.

Potent though that installation was at intervals, the one at the Menil, arranged by curator Michelle White (aided by the artist), integrates many of these same works with a rigor missing in New York. Pieces are allowed to retain their individual identities while also gathering a momentum that takes visitors through the warren of rooms until they reach what could be called a surprise ending—and one that's entirely fitting.

Drawing is an action unto itself for Mr. Serra and requires special handling from curators. While many sculptors' works on paper serve mainly as studies for three-dimensional objects, his drawings often aren't preliminary but done after he completes one of his monumental sculptures. Designed to stand alone, they also shouldn't be seen as divorced from Mr. Serra's other art.

Ms. White has treated this problem deftly by hanging on the wall of the Menil's lobby his "Forged Drawing" from 1977/2008: four small, forged-steel geometric sculptures (a circle, rectangle, octagon and square) that he has drawn over with black paintstick.

The process and physicality of making art have been central concerns of his since the late 1960s, and both ideas are reflected in the show's unusually "active" title: "Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective." He has said that when he draws he doesn't want to feel as if he is "skating" across these surfaces. The black paintstick—either in crayon or brick-like form—records his hand-to-hand combat with his materials.

The entrance to the exhibition space presents essential background material. Vitrines contain notebooks of drawings from several decades, as well as his famous two-page "Verb List" from 1967-68 (a catalog of possible art-making activities—"to roll, to crease," etc.). Screens embedded in the wall play films of his performances from the '60s, including the 30-minute "Hand Catching Lead," a title that effectively describes its content.

The galleries channel visitors into various kinds of spatial confrontations with Mr. Serra's inky abstractions. There are enormous works not exhibited in the other venues. "Double Rift #3" (2011) consists of three panels more than 8 feet tall and 16 feet wide divided by knifelike slits. "Emerson" (2010) is a black circle that seems to have already engulfed the square paper it's drawn on and threatens to burst like a runaway meteor into the room.

The Menil's natural light, filtered through its louvered ceilings, is ideal for appreciating the raised patterns Mr. Serra has built up by pushing the tarry oil into the linen or paper. Some have a smooth sheen, like freshly rolled macadam; others reveal a cratered battlefield or bumpy moonscape.

Not until visitors can go no farther in the gallery maze, when they are faced with "Two Corner Cut: High Low" from 2012 (made specifically for this show at the Menil), is it clear that this is not another "exit through the gift shop" installation. You have to return as you came, a path that, of course, alters everything you have already seen because it's now seen from reversed angles.

Ms. White and the Menil have thus turned the viewing of Mr. Serra's drawings into a kinetic experience that brings to mind his sculptures. Walking through these rooms is not unlike entering the whorl of one of his torqued ellipses and finding your way back out. There were moments when I even felt the same spasms of claustrophobia.

I didn't see the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's presentation of this body of work, the second of the show's three stops. But improving on the Menil's would be a tall order. Mr. Serra, not an easy man to please, has declared it his favorite of the three as well.

If some exhibitions are wrestling matches between the art and the space that displays it, with one or the other vying for dominance, the Menil usually triumphs by pretending to submit. Renzo Piano's innocuous gray shed looks from street level more like an elementary school than a world-class art institution.

Its curators of contemporary art enjoy a decided advantage over colleagues at museums such as the Met, or even SFMoMA and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where numerous traditions compete and the weighty judgments of history are reflected in the stony facades of their buildings. The Menil has less to defend, and the uncommonly observant and small crowds go there only because they're curious about or love art. In a city notorious for its sprawling disdain of zoning laws, this patch of ground feels like an anchor, its Central Park.

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