

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Every Force Evolves a Form

Phong Bui



"Intervals," 2013. © Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Robert McKeever.

RICHARD SERRA: NEW SCULPTURE

OCTOBER 26, 2013 – MARCH 15, 2014 | 555 WEST 24TH STREET

OCTOBER 26, 2013 – FEBRUARY 8, 2014 | 522 WEST 21ST STREET

Perhaps more than many of his peers from the late '60s through today, Richard Serra continues to explore his monumental anxiety through an inquiry of form, as much as remaining openly receptive to the art of the past and the art of his own time, especially regarding potential expansions from the language of post-Minimalism.

In the recent works, shown at Gagosian's two galleries in Chelsea, one is once again reminded of how weight, and Serra's endless attraction to it, does not inhibit his subtle and not so subtle reinventions of form. This time, however, Serra offers his exhaustive variables of a rectilinear repertoire in one space while invoking his luscious appetite for curvilinear configurations in the other.

For example, walking in, out, and through the installation "Intervals" requires a careful negotiation between walking and standing (a simple difference, yet often taken for granted); how fast or slow one walks, or how long one stands still in a particular location and not another in relationship to certain angles of the work's modules. In other words, the overall feeling of

walking inside and in-between seems to evoke a labyrinthine-like geometry, where one is less reassured of his or her own orientation due to the piece's shifting heights that shift one's eye level (five and six feet); the various thicknesses that mediate one's body; and the alternating lengths (five to 11 feet) that decide the stretch of one's stride. Once one moves along the outer edges one is released by the legible demarcation of the grid, on which all of the plates are visibly organized according to certain pairings of heights and widths. Still, one can't deny one's own spatial disorientation. Furthermore, in some instances, when looking directly in front of each nine-inch edge, covered by squeezed or dragged impressions, drips to robust cut marks, the variations of Barnett Newman's vertical zips come to mind, as if they are personified in three-dimensional form. (After all, Serra was once a painter, and his knowledge of painting is as equally well-versed as his knowledge of sculpture, his vested interest.)

"Grief and Reason (For Walter)," a forged steel work, considerably heavier than the rolled steel, is dedicated to Joseph Brodsky's 1964 essay of the same title and the recently passed Walter De Maria. Here Serra has deployed two rectangular units, the large one (3 by 7 by 5 feet) is stacked on top of a smaller one, and vice versa for the other. As a result, the ubiquitous baring of sheer solidity and weight is felt as soon as one enters the room. Yet as one comes closer and moves around it, one soon sees the thoroughly worn-out patinas and rough surfaces along with the irregular edges and planes that are the cause of tiny glimpses of light in between the two solemn forms. As a whole, the interplay between rotational symmetry and the inversion of the forms impeccably mitigates the weight. Yet the weighty sentiment of loss, as its title suggests, as with past references of burial forms, is an undeniable presence from every angle.

The sensation of weight is immediately altered as one confronts "7 Plates, 6 Angles" in the next room. With the seven plates, each 8 feet high, 40 feet long, and 8 inches thick, leaning against each other in a freestanding zigzag across the space, in six different angles, one is drawn into the constant fluctuation of spatial compression as one walks to the corner of the two plates and spatial expansion as one walks away. The relationship of these two experiential responses is drastic in that diagonal lines, usually associated with instability hence dynamism, have instilled this particular work with the feeling of stability and instability simultaneously and with equal force.

In the smallest room in the front, leaning against the center wall is "Counterweights." Not until one is near does one realize that two identical plates compose each configuration. The left two sheets, the same dimensions of about five inches thick and a bit more than five feet long, are stacked vertically to their maximal height. The right two, the same lengths, are stacked horizontally to their maximal width. Gravity plus the plate's weight, an overhead compression, appears to hold steady these perpendicular, upright forms while they lean at such a significant angle against the wall. What is even more remarkable is the viewer's insecurity from the side may well be justified—a hair more or less of the exact angle of this lean seems certain to cause collapse.

Given the interval of rest walking from 24th Street, where we had just seen the works discussed, to 21st Street, one's experience is barely digested, though it was perfect timing. Unlike Serra's other concerns with weights through rectilinear forms, "Inside Out" is by far one of the artist's masterpieces, at least to date, in my opinion. It emphatically demonstrates the sweeping power of Serra's preoccupation with curvilinear form begun in the mid-1990s with the torqued ellipses series. "Inside Out," is the largest and most complex among Serra's torqued steel sculptures. With its seemingly wavering volume, it is over 80 feet long and 13 feet high in two interrupted

planes (although 16 plates were seamlessly joined together), never before has the unity of the surface and the display of such complex bending become as lyrically fluid as in this installation. Never before has the choreography of the two plates provided such an array of spatial experiences. “Inside Out” appears to be a summation of all of Serra’s previous body of works, particularly as though it were a synthesis of the two works “Snakes” (1994–97) and “Band” (2006).

Walking away from the two exhibits on a windy, cold afternoon of December I couldn’t help but to think of how one’s memory system may perhaps be organized in some specific way in order to implement sorts of mnemonic recall at will. Similarly, the mind must be therefore receptive to many kinds of symbolic or allegorical episodes it equally considers intellectually functional and aesthetically satisfying. Either way the sculptures are disposed in the imagination as spatial patterns that hasten to retrieve early images associated with them. I mean to say, Serra’s early memory of seeing the enormous ship with obdurate weight launched on his fourth birthday in 1942, which turned buoyant, ecstatically free and light, never left him. It’s as if a sense of scale is also a matter of an inner condition, like a person standing on a high mountain looking at the immense surrounding and the vista below. All of a sudden an intense toothache occurs. The perception of scale here is the inner pain that easily dominates the immensity of nature outside. We’re once again reminded that any meditation on symmetry must inevitably account for different possibilities of asymmetry that are welcome to upset the given symmetry.