

I call it Oranges
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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Art Reviews, Cultural Bric a Brac, Jargon Free

Richard Serra

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Richard Serra: Double Rifts
Through June 1st
Gagosian Gallery

Poet Ted Kooser writes in “After Years” about seeing a woman he used to love and relates the encounter to both the vast and tiny tectonics of the world: “Without a sound/the glittering face of a glacier/slid into the sea,” he writes, “An ancient oak / fell in the Cumberland, holding only/ a handful of leaves.” The poem then turns on a sort of hinge, elegantly pivoting away from the large and anonymous into the small and specific: “An old woman/scattering corn to her chickens looked up/ for an instant.”

It feels like that, seeing someone we loved or perhaps still love, we want it to register on the level of nature, we want the wisest and the oldest to notice, we want the world to turn our way, we want that deep -- still numb -- bruise to have meant something. We also, perversely, enjoy riding the nostalgia of the bruise’s unexpected return. We don’t exactly want it to go away. That inside of us which had fractured and split arrives again in silence; we stand in “the great open dome” of our heart “with no one to tell.”

It is common in poetry to compare the events of the universe with the local, to feel the fissure of large galactic events in the tiny situations of life, to think that nature holds our pain along with us. However, good poems know that this is not true and often the most total and all encompassing sublimity of what we feel is really a sort of irony. Nature is at best apathetic of us and the enormity of its silence and disregard of us has a strange way of making us seem precious and unimportant at the same time. We expect to be one with the universe but really are but small things out of line with it by virtue of the shocking gift of our consciousness, weakened by our own arrogance. From mighty Caesar, whose “double bed is warm,” as W.H. Auden writes in the Fall of Rome, to “an unimportant clerk” who “writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK/ on a pink official form,” all register as ironic anomalies against that which is “altogether elsewhere,” as “vast/ Herds of reindeer move across/ Miles and miles of golden moss,/ Silently and very fast.”

Is it irony or sublimity that I feel in front of Richard Serra's new drawings at Gagosian? They too are vast, they too register large tectonic events and small local moments: the tough rub of his paint stick surface, bathed in Richard Meier mid-day skylight, torn with lighting strikes of white paper shining through the pitch of black. I think, on one hand, of Barnett Newman's encounters on the empty tundra of the north, as a single person approached him from a great distance striking against the landscape, I think of how this event quieted Jackson Pollock's networks and galaxies down to single lightning strike. I think of how a Newman zip could send Walter Di Maria to the Southwest and James Turrell to a crater with a backhoe. On the other hand, I think of every moment I am at loss for words in relation to the world, how a loss splits me from the world and takes me to a loneliness that I would like to think is important but probably isn't, how those that I have lost simply go away and how the world rises around me threatening and dangerous and glorious, and how it is both a comfort and a terror to think that nature doesn't care about something so decidedly un-glorious as me.

Are these thoughts even appropriate to have in a shiny well lit space of Gagosian, apparently given by an artist who usually simply hits me over the head with core-ten steel and drags me back, subdued, to his cave? How do these thoughts suddenly arrive like this, with Kooser and Auden and the long line of lonely souls who go to the sea and sing, who write to save their lives because to do anything else would mean being simply subsumed entirely by the quiet? Has this been Serra's point the entire time? I want to write of both the terror and the comfort.

I think a partial answer to that primal feeling that Serra's drawing produce in me has to do with basalt. Grey to black in color, basalt is the belched aftermath of volcanic events, millions of years of micro and macro tears in the crust of the earth that brought us life and gave us this, our earth (perhaps like the muscle of our hearts). Serra became obsessed with basalt on multiple trips to Iceland, from which he created one of his least known but most poetic site specific sculptures, Afangar, on Videy Island, in 1988. Serra describes this sculpture like a worker, as a matter of simple details: “The sculpture on Videy Island consists of 18 hexagonal basalt stones, nine sets, all three and four meters high and approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of a meter wide.” In these simple details, there is more than enough to contain everything we are.

Dirk Reinartz's great photos of the Afangarsculpture shows stark bits of basalt, primal encounters against a vastness of space and ocean. As anyone who has looked out far and deep into the sea knows, there is something old and crazy and angry about its winds and waves, and for me, Afangar, captures the anger of the primal event. I remember visiting a fort far north on Ireland's Aran Islands and thinking, how, with primitive tools and time, could have anyone made such a structure; what, on this island in the middle of nowhere, could have scared these people; and who, far away from things, would they need protection from? In Afangar, I feel these questions, knowing full well that it was Serra that placed the basalt stones there, that he was commissioned, knowing all the sausage making of what that entails. In the end, Afangar works as a bit of primal magic. It might as well be thousands of years old and who cares that it is not. Our hearts house the same terror of the ancients and why shouldn't it? We live in the same world. Volcanoes destroy us with the same lack of enthusiasm with which they drain ancient lakes.

Afangar, one could argue, is a sort of grandfather to Double Rifts at Gagosian. Its lonely columns in a vast space strike me as much more relevant to the new drawings than any of the core-ten works or even the previous drawings. The notable exceptions are the Rounds series (which step forward like expanding big bangs or contracting black holes) and the Solids (whose play with Newman's zips are less about encounter and more about assertive containment) if only as foils from which Double Rifts emerge. Afangar and Double Rifts are not assertive, they are not jocks, they are simply realities, they sit in their primal apathy, shot through with event as the intensity of old stone breaks into ancient malice. Those zips on the horizon and those streaks of white are nothing less than Robinson Jeffers' hawk landing on a stone. "A falcon has perched," and the poet goes onto write, "Here is your emblem/ To hang in the future sky;/ Not the cross, not the hive, / But this; bright power, dark peace; /Fierce consciousness/ joined with final/ Disinterestedness; /Life with calm death." Both the hawk and the stone are strange to us. We do not have these "realist eyes." We hope, we dream, but the reality is that we are "Married to the massive/ Mysticism of stone,/ Which failure cannot cast down/ Nor success make proud."

If this is true – that Serra's zips break as the tectonics of the world break -- the ethic behind Serra's drawings is fierce indeed, brooding to point of primal pain. If this is true, there is no consolation indeed for he who sits lonely without the person he loves, who comes up against the apathy of a universe without even the slightest desire to understand him, a strange creature who stands apart in his strange agency, with his quite other worldly pursuits of happiness and progress and the endless frustration that it is only he that validates or condemns those very pursuits.

Quite a lot for Richard Serra show, I know, but worth thinking about. Even more so, there's an even further thought, that it's somehow fantastic and moving that Serra's drawings bring out these tough thoughts. Furthermore, it's fantastic and moving that in the process of showing me such tough thoughts, with all the weight of primal event, that the drawing had the strange tendency to make me miss someone I love, to think of that Kooser poem, of the loved and lost off in the distance.

This longing is ego, is consciousness, is human. The foolishness of my smallness and its capability to be animated and affirmed paradoxically by the callousness of the world is, in the end, a human thing. It makes one glad we moved out of caves and away from shorelines, that consciousness allowed us to dream ourselves into our ironic existence. Our human thing, though the glacier has little regard for it, is all we have and it will always be good enough. I am reminded, somehow, to step up to Jeffers and Serra and proclaim, as Czeslaw Milosz did, that it is “Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses/as was done in my district. To birches and firs/ give feminine names. To implore protection/ against the mute and treacherous might/ than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.”