

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Impossible balance: Richard Serra's sculptures at Gagosian Gallery

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Backdoor Pipeline (2010), Richard Serra © Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

I remember Richard Serra's 2008 'Sculpture' show as a powerful, corporeal experience. Enveloped by the folds of *Open Ended*, I had the sensation that its metallic walls were pulsating in time with my own heartbeat. It is the measure of Serra's brilliance that such an illusion may be felt within the stillness of his monumental structures. Serra's current exhibition at Gagosian London (until 28 February 2015) is no less enthralling. Entering *Backdoor Pipeline* is like stepping through the threshold of a cathedral of rusted steel. You feel compelled to whisper as you follow its curved path, but if you do speak up (or clap, hum, sing even), the sound reverberates wondrously, and glides along its surface. The

cavernous darkness of the arched structure feels primeval. But despite its apparent simplicity, this is a tour-de-force of engineering. The complexity and integrity of Serra's work is mind-blowing.



Ramble (2014), Richard Serra © Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

I went to Gagosian with a scientist friend, and to him, standing in *Backdoor Pipeline* was like being inside an equation, which you are given to solve physically, rather than intellectually. *Ramble* shares this sense of mathematical poetry. Seen from the sides, it offers perfectly regular sightlines. Wandering through its labyrinthine core, one struggles to unravel the pattern in its scansion of steel fins. Their sobriety is at once soothing and exhilarating.



London Cross (2014), Richard Serra © Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Can one really speak of minimalism when these works have such monumentality? Serra is a master of the impossible balance. His gravity-defying sculptures loom over the viewer but they enclose, enfold, shelter, rather than intimidate. *London Cross*'s perfect equipoise defies belief. Standing beneath the meeting point of two colossal blades of metal, one feels wonder, not apprehension. They reveal the space, its possibilities, and our place within it. If *London Cross* suggests miraculous lightness, *Dead Load* is all gravitas. Resembling an altar, it calls for devout contemplation. You want to kneel in front of it.

For their abstract rigour, it would be easy to describe these works as austere. Yet their calculated intensity is matched by their sensuality. Serra is, without a doubt, an artist who loves surface and matter as much as he relishes volume and technical challenges. Serra the alchemist manipulates substance into being something else. *London Cross* emulates matt concrete, but concrete that is soft rather than raw, and begs to be touched. *Backdoor Pipeline*'s rust colours are of the earth, its striations almost geological. If the burnished edges of *Ramble* evoke charred wood, the scars on its planes bring to mind the galleries beetles dig into bark. The scorched skin of *Dead Load* reveals glittering, precious reflections. Serra's steel is not a base metal. It is sophisticated, rich in tones and textures. It is seductive and precious: alive.



Dead Load (2014), Richard Serra © Richard Serra. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

As a museum curator, it is rare for me to feel that art needs no interpretation. But there is no need to label, explicate or theorise over Serra's work. As cerebral as it might be, it is possible to have a deeply personal, emotional response to it. And Serra reminds you that sculpture inhabits space, and invites you to inhabit it with it.