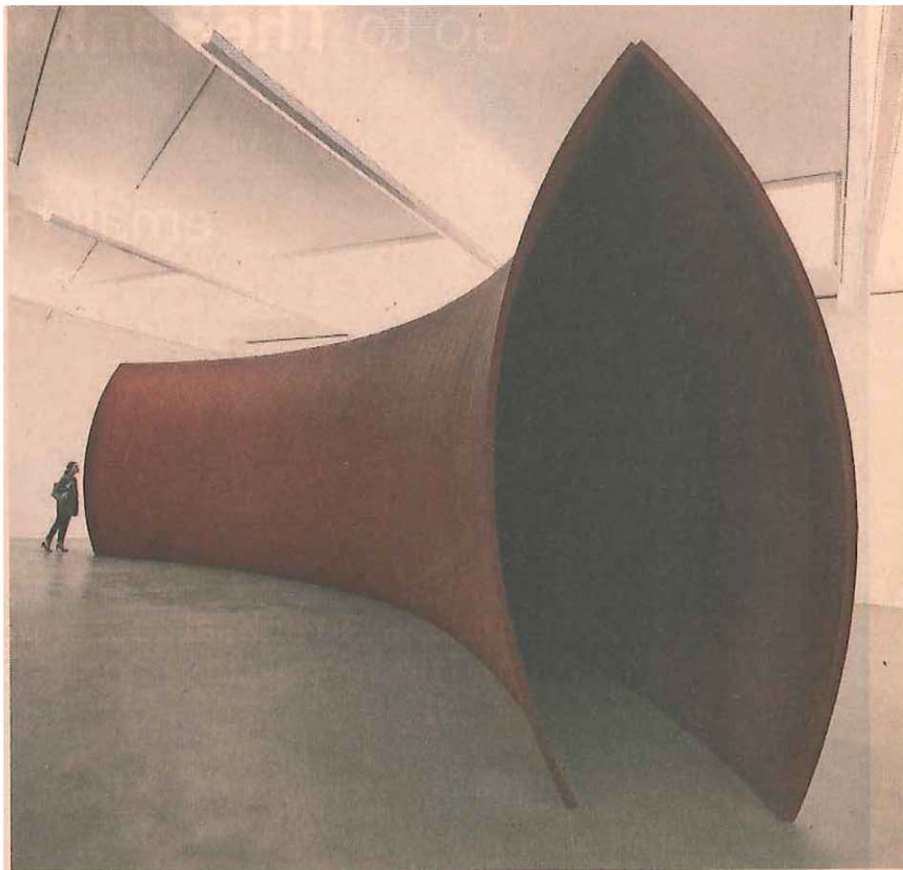


GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Steel made light and lyrical

*Sculptor Richard Serra
considers space to be
his primary material:
Jackie Wullschlager reviews
his new London show*



Enticing: 'Backdoor Pipeline' (2010), by Richard Serra

Richard Serra's quartet of steel works at Gagosian weighs a total of 230 tonnes, demanded the demolition then reconstruction of most of the gallery's walls, and during installation closed traffic on Britannia Street for a fortnight. No wonder Serra has never had a museum retrospective in the UK. But the omission is our loss: this titan of a sculptor is a rare case where gigantism is essential to the vision, not a decadent offshoot of money or vanity.

Arriving in the capital during Frieze week, Serra's show *Backdoor Pipeline, Ramble, Dead Load, London Cross* is a reminder that spectacle and theatre in a gallery really only satisfy when tied to formal seriousness and precise pleasures of mass, volume, materiality.

"London Cross", which fills a single room corner-to-corner, consists of two 12m-long slabs of weatherproof steel placed one on top of the other and aligned to make a cross. The upper one, reaching the roof of the gallery, is attached not to ceiling or walls but seems to defy gravity by resting entirely on its intersecting point with the lower slab.

It is a masterpiece of compression and precariousness, a sort of monumental double prop version of Serra's early corner prop pieces which is impossible to take in at one view: the mystery of what is on the other side keeps you moving across, beneath, behind, around this strangely bisected, distorted space.

When Serra says "I consider space to be my primary material", he is inviting a response which is as much from the body as from the eye. "Ramble" consists of two dozen upright steel plates of varying widths, each standing at roughly human height, arranged to form a geometric maze. The plates are placed in irregular rows, just far enough apart to encourage you to wander through them - a walk which reveals their ravishing, lively oxidised surfaces of golden rust, grit, shadows, blotches, chance patterns resembling dripping rain or leaf imprints, downward pulsing marks that recall Cy Twombly's late abstractions, vast silvery blurs that bring to mind Gerhard Richter's grey paintings.

But not entirely is "Ramble" the gentle counterpart to the unyielding "London Cross", because some of the plates are slightly too tall to see over, bringing you up close to darkness, while their tight positioning constantly forces you to slow down, pause, turn another way. A ramble through a wood, with sunlight piercing gaps in the trees, comes to mind, but so do tombstones in a cemetery.

Lightness and weight, openness and constriction, solid and void, angles and curves, are the poles of Serra's art.

At Gagosian the coffin-like 50-tonne pair of rectangular boxes of forged steel in "Dead Load", with contrasting surfaces - one was left outside to acquire a weathered patina - is the blunt, squat, solid, opposite of "Backdoor Pipeline", an undulating, inside-out 15m ribbon of reddish-brown steel. Its curving exteriors are vast, overwhelming, but

its conical entrances entice you through an exhilarating, cavernous interior.

Is "Dead Load" the dead load of modernism, or the tragic ending of its utopian idealism in totalitarian nightmare? "Modernism was a right angle. The whole 20th century was a right angle," Serra has said; then in the 1990s "people were ready for curves". His torqued spirals such as "Snake" (1994-7) and "The Matter of Time" (2005) are the only sculptures which answer the defiant concave and convex surfaces replacing right angles in Frank Gehry's deconstructivist Guggenheim Bilbao.

Yet Serra's art, rooted in minimalist austerity, looks back as well as forward: to the industrialised early 20th century, and to the shipyards that he observed as a child growing up in San Francisco. He has described his wonder, on his fourth birthday in 1943, at a boat launch: the vessel's size, the anxiety of watching the vessel roll into the sea and find its balance, its "transformation from an enormous obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat and adrift". "Backdoor Pipeline", with its echoes of a ship's hull, is such an object, the uncompromising heavy steel transformed by Serra's art into something lyrical and liberating.

Gagosian Gallery, London, to February 28
gagosian.com