

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE NEW YORKER

Richard Serra in the Qatari Desert

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Photograph courtesy of Richard Serra.

Richard Serra's new sculpture, "East-West/West-East," is a set of four standing steel plates rolled in Germany, shipped via Antwerp, and offloaded, trucked, and craned into place in the middle of the western Qatari desert. It's his second public commission in Qatar—the first, a towering sculpture titled "7," is his tallest ever—and it is being unveiled, together with a new work, at the Al Riwaq exhibition space, in Doha.

"East-West/West-East," which spans the greatest area of any of Serra's creations, is yet another grand piece of public art purchased by the Gulf nation. The Qatar Museums Authority is estimated to spend about a billion dollars per year on art. At its head is the young Sheikha al-Mayassa Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, a sister of the Emir of Qatar and a Duke University graduate, who was recently named the most powerful person in the art world by ArtReview.

I asked Serra the day before the piece debuted about what effect this enormous investment has had on his work. He told me that the Qataris have given him the opportunity to work in his own time on gigantic projects that he couldn't possibly have conceived of anywhere else. He said that his focus is not on the political and sociological aspects of the country but, rather, on his own projects: "You know, I come here and work. That's what I do."

The conditions in the desert differ from those of the Grand Palais, in Paris, where he set up work in 2008. There, he said, "you can step out and have a cappuccino," whereas, in Qatar, he has to contend with savage sandstorms. Yet the team that helped him set up was the same that he's used for more than a quarter century; the steel is the same that he's used in his other pieces, and it will

oxidize in the same way, albeit more quickly in the hot, salty conditions of the Brouq Nature Reserve. The plates will go from gray to orange to brown, until they turn a dark amber—approximately the same color, he said, as the Seagram Building, in midtown. “How long those pieces will last, nobody knows,” he said. “But I think this piece has a good shelf life.”

The idea to work in the desert came from the Qataris. Serra recalled a conversation with Sheikha al-Mayassa during the construction of “7”: “She asked me, ‘Would you build a piece in the landscape?,’ and I said to her, ‘What landscape?,’ and she said, ‘The desert.’ ”

Serra started making exploratory trips during the day, when it was too hot to work on the installation of the tower. He said in a past interview that he’s less interested in the desert than in the sea, and he told me that he never specifically intended to work in these conditions. But, he said, “it’s a desert like no other—the desert itself is just a mysterious place,” and he enjoyed the conditions. “You become very, very aware of the hour of the day and what’s underfoot and the temperature and the wind, particularly the wind, and the sand,” he said.

I told Serra that the first time I had seen one of his works was at Dia:Beacon, upstate. It was an enclosed, spiralling piece and, as I approached it, I was unsure whether I was allowed to enter. I remember the feeling of transgression as I made my way inside, and the way the noises from the rest of the gallery were distorted by the steel walls, then the thrill of touching the art. The places in which he chooses to install his art work are significant, often public, but made private through his intervention. Finding such a place in the desert took time. He was drawn to a chalky plateau between two inlets—Serra called it “John Ford country, without the romanticism of the large plateaus”—and he couldn’t stop visiting. “We went back again and again and again,” he told me.

The spot had been suggested to Serra by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, the former Emir. He told Serra that it was a place he remembered from his youth, where herds of antelope gathered. When Serra chose the location for the installation of the plates, he went to see the Sheikh. “He was very touched by the fact—I could see it in his eye—he was moved by the fact that I had chosen the place.”

I’ve always thought of what Serra does as something like the statue of Marcus Aurelius on top of the Capitoline Hill, in Rome, guiding us to understand the space in front of us, pointing and shaping the urban landscape with an outstretched hand. In transgressing the space, some of Serra’s works invite us to do the same, but what does that mean for an American in the Middle Eastern desert?

“These pieces are pretty transparent,” he told me. “You can actually engage them without any apprehension.” His hope is that “East-West/West-East” will become a landmark. He said that “7” had become a “destination” for residents of Doha on weekend walks, and he doesn’t see why his new work in the desert would be different. As Serra put it, “I’m sure people will either walk or drive to the pieces. I’m positive of it.”