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Shows That Matter: Richard Serra's "Ramble Drawings"

Noelle Bodick



*An installation view of Richard Serra's "Ramble Drawings," currently on view at Gagosian Gallery.
(© Richard Serra. Courtesy of Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Robert McKeever.)*

WHAT: "Richard Serra: Ramble Drawings"

WHEN: Through October 26

WHERE: Gagosian Gallery, Upper East Side

WHY: Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, once said that every generation has to paint its own black square. He was referring to the 1913 monochrome by Kazimir Malevich, founder of the Russian Suprematist movement, who searched for a new beginning, a "zero degree," in art. But his statement could also apply for a later generation to Richard Serra, whose "Ramble Drawings," displayed at Gagosian Gallery's Upper East Side outpost in a show that opened Saturday, demonstrate the same reductive impulse.

The exhibition's 74 works on paper (all from 2015) are variations on Malevich's square, stretched out and pressed with black lithographic crayons to achieve different textures: oily, streaky, pocked, solid. The pictures, stacked like rows of large, incongruous industrial cement bricks across the gallery walls, are anything but monotonous, however. Black never looked so colorful.

The 75-year-old American modernist has in the past explicitly invited a comparison to Malevich, observing: "Malevich's black square = spirituality. My black square = materiality." Serra's description of the earlier work was in line with the way many American artists of the 1960s and '70s — Donald Judd and Mel Bochner among them — preferred to think of its creator: as a Euclidian rationalist unconcerned with process. This was either an innocent misreading or a calculated mischaracterization, designed to differentiate their own projects from the Suprematists'. In truth, as art historian Yve-Alain Bois pointed out in a 2011 essay, Malevich laid down paint with bristling, varying surfaces.

Serra is right, though, in imputing mystic inclinations to Malevich. In his 1915 Petrograd gallery show, he hung his black square painting in a corner near the ceiling, the place where, in a Russian home, the icon of a saint would be displayed. Here was a new icon for modernity, Malevich suggested, released from the burden of representing real life in portraits or landscapes.

Serra's drawings are hung at a less celestial height and exhibit a less pure abstraction. There is a sensuality to the long crayon marks pressed onto the paper with varying degrees of weight. Some works might remind viewers of a moment in a Degas sketch, a Munch drawing, or a Cézanne painting. And those associations are perfectly acceptable. Paul Klee famously defined drawing as taking a line for a walk. These "Rambles" on the other hand, are desultory wanderings, of the line and the eye.