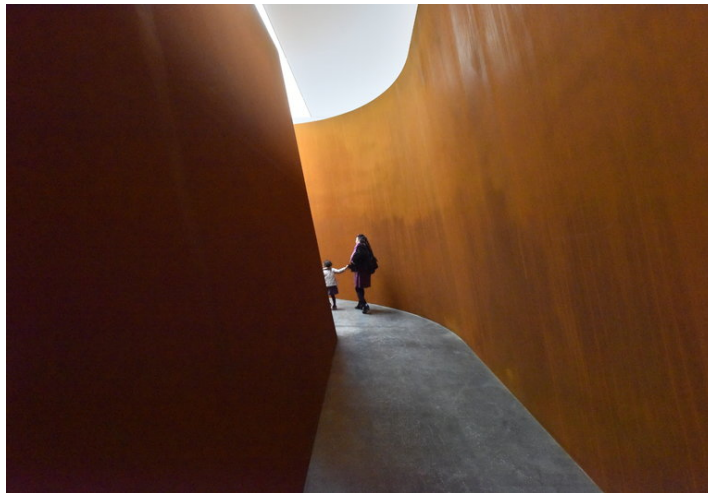


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Richard Serra's Steel Behemoths Get Into Your Head

Ken Johnson



Richard Serra's steel sculpture "NJ-1" (2015) is at Gagosian's 522 West 21st Street galley in Chelsea. 2016 Richard Serra/Artists Rights Society, New York; Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Richard Serra may have his ideological detractors, but he is certainly today's greatest living sculptor of Minimalist abstraction. Exhibitions of new works occupying Gagosian Gallery's two Chelsea display spaces find Mr. Serra at 76 still wrangling fundamentals of shape, space, gravity and time into objects and installations of thrilling severity.

At West 21st Street is a single, grand example of his mazes made from immense ribbons of rolled steel; West 24th Street hosts three works made of solid steel slabs as well as a drawing installation. In certain respects these divergent strands in Mr. Serra's oeuvre are opposites. While the maze subordinates material to gravity-defying form, the slab works favor weighty raw material. What the two have essentially in common is their consciousness-expanding effects.

Standing in the middle of the huge West 21st Street space, "NJ-1" resembles a big tent whose nearly 14-foot-high sides seem to be made of burnt-orange velvet. Up close you discover a beautiful, granular surface of rusted steel. Circling clockwise on the outside you find no entrance until you've gone three-quarters of the way, at which point the two-inch-thick wall swerves into a narrow corridor. Walking in, you approach a concave interior wall and openings to right and left. Either way, you proceed between walls tilting this way and that and admitting different amounts of light from above. (Claustrophobes beware.) A series of switchbacks eventually empties you into the first corridor and out.

This is sculpture not just as an interesting object to look at but as an engulfing experience. Moving through the construction, you become acutely attuned to sight, touch and sound and to your own being in time and space. Consciousness itself becomes an object of consciousness. Perhaps there's a quasi-religious dimension, too, if you think of the maze as an ancient participatory ritual object in which the uncertain journey of life is ceremonially enacted and the possibility of spiritual progress is metaphorically expressed.

The most arresting piece at West 24th Street is "Silence (for John Cage)," an 80-ton slab of forged steel lying flat on the floor. Knee-high and 29 ½ feet by 9 feet 2 inches, it astounds by virtue of its sheer mass, its rugged physicality intensified by contrast with the pristine white walls of the gallery.

It's worth noting Mr. Serra's titular dedication to Cage, the avant-garde musician whose most famous composition, for piano, "4'33"," consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence. Mr. Cage's piece is presumed to heighten audience attention to and appreciation of ambient sound and to invite meditation on just what exactly music is. Mr. Serra's piece is similarly effective. You become enthralled by the brute presence of this enormous hunk of steel and your involvement with it. What did it take to transport such an unwieldy, dangerously heavy object to the gallery, to unload it and to place it so precisely in the gallery? What does such an operation cost?

If you saw this piece in a steel foundry you might find it magnetic and even beautiful. But you wouldn't necessarily know it to be a work of art as it bears none of the conventional signs of aesthetic design, technique or symbolism. What does it add, then, to see it as an artwork? It shifts attention from the object itself to the sensory, intuitive and cognitive experience of it. It's a here-now situation. You might wonder what it means, for surely if it is art then it means something. But it answers only with a provocative silence, as per its title, as if to say that ultimate answers to questions of meaning and being are beyond human comprehension.

Mr. Serra's two other sculptures in this gallery have a similarly industrial and primordial feeling. "Through" consists of three slabs, each the same size as "Silence," standing on their long sides in parallel. The whole is precisely oriented diagonally in the gallery so that peering through the narrow space between two slabs affords a view of one of the room's distant corners. Metaphorically speaking, you see through the physically opaque to the metaphysically transcendent.

"Every Which Way" has 16 slabs set up in a rectangular grid. Each slab is nearly a foot thick and they are in three heights — 7, 9 and 11 feet. Walking among them is like strolling through a graveyard of massive tombstones. Rows alternating paired slabs and single ones create a stately, rhythmic impression, like a marching band playing funereal oompah music.

A fourth, nonmetal piece, "Above Below Betwixt Between," is an installation of flat, black rectangles made by applying paint to Belgian linen. In a white, cube-shaped room about 18 feet on a side, the black swatches fill the upper halves of two opposite walls and the lower halves of the others, creating an enveloping syncopation of impenetrable darkness and blinding light. Like the Rothko Chapel, this is a space for meditating on terrestrial perception and cosmic ineffabilities.