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Richard Serra Will Jolt You Awake

The minimalist sculptor, with current shows at three branches of the Gagosian gallery, keeps the dynamic of the sublime in splendid tension.

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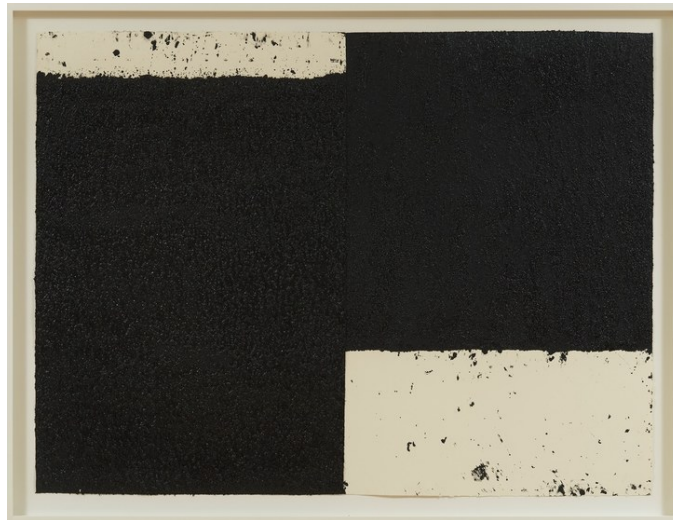


Serra's "Nine," from 2019. The sculptor's work raised the stakes of minimalist confrontation. © 2019 Richard Serra / ARS, courtesy Gagosian; Photograph by Rob McKeever

Great sculptors are rare and strange. In Western art, whole eras have gone by without one, and one at a time is how these artists come. I mean sculptors who epitomize their epochs in three dimensions that acquire the fourth, of time, in the course of our fascination. There's always something disruptive—uncalled for—about them. Their effects partake in a variant of the sublime that I experience as, roughly, beauty combined with something unpleasant. I think of the marble carvings of Gian Lorenzo Bernini in Rome: the Baroque done to everlasting death. A feeling of excess in both form and fantasy may be disagreeable—there's so much going on as Daphne morphs into a tree to escape Apollo, or a delighted seraph stabs an ecstatic St. Teresa in the heart with an arrow. But try to detect an extraneous curlicue or an unpersuasive gesture. Everything works! Move around. A newly magnificent unity coalesces at each step. You're knocked sideways out of comparisons to other art in any medium or genre. Four centuries of intervening history evaporate. Being present in the body is crucial to beholding Bernini's incarnations. Painting can't compete with this total engagement. It doesn't need to, because great sculpture is so difficult and, in each instance, so particular and even bizarre.

Richard Serra, with current shows at three branches of the Gagosian gallery, is our great sculptor, like it or not. I say relax and like it. His new work consists, at one gallery, of a nearly twenty-foot-high, nearly hundred-foot-long elongated S shape of two-inch-thick weatherproof steel (sealed by its patina of softly textured rust) and, at another, of standing steel cylinders that differ

in proportion of height to breadth but share the condition—so we are told and can only believe—of weighing fifty tons apiece. All the works were forged in Germany and shipped to Newark, and the two segments of the S shape spent the trip on deck. This likely explains the blooming orange surfaces of the plates on sides that were exposed to sun and the gloomy striations on the other sides, as yet uncured. The third show is of “drawings”—rather a frail word for diptychs and triptychs of large sheets of heavy paper bearing thick black shapes in paint stick, ink, and silica. Hardly pictorial, they are about as amiable as the front ends of oncoming trucks. Apropos the sublime, there’s possible unpleasantness galore about Serra’s sculpture: gross materiality, bombastic scale, and perhaps the all-time aesthetic quintessence of passive aggression. You can’t not think of the artist’s willfulness. He has seemed at times an Ayn Randian (though leftist) figure of the creator as a law unto himself. I would dislike him if I could build a case from the visible evidence equal in strength to my itch to dislike him. But beauty kicks in. Again, shift your viewpoint. There is a Beethoven-like majesty to the way the forms track, bend, concentrate, and release the space that they share with you. Your movement in their vicinity is a kind of dance that you can’t refuse or repress. Clear your mind. Let your body tell you what’s happening. Then your mind may start up again, pondering the work’s significance. How can anything so posterous feel matter-of-fact? How can it stun while coming as no surprise?



“Diptych #6,” from 2019. © 2019 Richard Serra / ARS, courtesy Gagosian. Photograph by Rob McKeever.

Serra is the straight-line consummator of Minimalism, the aesthetic revolution that, in the nineteen-sixties, redefined what sculpture is and what it does. Rather than offer objects for contemplation—as Bernini or Rodin or even expansive modernists such as Giacometti and David Smith did—minimalist artists induce acute self-consciousness, making us aware of where we are in a given space and how our sensations alter as we move. There’s no right vantage point. Minimalism ratified in art a mid-century shift to the sprawling new world of superhighways, airports, corporate plazas, malls, and big-chambered contemporary museums. For the viewer, it is “theatrical” and “in his way,” as the formalist critic Michael Fried put it, in an amazing essay from 1967, “Art and Objecthood,” in which his bull’s-eye attacks on the movement constituted an unintended appreciation. Boxes by Donald Judd, tiled metal plates on the floor by Carl Andre, and fluorescent fixtures by Dan Flavin irradiate rather than occupy space. Judging the work is complicated by a nagging consciousness that, as in a game of tag, the “it” is you. The inside-out aesthetic spread to many arts, notably music and dance, and remains a tacit lingua franca of curated exhibitions to this day.

Serra arrived smack in the dawn of the movement, graduating from Yale's School of Art and Architecture with an M.F.A. in 1964, and entering New York's seething downtown art world. He was born in San Francisco in 1938, to a Spanish-American father and a mother who had Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. Serra's experience of heavy industry at the city's docks, while his father worked there as a pipe fitter, affected him for life. With the truculent personality of some physically strong, emotionally hypersensitive people, he swaggered into action by ladling molten lead into junctions of gallery walls and floors. It was a way of moving beyond the finished objects of the first-generation minimalists by making things—ragged lengths of lead, pulled out into rooms—whose subject was the making of them. Did the cool effects secrete hot rage? You could think so, in ways encouraged by the disquieting presence of Serra's "prop" sculptures, weighty metal elements that leaned together, mutually supported by only gravity: not actually precarious but sure seeming so. Those were, and remain, terrific as more than representations of the real—they are realities, raising the stakes of minimalist confrontation. Almost by the by, they are elegant, too. Serra's follow-up was an engagement with outdoor sites which established his greatness as much by what he refrained from doing as by what he did.

The minimalist intoxication with existing space spurred other artists of the late sixties and early seventies into the wild: Michael Heizer, with "Double Negative" (1969), excavations of two mesas in Nevada; Walter De Maria, with "Lightning Field" (1977), four hundred stainless-steel poles evenly spaced in New Mexico; and Robert Smithson, with "Spiral Jetty" (1970), the eponymous shape, in rocks and dirt, which extends into the Great Salt Lake. Earthworks, as they were termed, were an overshoot, functioning as art mainly by way of documentation or dedicated tourism. (In person, I found "Spiral Jetty" disappointing as sculpture—distinctly not quite big enough for the scale of its setting—though glorious as a subject for photographs that will grace every art-history book forever.)



"Reverse Curve," from 2005/2019. © 2019 Richard Serra / ARS, courtesy Gagosian. Photograph by Rob McKeever.

Serra kept his evolution to gigantism primarily in town and in art parks, where it could relate to existing structures and tended landscapes. The works, rather than complementing their settings, oppose them, with right-angled forms in nature and sinuous ones against angular architecture. Pieces by Serra command public spaces in cities from Berlin to Pittsburgh. Most involve ship-size steel slabs, curved or torqued and very long or tipped together and soaring. Some form

corridors and enclosures that can feel mazelike, though their footprints are rationally simple enough. They poetically rhyme exquisite engineering with brute materiality, élan with solemnity. They jolt you awake.

What is “public art”? It is a phrase composed of two nouns. Serra failed epically with regard to one of them in 1980, with “Tilted Arc,” a commission by the U.S. General Services Administration for the plaza of the Javits Federal Building, near the Brooklyn Bridge in Manhattan. The hundred-and-twenty-foot-long, twelve-foot-high leaning slab looked graceful when viewed from its ends but faced anyone emerging from the building with a grim wall, and, in effect, cancelled any other use for the plaza. Federal workers petitioned against it. The furious controversy, leading to the removal of the sculpture, in 1989, helped scuttle a period of lavish funding for art by national and state agencies, which were being advised by art-world panels. The G.S.A.’s Art in Architecture program survives, but not its former deference to the avant-garde. The event now seems an early harbinger of today’s catastrophic ruptures in the national body politic. (For the record, I deemed the installation a mistake and, in print, sided with the unhappy workers.) But it also illustrates, by overbalancing, the dynamic of the sublime—the affront, the seduction—that Serra usually keeps in splendid tension.

Serra says that his new cylindrical works are about weight. Lightness he leaves to other artists. What do we understand of weight? I mean, beyond heavy, very heavy (a convertible sofa with the steel bed inside it which I once helped carry up several flights of stairs), incredibly heavy (more than the sofa), and incomprehensibly heavy (budgeable only by immense machinery, if at all). Where do you stop along the increments of that scale? The fifty-ton criterion for Serra’s “Forged Rounds,” as the cylinders are titled, owes to a weight limit for trucking across the George Washington Bridge, Serra has said. Therefore: as heavy as possible. There’s something profoundly satisfying—gravity as gravitas—about keeping company with the new Serras, as of being entrusted with a home truth of your and, for that matter, anything’s earthly existence. The sensation might be a tuning fork to gauge the degree of fact in other aspects of a world awash in pixelated illusions. How real is real? How real are we? ♦