

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

Richard Serra Is Carrying the Weight of the World *The 80-year-old artist, unlike his modernist forebears, counts pounds. He calls one coming exhibition his “heaviest show ever.”*

Deborah Solomon



Richard Serra, 80, with his sculpture “Combined and Separated,” consisting of 50-ton forged-steel rounds for his upcoming show at Gagosian Gallery’s 24th Street location. © George Etheredge for The New York Times

What do we talk about when we talk about sculpture? Not pounds or kilograms, for sure. It hardly deepens our view of Giacometti’s spindly figures or Calder’s light-as-air mobiles, or even the pioneering brown-hued “Guitar” that Picasso assembled from sheet metal, to know they weigh, say, 50 or 60 or 100 pounds.

But Richard Serra, unlike his modernist forebears, counts pounds. “This is my heaviest show ever,” he said with a hint of pride, when we met recently in his studio. It was an August weekend, and the streets of TriBeCa, where he lives and works in a six-story brick building, had emptied out. The 80-year-old artist was preparing for a somewhat crazed fall season. Three exhibitions of his new work will open simultaneously, in mid-September, at the Gagosian Gallery’s spaces in Chelsea and on the Upper East Side.

Add to that the unveiling of a not-slight piece at the Museum of Modern Art. “Equal” (2015), a room-sized assembly of eight, 40-ton forged-steel blocks that together weigh more than a Boeing 777, will occupy its own gallery in the new David Geffen Wing when the museum reopens on Oct. 21.

Mr. Serra, the best-known living sculptor in America, might seem out of step with our increasingly virtual world. In an age when visual satisfactions scroll by on Instagram in seconds, he revels in the physical — enshrining abstract forms as maximalist feats of mass and scale. Tellingly, his medium is steel, whose production in this country peaked in the middle of the 20th century.

Does he see his sculpture as distinctly masculine? “It’s not feminine,” he replies, sitting at a table in his studio. He was dressed in a black turtleneck and black pants, an intense figure with Slavic cheekbones and a steady gaze.

Does he see any tenderness in his work?

He appeared surprised by the question. “I don’t think in those terms,” he replied. “It sounds like you are talking about steak.”



Mr. Serra’s “Tilted Arc”; which raised a storm of controversy after it was installed in 1981 in downtown Manhattan. It was removed in 1989. © Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

Mr. Serra remains famous for a sculpture that no longer exists. “Tilted Arc,” a great broad swath of steel, once bisected the plaza outside the Federal Building in Lower Manhattan. It spawned more than a few negative reviews from people who found it hulking and oppressive, and wanted it removed. In 1989, after nearly a decade of debate, the sculpture was dismantled and hauled off to a storage garage in Brooklyn.

The artist, who at the time likened the loss of his sculpture to a death in the family, these days refuses to waste any more time thinking about it. “The government has it,” he said, when asked the work’s whereabouts. “It’s their property and they destroyed it.”

According to the General Services Administration, the federal agency that commissioned the piece, the sculpture is now in Alexandria, Va., in three separate parts. Its components are “preserved as artifacts of what was formerly known as Tilted Arc,” a spokesman noted in an email. The GSA declined a request to let the Times photograph the “artifacts” for this article.

But even in its dismantled condition, “Tilted Arc” continues to distort Mr. Serra’s reputation, fostering an image of an artist who set out to taunt the public. It is true that his great innovation was to redefine sculpture by making it look less like a polished object on a pedestal than an off-putting incursion into the viewer’s space. On the other hand, not nearly enough has been said about the protective or sheltering aspect of Mr. Serra’s work. His sculptures often contain openings that allow you to enter them and linger unseen, to hide. It’s as if Mr. Serra is trying to bridge two poles, to create an aura of danger and then banish it in short order.

Over the years, Mr. Serra has placed more than 100 commissioned sculptures from Philadelphia, St. Louis and São Paulo to the deserts of Doha. His sculptures belong to two basic categories. His forged pieces consolidate steel into masses of unrivaled denseness, while his plate-steel pieces tend to be lighter and more lyrical. These include his playful “Torqued Ellipse” series, looming ovoid structures whose rust-hued, orangy-brown walls turn and twist. The best ones — on long-term view at the Dia Foundation in Beacon, N.Y., and at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain — can be almost flirty in their wanton curviness.



From left to right, “Torqued Ellipse II,” 1996; “Double Torqued Ellipse” 1997; “Torqued Ellipse I,” 1996. Mr. Serra’s series represents steel sculpture at its most playful and curvaceous. © via Dia Art Foundation; Bill Jacobson Studio



Mr. Serra’s “Echo” (2019), consists of two parallel plates that create an echo chamber between them, at the Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo, Brazil. © Instituto Moreira Salles; Cristiano Mascaro

Not that Mr. Serra would agree with much of this. He is opposed to viewing his sculptures as an expression of his interior life, and insists that any metaphors they suggest are accidental and wholly irrelevant. He prefers to believe in the untranslatable quality of his materials, as if there are “no ideas but in things,” to borrow a line from the poet William Carlos Williams.

As Mr. Serra says, “If you’re are dealing with abstract art, you have to deal with the work in and of itself and its inherent properties. The focus is mainly on mass, weight, material, gravity and so on.”

He is, in other words, an unapologetic formalist who can seem austere in his stated lack of interest in the ways that art can touch on the preoccupations of life (e.g., love, nature, the vanished past). Oddly, when I asked him if I could see a photograph of him as a child, Mr. Serra shrugged and said he doesn’t own any.

“Richard was born before the iPhone,” his wife, Clara, added dryly.

On the other hand, Mr. Serra does wax nostalgic about his boyhood fascinations, especially the shipping industry. “I’ve always lived near big bodies of water,” he tells me. “I prefer that. Maybe it’s because I was born near the beach and it’s almost part of my DNA.” In addition to his place in Manhattan, Mr. Serra also has studios out on the North Fork of Long Island, and up in Nova Scotia, Canada.

How would he describe the sea?

“It’s like the desert with water,” he says pithily.

BORN ON NOV. 2, 1938, Mr. Serra spent most of his childhood on the western edge of San Francisco, in a development that was so new it had tall dunes in place of tidy front yards. The family’s stucco house was five blocks from the water, on a slight hill. “I could look out of my bedroom window and see ships go by,” Mr. Serra recalled.

His mother, Gladys Fineberg, was a housewife of Russian-Jewish descent whom the artist recalls as an avid reader of 19th century French novels and contemporary Americans like Hemingway. His father, Tony, was a Spanish-American laborer who was born in Peru. U.S. census records list him as a candy maker, but his son prefers to remember him during the war years, when he took a job as a pipe fitter at Marinship, a shipyard which was founded after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

For Mr. Serra’s fifth birthday, his father took him to the Marinship yards as a treat. Later, recalling the experience in a page-long statement entitled “Weight,” Mr. Serra adopts a steel-plated oil tanker as his Proustian madeleine. It was a new tanker, and he and his father watched the launch with a cheering throng as the boat slid into the sea, transformed, as he wrote, “from an enormous obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat and adrift.”

In a startling coincidence, Mark di Suvero, the future sculptor, lived two houses down from the Serra household. Looking back, di Suvero, who turns 86 this month, recalled long, riotous afternoons when he and a young Mr. Serra played in the dunes, skidding down them on flat cardboard, having to empty their shoes of sand before their mothers let them back into the house. Their relationship, however, was not completely harmonious. “Our dogs would fight,” di Suvero

recalled with amusement. “I had a dog, they got a dog, and his father would say, ‘Let them fight!’”

MR. SERRA ARRIVED AT YALE as a graduate student, after earning a B.A. in English literature from the University of California, at Santa Barbara. Settling in New York in 1966, he quickly found his way to the center of the avant-garde. Minimalism was the leading style, and Mr. Serra became acquainted with its exponents, including Robert Morris, who invited him to participate in a group show at the prestigious Castelli Gallery. But in contrast to the crisp geometry of the Minimalists, with their reflective aluminum skins (Donald Judd), fluorescent lights (Dan Flavin) and Fiberglass L-beams (Robert Morris), Mr. Serra tried to get “down and dirty,” as he says now; he wanted to turn closed, tightly sealed forms inside out.

To this end, he compiled a now-historic “Verb List” that itemized, in two neat, cursive columns, 54 manual actions you can do with art materials (e.g., “to scatter,” “to weave,” “to stretch”). He then set out to enact them. He experimented with lead, a non-art material that he learned about from the composer Philip Glass, who moonlighted as a plumber.



Mr. Serra’s “Verb List” is the closest he came to producing a manifesto and helped define what is known as Process art. © The Museum of Modern Art



Mr. Serra tossed molten lead from a ladle to create one of his site-specific “splash pieces” in 1970. © Henry Groskinsky/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

Mr. Serra's "splash pieces" were nothing if not hot. He heated sheets of lead in a caldron and, using a ladle, splashed the molten metal at the base of walls. Then he let it harden into long, ragged-edged metal casts that lay on the floor and didn't look much like sculpture.

In 1969, Jasper Johns, who was an early devotee of the casting process, invited Mr. Serra to create one of his splash pieces in his studio on Houston Street. "I felt like I had been tapped on the head by the Pope," Mr. Serra recalls, adding that he credits Mr. Johns for helping him see how an artwork can enshrine the incremental steps of its making. Years later, when Mr. Johns sold his building, he donated Mr. Serra's sculpture — or, rather permission to re-create it — to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it now resides with the title, "Gutter Corner Splash: Night Shift."

Another of Mr. Serra's early masterwork, "One Ton Prop (House of Cards)," from 1969, consists of an imposing four-foot cube whose lead-plate sides remain unwelded — they're literally unhinged. A painting cannot be unpainted, and a marble sculpture cannot be uncarved. But Mr. Serra's "prop pieces" can come apart at the seams in less than two seconds. "One Ton Prop" combines the satisfactions of geometric abstraction with the frisson that derives from hoping that a slab of lead does not topple over onto your foot.

I asked Mr. Serra who among postwar artists was the first to take sculpture off the pedestal. He replied, "Judd liked to say he was, but it could have been Lucas Samaras. He put a grid on the floor." Indeed, in 1961, Mr. Samaras made a "Floor Piece (in 16 parts)" that was brushed with malleable Sculp-metal and sometimes mistaken by viewers for a rug.

"Judd and di Suvero put things on the floor, but Richard was the first one to activate the floor as an essential part of the piece," the sculptor John Duff pointed out.



Mr. Serra's red-hot, 50-ton rounds for his new sculpture, as they came out of the forge at a factory in Wetzlar, Germany, in March 2019. © Silke von Berswordt; via Gagolian

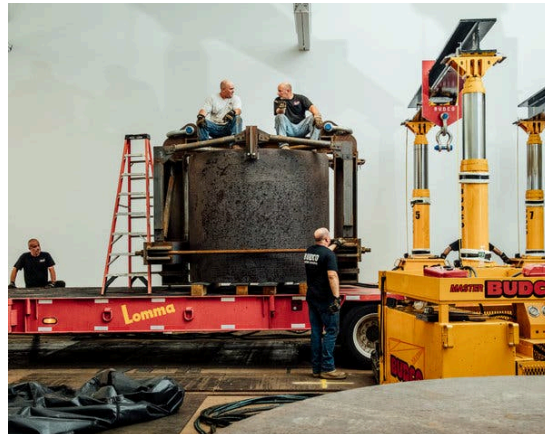
Nowadays, Mr. Serra's sculptures are no longer handmade but are fabricated in factories in Germany, and he may not realize how elegant they have become.

Does he sign them? "No," he said. "How would you sign a molten block?"

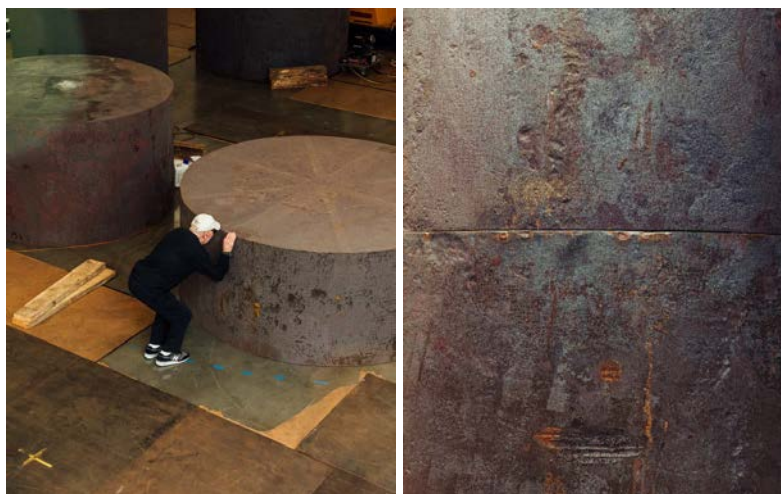
His work demands so much space that entire buildings have been purchased to exhibit it. Larry Gagosian, who first showed Mr. Serra's work in 1983, confirmed that he acquired 555 West 24th Street with Mr. Serra in mind. "It had the massive garage-door access where you can drive a huge truck in."

"Forged Rounds," which will open there on Sept. 17, is the show that Mr. Serra had described to me as his heaviest ever. One morning, when it was partially installed, we met at the gallery to see it. It consists of four massive sculptures composed from 21 forged-steel "rounds," or cylindrical drums, and part of its fascination lies in the perceptual riddle that allows rounds of varying dimensions — some the height of tables, others tall enough to take cover behind — to each weigh precisely 50 tons.

That sum happens to reflect weight limitations imposed by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. "If they're 50 tons, they can go over the George Washington Bridge," Mr. Serra said of his sculptures, which are trucked into Manhattan from the port in Bayonne, N.J. "If they're 75 tons, they can't."



In August, a construction crew removed a sculpture from a flat bed trailer using a hydraulic gantry during the installation of Mr. Serra's show at Gagosian. © George Etheredge for The New York Times



Mr. Serra with one of the 21 rounds in "Forged Rounds," opening Sept. 17 at the Gagosian Gallery. © George Etheredge for The New York Times. Up close, the surfaces yield delicate effects, with autumnal colors glowing beneath blistered grey skins. © George Etheredge for The New York Times



Taken together, “Forged Rounds” can evoke an abandoned shipyard, a well-defended military field, or a good place for hide-and-seek. © George Etheredge for The New York Times

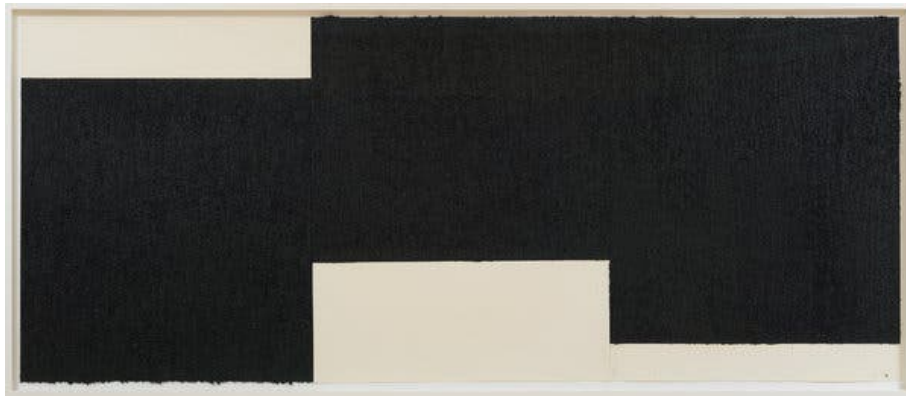
Taken together, the group of rounds can put you in mind of a shipyard, or a well-defended military field with concrete pillboxes extending into the distance. The bulkiness is startling. But their surfaces yield up surprisingly delicate effects, with rosy pinks glowing beneath cracked and blistered gray skins.

Meanwhile, in a separate show at the Gagosian outpost at 522 West 21st Street, the entire space will be given over to a single Brobdingnagian sculpture — “Reverse Curve,” back-to-back plates that form an S-shape and wind, riverlike, for 99 feet.

Finally, uptown, at Gagosian’s Madison Avenue location, Mr. Serra will be showing “Triptychs and Diptychs,” some 21 new works on paper. The artist Paul Klee once described the process of drawing as taking a line for a walk. Mr. Serra’s drawings are more like taking a lion for a walk. They are fierce objects, large and tarry, all-black on white. He begins each drawing, he tells me, by spreading a viscous substance — a mix of silicon ink and paintstick — directly on his work table. “Then the paper goes on top of the material,” he said. “Then I take a steel tool and rub the back of the paper so that the material comes up on the side that I can’t see. Then I pull it up to look at it.”

I asked Mr. Serra if he ever has the urge to use a color besides black.

“A pink painting,” he replied with a straight face. “I am working on it. It is in my closet.” A five-beat pause. “Or green and purple. For a week, I considered chartreuse seriously.”



A drawing, "Triptych #6" (2019), with paintstick, etching ink and silica on paper, from "Triptychs and Diptychs," at Gagosian's Upper East Side gallery. © via Gagosian; Rob McKeever

For all of Mr. Serra's facetious asides, his art has an estimable directness. He has devoted his life to imprinting space with his presence, asserting that "Serra was here," as if the humongous footprint of his sculptures could somehow reverse the evanescence of footprints we leave in the sand.

And yet what assurance does a sculptor have that works intended as site-specific will be left in the fields and plazas and museum galleries in which he planted them?

After the debacle of "Tilted Arc," Mr. Serra told me, he began thinking of ways to ensure that his other works remain anchored at their anointed sites. Enter lawyers. These days, he said, his sculptures come accompanied by legal contracts. Owners, whether individuals or museums, are prohibited from moving or altering his work without his permission. Moreover, a collector cannot offer a work for sale to another collector without offering it to Mr. Serra first.

Even so, Mr. Serra is well-aware that the future is hardly laden with guarantees. As he said, "You make contracts, but you don't know if they're going to hold up after your demise or not."

For a moment, the question of mortality hovered in the air. I asked him how he imagined his sculptures would be viewed 200 years from now.

"I can't think that way," he replied solemnly. "But I would hope that some of them last that long. I think in the history of sculpture 200 years is a nanosecond."