

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Richard Artschwager

by John Yau

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Richard Artschwager (b. 1923) is an American original, and, like Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) and Peter Saul (b. 1934), he will never be seen as a mainstream artist. In his introduction of his longtime friend, Malcolm Morley (another interesting misfit), which he read at the Skowhegan Awards ceremony in 1992, Artschwager said something that holds true for his own work: “Originality in art usually comes about by doing some damn fool thing and then finding it to be not so dumb. Or in any case by pushing the matter of editing and connoisseurship as far into the future as possible.” This is what Artschwager, Bontecou, and Saul have done at a consistently high level throughout their careers, though the latter two have not done it in such an extensive way when it comes to the materials they use. Artschwager’s undeniable and to my mind unique strength is the bond he manages to efficiently effect between highly unlikely materials (Formica, Celotex, rubberized horsehair, acrylic bristle, and now extremely rough-surfaced handmade paper) and banal subject matter (furniture, images of suburban houses, high rises, office desks, domestic interiors, still-lives, and landscapes). In this regard, Artschwager clearly learned something from Jasper Johns, but didn’t turn that lesson into a bid for mainstream acceptance (as did Frank Stella and Andy Warhol).

Artschwager was around forty when he began making works such as the deeply ironic and finally elusive “Handle” (1962), which is complete unto itself, and “Table and Chair” (1962-63), which, as he said about his work, “sits on the cusp between usefulness and uselessness.” To the artist’s credit, this formal tension never became the guiding force in his work, but one of many possibilities that he would explore. In contrast to Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Von Bruggen, who got mired in the predictable production rut of cute objects blown up big (say hello to Jeff Koons), Artschwager remained unassimilated and kept moving. An inimitable maverick from

the beginning, and showing no recent sign of let-up, he has always gone his own way, quietly and rigorously hewing to his own standards, which include a commitment to craftsmanship (has anyone thought of pairing Artschwager and H.C. Westermann (1922-1981) in a show?), the use of improbable materials, the subversion of conformist avant-garde thinking regarding painting's opticality and sculpture's inert physical presence, and, as in this exhibition, the exploration of subject matter many consider obsolete (domestic interiors, landscape, still-life). Included in innumerable group shows devoted to Minimalism and Pop art, Artschwager's work never fits in; it is secure within its own impenetrable space and needs no rubric to justify its existence. That is because Artschwager's subversions come from a deeper place than the desire to collapse art historical categories or comment on art, and the irony in his work isn't social but metaphysical. It is why the art world doesn't quite know what to do with him; his intention is too serious for a scene looking for the next exemplar of male adolescence or hirsute intellect (think smartass). The zone his work brings you to isn't predicated on entertainment and hipster cynicism, but on the willingness to contemplate one's relation to ordinary reality and mortality.

It is both inspiring and remarkable that at 85, Artschwager can still look at the world with fresh, open eyes and feelings of tenderness and affection. There is no sign of retreating into a doctrine of any kind. All of this comes through in his current exhibition of paintings and sculptures. In the middle of the gallery space are two Formica table sculptures, a subject that first appeared in the pictorial sculpture, "Table with Pink Tablecloth" (1964). A table is a place to talk and eat, a site of communality and its opposite, isolation. Set with a "pink tablecloth" made of Formica, Artschwager's early sculpture is actually a solid rectangular object at which no one could comfortably sit and eat, consequently conveying the inevitability of absence. Among other things, his formally set table is a memorial for a dinner that will never be served, a reminder of what lies in store for all of us.

In two recent sculptures, the top of the rectangular object, which is synonymous with the table's surface, is the same color as two of the sides signifying the space underneath. In "Table (Whatever)" (2007), the robin's egg blue that designates the table's top surface can be read as a void and a mirror of the sky, in addition to it being a hard, smooth surface. As a pictorial object, the table is made up of parts that fit seamlessly together, but our mind tells us that these are not the ones that should be there. I don't think of this as some kind of arty statement or even as a metaphor, but as an understanding of how individuals might understand their own life in time; it is all of a piece, but how and why these particular parts are the ones to have come together remains a mystery.

The two table sculptures, along with the two "Splatter Chairs" wedged in opposite corners, establish a wide-ranging dialogue with the paintings in the same room. If one turns right, the first painting by the entrance is "Lunch for One" (2007), where there are two people in the painting. However, if one turns left, the painting by the entrance is "Lunch for Two" (2007), and there are three people in the painting. Every painting and sculpture has been placed in a way that invites the individual to construct a narrative, but it is one that reaches no conclusion, and, in fact can be read backwards and forwards, as well as between the intimations of two-dimensional and three-

dimensional work. The narrative exceeds the obvious and easily palatable one about the relationship between fact and fiction, the physical and illusionistic, and enters a territory that asks basic, unanswerable questions: how does the constantly changing proximity of sight and touch affect the way we live in the world and across time? How little or much of reality do we actually experience? What gets lost and what remains of any of us? For the latter questions, the answer that Artschwager provides is that art is what remains.

In "Berceuse" (2007)—the title means lullaby—Artschwager depicts two people at a table, a bottle of wine between them. Their bodies and heads are tilted, as if they are inebriated. Is the artist thinking, instead of a lullaby, the line from the children's round, "Merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream"? In "Landscape with Macadam" (2007), the artist paints a row of trees alongside a two-lane highway, part of which can be seen curving along the bottom of the painting. As in most of the other paintings in the exhibition, the dominant colors are different tones of gray. The artist applies charcoal and pastel, sometimes suspended in a gel medium, to a surface that seems to be made of matted straw. The rough surface defies any attempt at draughtsmanship, which is a particularly bold move for an artist whose body of drawings, including the large group collectively titled "Basket Table Door Window Mirror Rug" (1974), constitutes a singular achievement. The trees are both ashen and tinged with soft, beckoning light; It's as if they have been bathed in volcanic ash, and exist in a state of erasure.

With their disconcerting perspectives, internal shifts in scale, and compressions of space, one is tempted to say that these paintings convey a dream-like state, but that offers a way out, and that is not what Artschwager is after. In "Lunch for One" 2007, a man whose face is both blurred and rubbed out sits on a staircase, facing a woman seated at an oval table. Behind her is a painting of a table very much like the one in front of her, and on the table are plates whose outlines echo the tables'. The woman's head is cropped by the bottom edge of the painting-within-the-painting, positioning her in two places at once, the room and the painting. Is the man a memory, a ghost, or an unwanted visitor? The stairs culminate in what looks like a stage curtain. Not only is the painting unsettling, but also it never sinks into a narrative.

Artschwager has had a long and productive dialogue with the work of his near-contemporary, the American Magic Realist painter George Tooker. In contrast to Tooker, however, he never settled for the visual literalness of his depictions of modern alienation. The fact that he could have gotten something from Tooker, along with this exhibition's more obvious sources of Edouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, and Giorgio Morandi, is further evidence of his independent thinking and analysis.

However, these paintings are neither pastiches nor ironic commentaries, but a complete transformation. It's as if Artschwager is updating the viewer on how the people previously seen in those paintings would look now, some fifty to one hundred years later. That he does so without devolving into morbidity is one of the stunning achievements of this exhibition.

In "Lunch for Two" (2007), two people are seated at a table, facing each other. In the distance of this weirdly sized room, a man sits playing a piano, his back to the pair. Does it help to know that the artist plays the piano? What about the two paintings of

animals depicted on either side of the piano and hanging above the head of each individual at the table, or the fact that they too are facing each other, like their human counterparts? All the paintings are replete with questions, none of which can be reduced to a single answer. The scenes are domestic and haunted. The gray seems to be made of ash (which it is), stone, and foggy light. It's as if everything is in a state of petrification. The fact that the paintings invite the viewer to touch them makes them all the more powerful. For how do we begin to recognize and understand death unless we come close and touch it?

There is not an ounce of sentimentality in these paintings and sculptures. Given the art world's keenness for kitsch, for hyped statements regarding spirituality and transcendence, smug reiterations of received tropes, and self-righteous political art, Artschwager's acts of freedom are nothing short of invaluable.

—John Yau