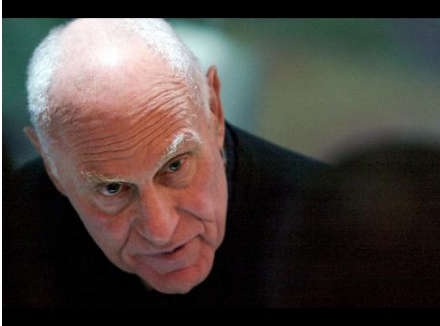


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Serra Recalls 9/11, Shipyard as Steel Labyrinth Opens in London

Interview by Farah Nayeri



Oct. 3 (Bloomberg) -- Richard Serra was four when he was taken to see the launching of a ship that his father helped build.

“You don't know for maybe 30 seconds whether it's going to submerge or arise,” says the 68-year-old artist. “And then it arises, and it's free, and afloat, and adrift. It's something I never got over.”

Serra, now one of the world's top living sculptors, has recreated that shipyard atmosphere inside London's Gagosian Gallery. Hundreds of tons of steel stand in an exhibition that was three years in the making.

The San Francisco-born artist is the man of the moment. He had a 2007 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. This year, he showed five 75-ton sheets of vertical steel under the glass dome of Paris's 19th-century Grand Palais. The success has surprised him.

“At the end of the last century, I wouldn't have given somebody working in steel and making sculpture a chance to have any audience,” he says. “We're at the last gasp of the industrial revolution.”

We meet in a white-walled gallery office. Serra wears a blue shirt over a black T-shirt, and a workman-like dark cotton jacket. His rugged face is carved with deep lines; his eyes are blue and alert.

The gallery's main room is crammed with the rust-colored work “TTI London” (2007) -- two thick, hollowed trunks with side openings. Standing against their tall, curved interior is rather like staring, with a child's eyes, at the bow of a ship.

Black Labyrinth

The other, "Open Ended" (2007-8), is a black labyrinth formed by two thick steel belts that bend around each other several times. Like Alice in Wonderland, the visitor walking through them feels fear, thrill, dizziness, entrapment. Such reactions are key, says the artist; the viewer is the sole subject of his work.

Serra's Mallorca-born father and Russian-Jewish mother quickly discovered his gift. He drew every night after dinner. Later, his drawings won him a scholarship to Yale School of Art.

After that came a defining couple of years in Europe, where he was slightly put off by Michelangelo -- "a little overdone in terms of steroids, just too much, too Schwarzeneggerish" -- and so awed by the sight of Velazquez's "Las Meninas" that he dumped his own university paintings into the Arno river in Florence, the city where he lived.

"I didn't see how in flat painting I was going to be able to, without illusion, make the viewer the subject, and I thought there might be a way of doing that in three dimensions," he says.

Watching Giacometti

In Paris, he sketched by day in the atelier of sculptor Constantin Brancusi, and watched sculptor Alberto Giacometti by night at the Brasserie La Coupole.

"Giacometti empowered the notion of process and working in the studio because he would come in at night with plaster stuck in his hair," he says.

Back in New York, he used materials others didn't. He carted away rubber discarded by a warehouse, and made doors, tents, and suspended belts out of it. He splashed molten lead against the wall of a warehouse. Eventually, he moved to steel.

"I came from a very poor family," he says. "As a kid, I worked in the steel mills. In order to pay my way through school, I caught rivets and stuck rivets."

His works, which weigh tens of tons each, are so heavy that many museums can't show them. Nor have they always been admired. In 1981, a curved wall in lower Manhattan called "Tilted Arc" drew such a torrent of protest that it was removed in 1989.

Over the years, his art has evolved from rectilinear slabs and sheets to curved and elliptical caves that draw one in like a magnet. He works with his wife, one assistant, and a secretary. His works can take as long as five years.

"Just to get steel on line takes nine months to a year," he says.

9/11

No stranger to tragedy, he saw the planes ram into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, and people leap to their deaths.

“Five people hanging to each other like a daisy chain, jumping together; people trying to fly; people on fire, going down in a spiral motion; people hitting the ground like pumpkins,” he said. “Where the guilt comes in is that you couldn’t look away.”

Has that permeated his work?

“I don’t know, I would say most likely. It’s hard to trace causalities.”

As Serra’s elegant wife knocks on the door, I ask him, what next?

“Work comes out of work, onion skin by onion skin,” he replies. “You don’t think your way through work. You work your way through work.”

To contact the writer on the story: [Farah Nayeri](#) in London at Farahn@bloomberg.net.