

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTWRIT

Richard Serra Drawings at the Met, New York

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Richard Serra's monolithic sculptures have a stature that eclipses their actual size. These ground-shifting giants stem from his deep-seated fascination with space and its mutations. Long before his first confrontation with metal, Serra's charcoal and paintstick drawings anticipated these grandiose investigations. His retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective*, explores the breadth of his drawings' creative evolution freed from his notorious totems. Serra's drawings illuminate the artist's formal questions and reaffirm his conceptual innovation in the medium.

Although they grace the last leg of the exhibition, Serra's sketchbooks are an introduction to his more well-known configurations in space. Serra has often referred to his sketchbooks as notations, landmarks of stunning form or motion. The notations are exercises in hand-eye coordination. His rabid depictions of the basalt columns in Iceland or an arbitrary junction in New York City, for example, train his vision and scrutinize space. Serra's four modest explorations of video from 1968 appear amongst the sketchbooks. They render the existential nature of Serra's obsession. *Hand Lead Fulcrum* (1968) depicts a single arm wavering at the mercy of a lead fulcrum clutched in its palm. Serra transforms the nature of his obsessive world starting with gravity. He mocks the universal force, submitting to it at his own pace. Serra's films and sketchbooks disclose his early impetus challenging the complications of the natural world.

The retrospective begins with a slew of large drawings from the 1970's. Singular shapes mingle with more abstracted perceptual readings of space. *Drawings After Circuit* (1972) fragments Serra's grasp of a room from eighteen slightly different vantage points. Each beige sheet of paper constitutes a space with three or four vertical lines. Serra sparks a battle of perception. Each sheet summarizes the foreshortened walls or a recession of depth. With minimal markings, Serra creates a space with hallucinatory simplicity. Heavy black polygons emerge as investigations of architectural alterations. Inspired by the Mexican muralists, Serra's picture plane merges with the tangible reality of the room. *Triangle* (1974/2011) is a sheet of Belgian linen, stapled flush to the wall, engulfed in the opaque strokes of an oily paintstick. Like closing your eyes and staring into the sun, the formidable blackness suddenly morphs into a spotty, trembling abyss. The shapes resist the flamboyance of optical illusions by conversing fluidly with nearby framed works. Despite a superficial resemblance to the work of Blinky Palermo or Frank Stella, Serra's early works provide fodder for his structural phantasmagoria.

Serra's most confrontational, all-encompassing drawings materialized in the late 1970's. Consisting predominantly of paintstick cavities of Belgian linen measuring over 100 square feet, his work from this period opposes the corners, floor and ceiling of their surroundings. *Pacific Judson Murphy* (1978), a rectangular linen expanse adhered to the corner in an empty room, swallows the viewer like an inky tidal wave. The tenebrous passage is hypnotic, vacillating between an empty abyss and the quiet animation of a melting candle. *Pacific Judson Murphy* significantly alters our perception of the space by devouring stray beams of light and recasting the depth of the room. The work is an unparalleled mark in the composition of the entire room as the piece assumes the role of an intricate detail or a tirelessly edited final draft. It is both inviting and intimidating. Serra redirects the energy of the room to make the viewer aware of the surrounding reality. It is heroic and fixating, singular yet simultaneously attached to the room.

Serra revisits the picture frame in the 1980's to expand upon his colossal quadrilaterals and the viewer's perception of weight. *No Mandatory Patriotism* (1989) is one of three works that depict two gigantic black squares rubbing shoulders. Serra forges a schism between the two shapes near the middle of the composition. The images are taut, fluctuating between a delicate swell and contraction. The *Weight and Measure* series from the early 90's similarly examines the balance of Serra's dense, dark squares. The four pieces on display are phenomenally hefty. White gaps of varying widths ease the weight of the cubes. Frayed edges and the striation of the paintstick animate the monochromes. Both series occupy smaller galleries at the Met, divulging their cumbersome imbalances. The sanctioning of space within a frame removes the organic acrobatics of the retina, curtailing Serra's playful alteration of space.

Serra's recent work is corporeal and overrun with circles. The shift lends motion and suspense of potential energy to a briefly ethereal display. *Black Tracks* (2002) depicts a teetering spiral with residue from its centripetal force. It is flush, fleshy and on the brink of extending outside of the glass containing it. Although less confrontational than the linen works, Serra's recent work rebels against space. It is immediately derivative of his swooping lead orbs and thus less powerful independently. Their gesture and texture divorces them from the architecture of the room and they attain their own life. Rather than syncing with the space to alter it, they rebel against it. Serra has ultimately reserved his reformation of space to his behemoths, forcing his drawings to wallow in the shadows. With this exhibit, the artist's graphic explorations command as much attention as they deserve.

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