

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Forbes

America's Master Creates His Masterpiece: Richard Serra's "7"

By Abigail R. Esman



America's got talent.

But it is in the Middle East, surprisingly, that America's most gifted are realizing the freedom and support to create some of the most magnificent works of their careers.

In Doha, Qatar, last week, America's premier sculptor, Richard Serra, celebrated the inauguration of his "7" — an 80-foot steel tower that pulls water to earth, earth to sky, East to West, and art to timelessness.

The project represents the latest achievement of Qatar's 28-year-old Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the founder and chairman of the Qatar Museums Authority who commissioned the work and whose vision has, to date, made possible the construction and planning of three museums and cultural institutions since 2005, with several others in the works. The Serra "7" launches a new phase in a process that will ultimately take generations: to birth an indigenous artistic culture in a people that currently have none, and to educate them in the wonders and possibilities of visual art.

Standing at the end of a pier outside the stunning I.M. Pei-designed Museum for Islamic Art — the cornerstone project that launched the Qatar Museums Authority's ambitious program when it opened in 2008 — Serra reflected, "I've been making towers for 30 years, and I've made several towers. But I've never made a tower like this tower."



It was in fact Pei himself who first suggested Serra to Sheikha Al-Mayassa as the ideal sculptor to commission for the project, aimed at establishing a sculpture plaza and public waterfront culture park where the people of Doha can gather to enjoy cultural events, ranging from art workshops to concerts and film screenings.

As Serra tells it, when he first arrived in Doha to explore the possibility of building the sculpture, he confronted a barren park along the city's corniche, along with piles of earth and rubble – detritus from the building of the Pei museum. Accompanied by others on the planning team, the artist walked the grounds surrounding the museum to pinpoint the best location the work, until he was struck by the realization that the ideal site did not yet actually exist.

“I want to go out on the water,” he said.

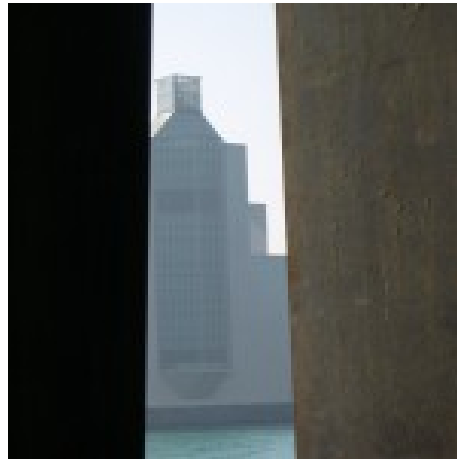
And so he did.



From the rubble, Serra and the Pei team built out 250 feet out onto the water, extending the crescent of the existing esplanade. The process, as Jean-Paul Engelen, the QMA's Director of Public Art, has noted, defined Serra as the first artist ever to design the site for his own site-specific sculpture. (It marks, too, as Ali Nassar Al Khalifa, the engineer who oversaw the construction of the project, also noted, the first time a site was actually created to suit a sculpture being placed there, rather than vice-versa.)

“The initial idea was not to make a sculpture,” Serra explained at the opening event. “The initial idea was to make the site function.”

Designing the actual work was another challenge. “I took it as my mandate,” said the sculptor, who began his career with Leo Castelli and now shows with Larry Gagosian, “to try to link the aesthetic content of the museum to the possibility of a public space for the people. But then came the possibility of, what was I going to make?”



Serra studied minarets “from Spain to Yemen” until discovering one from around the 10th century that had been designed, not cylindrically, as is the norm, but “in a planar fashion.” This became the basis for the piece, which was then further shaped – both literally and figuratively – by Serra’s discovery of the work of Persian mathematician and astronomer Abu Sahl al Quhi, who, following in the footsteps of Archimedes, had constructed a 7-sided figure within a circle. “I thought I could use my vocabulary and dovetail into the vocabulary of the Afghan minaret quite easily,” the artist recalled.

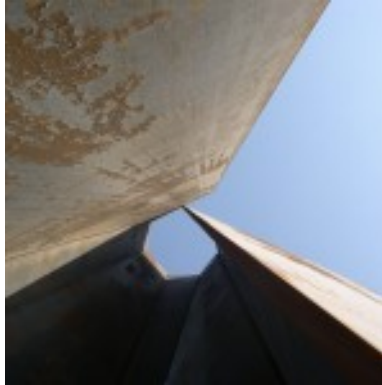
The pier took over three years to build, with the help of the Pei team and architect Hiroshi Okamoto. During that time, the sculpture – the largest of Serra’s career – went through any number of revisions and developments before acquiring this final form. (That the number “7” is particularly significant in Islam and appears frequently in the Koran was, the sculptor confessed, a coincidence, if a fortunate one under the circumstances of this particular commission.)



Measuring ten feet wide at the base and narrowing to nine feet at the top, the tower’s walls are placed so as to include three triangular openings, allowing an interplay between the work and the viewer, and between the space of the outside world and the space of the work of art. Sheikha Al-Mayassa followed the process closely, visiting Serra at his New York studio and even visiting the pier to witness for herself the final moments of the construction process in the middle of the night. “What head of state would do that?” queried Serra in a conversation with journalists, visibly impressed.

Who, indeed.

The finished structure, formed of seven steel plates each eight feet wide and four inches thick, stands at the end of the man-made peninsula – one which required extensive engineering and the use of underwater cement reinforcements, placed by a team of marine experts and deep-sea divers, to stabilize the land for the sculpture. (Serra's works have been known, in the past, to collapse floors.)



The result is, in a word, breathtaking: a soaring force of steel at once powerful and tender, an Ozymandias towering over the waters that surround this desert city. Thrusting skyward, it forms, from afar, a beacon in the water; at intimate range, the interplays of interior and exterior spaces seduce the eye, inviting the public to explore the landscape from without and from within, to lose themselves inside its enormity and to discover, in the revealing of spaces, the grand details of their surroundings: the cobalt blue waters of Doha bay; the curvilinear majesty of Pei's museum, its forms pulled in, as it were, to the apertures of the sculpture as one walks through and around the secrets of its interior; and from the prism at its center, the vast infinity of the heavens. Here, in the intangible, transient world of Bedouin history – a history without memory or place – Richard Serra has set an anchor, creating a monument in every sense of the word, a universal vision for the ages.