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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA | OCTOBER 20, 2011

Sculptor Revisits His Early Haunts

Serra Talks About Childhood on Ocean, Job as Steel Riveter

By GEOFFREY A. FOWLER

Richard Serra is renowned for steel sculptures that helped redefine the notion of space in modern art. What's not so well known are his roots in the sand dunes of San Francisco's beaches and a youthful job in a Bay Area steel yard.



Annie Tritt for The Wall Street Journal

Sculptor Richard Serra, shown last week at the retrospective of his drawings at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Mr. Serra, who now lives in New York, grew up in San Francisco and went to college at the University of California, Berkeley, earning money by working in the rivet gang of an Alameda steel company.

The monumental steel forms created by the 72-year-old artist are so admired that New York's Museum of Modern Art engineered one of its floors to support the weight of the work. In San Francisco, Mr. Serra's sculptures are displayed in UC San Francisco's Mission Bay campus and at Gap Inc.'s downtown headquarters.

The artist is back in San Francisco for his first-ever solo retrospective here, a collection of his drawings at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on display through Jan. 16. The Wall Street Journal caught up with Mr. Serra at the opening of the exhibition last week. Edited excerpts:



Alfredo Aldai/Zuma Press

One of his monumental sculptures is currently exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

WSJ: What was it like growing up in San Francisco's Sunset neighborhood in the 1940s?

Mr. Serra: There was nothing there. There were two black-top streets that had streetcars, Taraval and Judah. Other than that, there were just sand dunes. Even to come downtown to Market Street was an event. I pretty much lived between the beach, the Golden Gate Park and the zoo. My perception was formed by the sea and the sand dunes.

WSJ: How did that shape your view of space?

Mr. Serra: The thing about sand dunes is there is no relation to a given horizon. You are always dealing with elevations. If you have to walk through the sand dunes to get to school every day, you have a different relationship to space: walking down a hill in the sand dunes, versus walking up the hill in the sand dunes.

When I was very young, I used to walk along the beach to the Cliff House. And I would say to my mother, there is something very interesting there. When I walked along the beach one way, I would have one experience. And when I got to the other end, I would turn around and follow in my previous footfalls, and what was once on the left was now on the right. The experience was totally different. My mother said, 'Oh that's interesting, but don't think about it too hard.' She didn't understand where I was going with it, but those kinds of things have always fascinated me.

WSJ: How did you end up working in a steel plant?

Mr. Serra: It was the most money that I could make in a short period of time. In high school I was working in a produce market, and as soon as I got out I joined U.S. Steel in Alameda working on a rivet gang. We were building trusses that went on to build the Crown Zellerbach building [at One Bush Plaza].

WSJ: So you learned something there about working with steel?

Mr. Serra: Yes, but I never thought I was going to use it. I probably learned more about how people organize labor. If you become a member of a steel union very early, you understand that people have to protect their rights, and part of protect their rights is to not overwork themselves.



Richard Serra/SFMOMA

Several paint-stick drawings from his Weight and Measure series on display at SFMOMA.

WSJ: Did your work experience help you think of steel as art?

Mr. Serra: At first I was very reluctant to work with steel as art. If you look at the history of steel sculpture—from Picasso to Calder—they had used steel to cut and fold and hang out in space in terms of making pictures. But it was anchored and bolted into the ground, and it was false in terms of its gravitational load.

I wanted to bring the processes and procedures of the Industrial Revolution into art making. I thought, why not use steel for its weight-load, for its thickness, for its mass—and to use it in a very primary way, and to use it for its gravitational propensity. I went back to the basics of tectonics. If you look at "House of Cards" [on display at SFMOMA], that is pretty much it. Each part is in itself free-standing. None of them are dependent on welding for their manifestation. Everything is figured to balance on its own.

WSJ: What do you think of SFMOMA's plans for a major expansion?

Mr. Serra: I have a piece called "Sequence," which is going to be on the ground floor [of the new structure] on Howard Street. I have met three or four times with [SFMOMA architects] Snøhetta, who made a second-floor space where you can look down into the piece.

WSJ: Do you have any major commissions in the works for the Bay Area?

Mr. Serra: There may be a very large piece. Initial discussions sometimes lead to negotiations that lead to building—and sometimes that is three or four years in the making. Right now there is something incubating that is very promising.