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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### THIS IS HOW NEW YORK WORKS **CAPITAL**

**A Whitney Retrospective puts an exclamation point on Richard Artschwager**  
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*'Exclamation Point (Chartreuse),' Richard Artschwager.*

The exclamation point in the title of the Whitney's new Richard Artschwager retrospective is perhaps the finest example of truth in advertising in recent memory.

The show—known simply as *Richard Artschwager!* (and up through Feb. 3, 2013)—is surprising and exciting and sincere and beautiful. And it even features its own exclamation point, a five-and-a-half-foot tall one, in stunning chartreuse no less, consisting of plastic bristles attached to a mahogany core and presented as a kind of gleeful surprise.

In truth, Artschwager is a master at gleeful surprises, an old hand at unexpected and compelling juxtapositions. Almost 25 years ago, the Whitney dedicated a well-received show to the artist's work, and it is heartening to see that, in the intervening quarter century, Artschwager has only

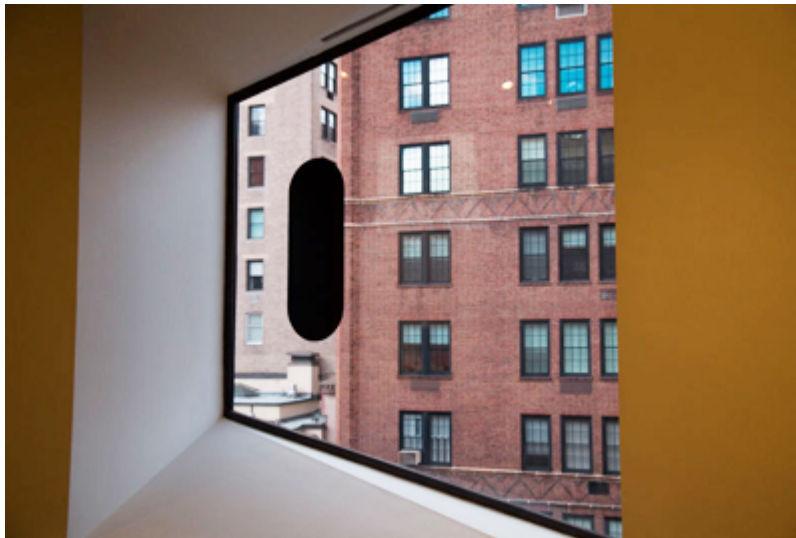
gotten better. On the cusp of turning 89, he is still working—several of the works on display were made in the last five years—refining the vocabulary and the media that have spanned a career that officially began with a solo exhibition at Leo Castelli in 1965.

Artschwager has never exactly become a household name; he is more an artist's artist, an insider's secret. Spanning, as he does, nearly half a century, he references a number of big-wow-factor movements in late-20th-century American art—Pop, minimalism, conceptualism. He also works across several mediums—painting, sculpture, and furniture-like objects—without conclusively being *of* any of them. His defiance of easy categorization may have placed blockbuster fame *just* out of reach, but it also makes him a genuinely unpredictable maker.

Just about the only consistency across his oeuvre is his commitment to variety and innovation. Motifs recur in new permutations; ideas are examined and re-examined; materials are put through different paces. Artschwager is simultaneously committed (he has frequently painted on Celotex, a building board typically used as insulation or paneling) and flexible (when Celotex Corporation stopped making the panels, he began having fiberboards created to his specifications)



The result is one of the most interesting bodies of work in late-20th-century American art. Masterfully organized by Jennifer Gross, a curator at the Yale University Art Gallery, that body of work is presented to optimally mine the kind of juxtapositions Artschwager's restlessness promotes. Grisaille (essentially monochromatic) portraits of George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden are separated by a self-portrait, the artist's grayscale visage positioned against a bright green background. And that chartreuse *Exclamation Point* (2008) is installed in the vicinity of some other, more large-scale grisailles, including *Tank* (1991), a work in acrylic and Formica on fiber plate and wood, forming a kind of visual puzzle in its division into four parts that reveal the eponymous armored vehicle only when the viewer steps far enough away from the frame, at which point you find yourself staring down the tank's barrel, pointed right at you.



*Exclamation Point* also continually engages other works in the retrospective, recursively looking back at Artschwager's "blps," black punctuation-like marks, constructed variously of bristle, wood, paint, and rubberized horsehair and scattered throughout the show. They are intended to make their immediate environment, in the artist's own words, more "see-able," and they also offer a chance to pause and reflect. (A smattering of blps has been installed on and around the High Line, future home of the Whitney, in conjunction with the show; MoMA PS 1 also has a number of blps scattered around the museum on a permanent basis.) Punctuation marks also become the subject of paintings, as in *Untitled (Quotation Marks)* (1980), two quotation marks enclosing empty space, half sly joke/half poignant comment about appropriation and allusion, then—and now—all the rage in the world of art.



Artschwager has always been interested in space, in how it is constructed and perceived and inhabited, and the show's organization takes this interest as a kind of leitmotif. The artist's furniture-like forms are placed throughout the galleries, deceptively inviting the viewer to make herself comfortable. But, as the title of a 1964 sculpture would have it, most of these are merely

a *Description of Table* or else merely *Table (Somewhat)* (2007), rather than actual items of furniture. Corners are occasionally marked by painted wood wall-installations. Defying pattern, these become treasure islands, half-sculpture, half-painting; hybrid forms that demand attention to nooks and crannies. Vitrines, holding sundry objects, are dispersed like sophisticated home decorations: a *Yes/No Ball* (1974), a magic 8-ball created by stamping “YES” and “NO” on opposing poles of a black bowling ball; *Four Approximate Objects* (1970-91), a game-like box, displaying four brass shapes.

Veering from gray scale to vibrant bursts of color—which have grown more pronounced in Artschwager’s paintings of the past decade, making use of pastels and neons to complicate what might otherwise seem almost conventional, quasi-domestic or pastoral scenes—the retrospective is experienced like some magical funhouse, an impeccably thought-out environment filled with sights for sore eyes. Though there are more than 100 works included as part of the retrospective, it seems impossible to grow tired of what is on display. Things fit together, comment on one

another, illuminate and mystify in equal part. Perhaps even more importantly, they never bore.



This is no faint praise: retrospectives are notoriously thorny propositions, with their tendency to drive some point home until the point, and the artist’s work, is rendered lifeless. Artschwager—no less a mournful poet of space than he

is a gimlet-eyed commentator on the past half century of American life—offers instead the chance to meander through a labyrinth of image and object and to emerge, not exhausted but rejuvenated, puffed up like a beautiful neon exclamation point proudly staking its claim in the canon of American art.

*‘Richard Artschwager!’ will be on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through Feb. 3, 2013.*

*Images, from top: 'Exclamation Point (Chartreuse),' (2008), photo by Robert McKeever; 'Triptych V,' (1972); 'blp,' (2012), Installation view, photo by Pierce Jackson; 'Description of Table,' (1964), photo by Steven Sloman; 'The White Cherokee,' (1991); All works © Richard Artschwager.*