

Modern Painters
November 2012

GAGOSIAN GALLERY
MODERN PAINTERS



Richard Artschwager,
photographed by
Ann Artschwager
on Cape Cod, 1998.

OPPOSITE:
Splatter Chair C,
2008. Formica and
acrylic on wood.



SCULPTURE FOR THE EYE, PAINTINGS TO BE TOUCHED

RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER'S MIXED MESSAGES

BY CHARMAINE PICARD

"Art can take you to funny places," says Richard Artschwager on a rainy August afternoon in the modest one-bedroom apartment he shares with his wife, Ann. The couple, who met in 1991 while Ann was working at the Mary Boone Gallery, in New York, are in the process of downsizing. They recently sold their primary residence, a converted church in Hudson, New York, and have transformed Richard's nearby art studio into a live-and-work space. These days they divide their time between the Hudson Valley studio and their Manhattan pied-à-terre in Chelsea's London Terrace. The 88-year-old Artschwager remains every bit the artist of his youth—thoughtful and witty, with a scientific bent.

He took a decidedly hands-off approach to the organization of his 50-year career retrospective, on view at the Whitney Museum through February 3, 2013, giving curator Jennifer Gross full authority to arrange the show. "He doesn't have an agenda for his work, and he doesn't feel compelled to strategize or control how it is received," says Gross. In fact, Artschwager confides, "I have never thought or acted in terms of a career." He rejects everything that smacks of clubbiness among artists, dealers, curators, and collectors, saying, "The concept of an 'art world' goes against anything that I understand about art."

What is important to Artschwager is making art, and he continues to produce new pieces, including four Formica "piano" sculptures based on sketches from his 1963–65 notebooks for a fall exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in Rome. He recently painted two landscapes as well as a portrait inspired by a business-card image from a Chinese restaurant in New York. The portrait, according to Ann, has morphed into a person who appears occasionally in his work, whom she believes to be his mother. "I start early, and whatever runs through my mind I take note of," Artschwager says of his daily studio routine.

Consistently described as a quirky outsider who over the course of his career has operated on the margins of such popular movements as Minimalism, Pop, and Conceptualism, Artschwager is in fact a consummate insider. His first solo exhibition took place at the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1965. His champion there was the fast-

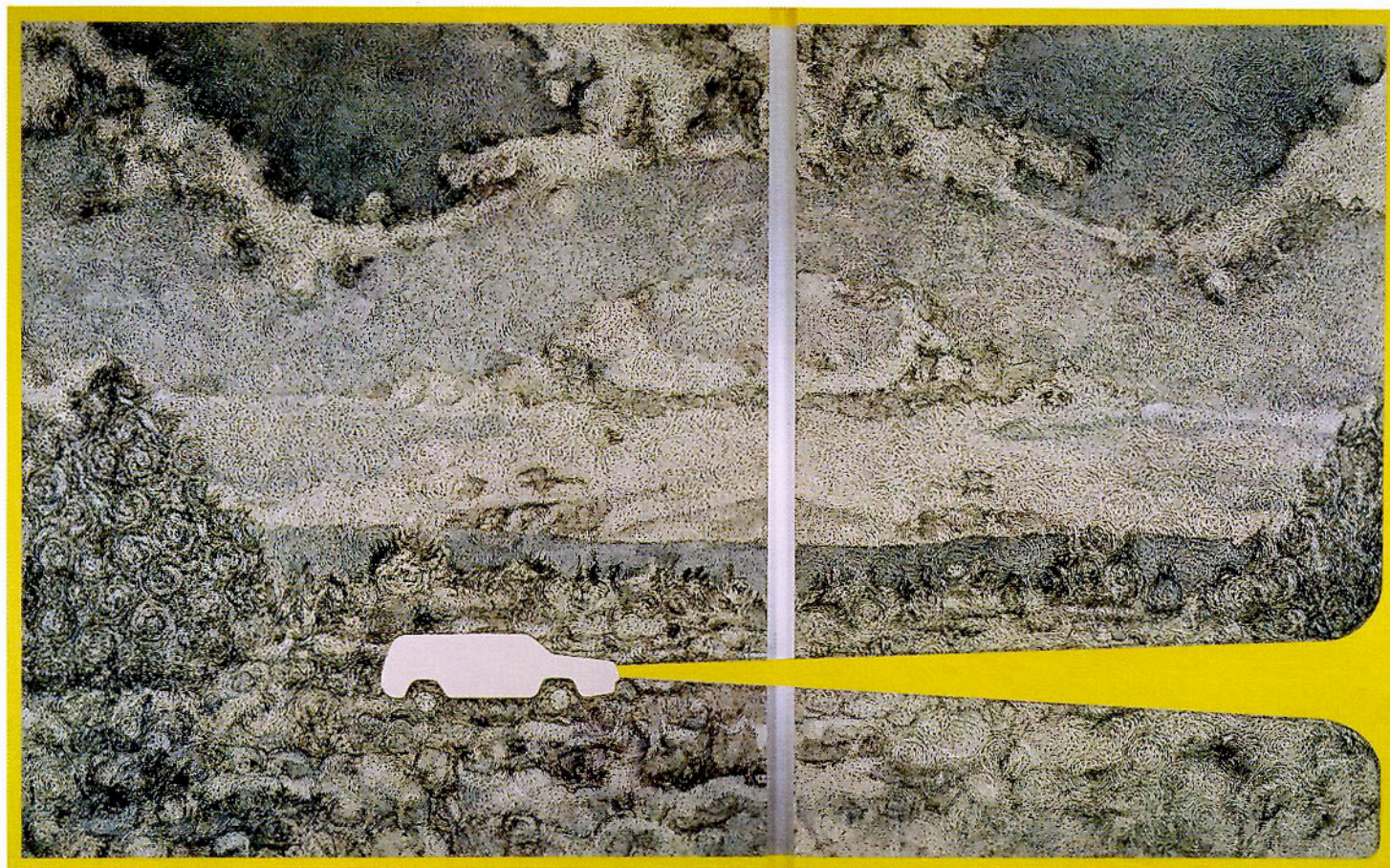
talking director Ivan Karp, who singled out Artschwager's Formica sculptures from the hundreds of submissions sent to the gallery each week. Artschwager stayed with Castelli for nearly 25 years before decamping to Mary Boone in 1991 and then to Gagosian in the late '90s. Though his work defies easy categorization, he has always had powerhouse dealers backing his production and a steady stream of supporters both at home and abroad.

"The idea that he's eccentric or an outsider really isn't true. It's just that he's an amazing amalgamation of his parents, his education, where he grew up—and then he's incredibly smart," says Robert Monk, director of the Gagosian Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York. Monk considers Artschwager a "father figure," and the two have been close since the mid '70s, when Monk directed Castelli Graphics. When asked if Artschwager was part of the legendary inner circle of Castelli artists that included Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist, Monk replies, "There was no inner circle. It was probably one of the greatest stables ever, but as far as how people got there, it was all almost happenstance."

So why does the perception of Artschwager as an outsider persist? His life and his improbable path toward becoming an artist are filled with twists and turns that read like a novel. He was born in Washington, D.C., to Ernst Artschwager, a Protestant from East Prussia who worked as a scientist and suffered from tuberculosis, and Eugenia (née Brodsky), a Jewish Ukrainian born in Kiev who studied at the Corcoran School of Art. The family moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 1935, to ameliorate his father's health problems. In 1941 Artschwager began his studies in mathematics and chemistry at Cornell University with the intention of becoming a scientist, but he left school after two years when he was drafted into the army. He participated in the Battle of the Bulge and was subsequently posted to Frankfurt, where he moved high-level prisoners across the continent. Among them was Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, a German general whom he brought to Oslo to be put on trial by the Norwegians for war crimes. Artschwager was later assigned to an

The White Cherokee, 1991. Acrylic and Formica on Celotex with metal frame, 57½ x 89 in.

OPPOSITE: *Description of Table*, 1964. Melamine laminate on plywood, 26 x 32 x 32 in.

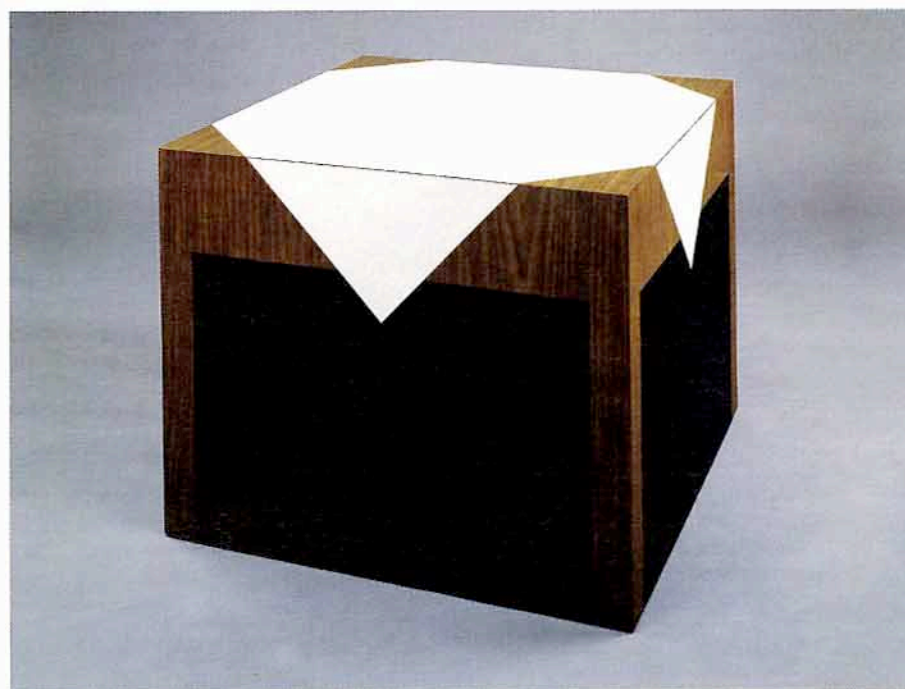


intelligence position in Vienna, where he met Elfriede Wejmelka, who would become his first wife. Eventually he returned to the U.S. and completed his studies at Cornell.

"Richard is a true intellectual who speaks three languages fluently, can play Beethoven and Mendelssohn from memory on the piano, and traveled to Europe three times on an ocean liner before he was 10 years old," says Ann. "He even spent a year living in Munich in the early 1930s."

For all of his education and experience abroad, Artschwager found himself at loose ends after graduating from college and moving to New York City. Taking advantage of the GI Bill, he attended Amédée Ozenfant's School of Fine Arts in New York for a year and then took a series of odd jobs, becoming a lathe operator, a baby photographer, a bank clerk, and an apprentice cabinetmaker before finding steady employment in 1956 as a commercial furniture designer. A 1960 commission from the Catholic Church to build portable altars for ships inspired him to start producing small wall objects made of wood and Formica.

The practical skills that he developed as a craftsman, along with his use of unconventional materials like Formica wood-grain laminate, Celotex ceiling insulation panels, and rubberized horsehair, distinguished Artschwager's efforts from those of his contemporaries. His scientific training also came to bear on his work. In both his early grisaille paintings on Celotex and his Formica sculptures, Artschwager edited down the idea of the



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object to its most basic components, removing items from their everyday contexts and placing them under scrutiny in much the same manner as a scientist working in a laboratory.

When asked about his 1964 sculpture *Table with Pink Tablecloth*, Artschwager once responded, "It's not sculptural. It's more like a painting pushed into three dimensions. It's a picture of wood." Artschwager made this idea more explicit in later pieces like *Splatter Chair I*, 1992, in which the object is flattened and splayed out on a wall, creating a hybrid form. Conversely, his paintings of modern buildings and bourgeois interiors and his photorealistic portraits are sculptural in their presentation. Using imagery culled from newspaper photographs that he enlarges with a grid technique, Artschwager paints onto the nubby and uneven Celotex surface. He borders these works with heavy, fabricated Formica or mirrored frames, propelling his paintings further into the three-dimensional realm.

Artschwager's views on the autonomy of art were recorded in his 1990 essay "Art and Reason," which he urges me to read. He calls his representations of everyday items like a chair, a dresser, or a table "useless objects," and they are meant to be experienced both as the image of an object and as the object itself. "The best chance for me to be understood," says Artschwager, "is for the viewer to look at the work." The concept of experiencing art in the moment without preconceived ideas or expectations lies at the core of Artschwager's practice. "Some things that happen to be useless can be commercialized, but that doesn't define them," he admits in a revealing aside that lays bare his practical, no-nonsense nature.

A lesser-known and rarely displayed aspect of Artschwager's output are his site-specific interventions. While teaching at the University of California, Davis, in 1968, Artschwager created the *blp*, a lozenge-shaped graphic symbol produced in such media as wood, horsehair, and paint. In 1968 the *blps* were the subject of his first solo exhibition at the Konrad Fischer gallery in Düsseldorf,

where he spray-painted the symbol throughout the gallery spaces. "The Europeans absolutely loved his work immediately, and that was very much part of the whole Castelli momentum—where a lot of American artists were collected by people like Giuseppe Panza and Dr. Peter Ludwig and many other great collectors," says Monk. Artschwager also installed 100 *blps* in unlikely locations throughout New York's Whitney Museum in 1968, drawing attention to the architecture of the Breuer building. That same year he showed 40 *blps* in the Kunsthalle in Bern and at various locations throughout the city, and in 1971 he installed a series of *blps* at sites around the city of Utrecht. A solo exhibition at New York's Clocktower Gallery found Artschwager *blping* three floors of the landmark municipal building where the gallery is housed while engineering the hands of the building's nonfunctioning clock to race forward and backward simultaneously.

"I think Richard would say that the *blps* are an important part of his work," says Gross, who approached New York's High Line Art curator Cecilia Alemani about creating a site-specific intervention to coincide with Artschwager's Whitney retrospective. In all, there are 10 *blps* situated along the length of the High Line, fabricated in an array of media and ranging in size from 18 inches to 6 feet tall. The site-specific installation will remain for the duration of the Whitney show.

"So many younger people think he's just the cat's pajamas," Monk declares. Artschwager could always count among his admirers Robert Gober, Albert Oehlen, Chuck Close, and Malcolm Morley, and he has been credited with influencing 1980s artists like Haim Steinbach, Meyer Vaisman, Ashley Bickerton, and John Armleder. An even younger generation has also come to see the importance of his legacy. Sculptor Rachel Harrison paid homage to Artschwager in her 2009 installation at the Venice Biennale by re-creating his *Table with Pink Tablecloth*, and Rob Pruitt, a former Artschwager assistant who affectionately calls him "part sage, part nutty professor," organized an exhibition of his paintings at the Carlson Gallery in London in 2011.

In recent years, Artschwager's paintings and drawings have focused largely on the winding roads and Southwest mesas of his youth. The atmospheric New Mexico landscape is hardly a new subject for the artist, who began painting desert scenes in the 1950s, but his latest versions are infused with brighter colors than the earlier works. Among these, *Landscape with Macadam*, 2007, depicts a wide road leading out over the edge of a horizon; it appears to be a meditation on what lies ahead.

What, if anything, I ask Artschwager, does he have left to do artistically? In his typical fashion, he offers a thoughtful yet laconic response. "Try anything, because you only get one life to live." MP