

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

Richard Artschwager

New York and Los Angeles

by JAMES LAWRENCE

HISTORICAL DISTANCE TENDS to obscure doubt, as though whatever does not fit is best ignored. This is particularly noticeable in art from the early to mid-1960s. Whereas Pop and Minimalism are now firmly established as pre-eminent styles, a cursory glance at publications from the time reveals a fluid situation with few clear distinctions between aesthetic trends and fleeting tastes. If there was a common thread, it was an ethos of cool separation: playfully irreverent, mildly satirical, attuned to socio-economic shifts and sceptical of dispensations *ex cathedra*. These traits have given the work of Richard Artschwager (born 1923) a syncopated rhythm for half a century. From the beginning, when Leo Castelli first exhibited Artschwager's objects in 1964, they resisted labels: too figurative for Minimalism, too hermetic for Pop. No subsequent category has proved adequate. One result is that even Artschwager's early works come across as objects in the present rather than as artefacts from the past. The retrospective exhibition *Richard Artschwager!* at the **Whitney Museum of American Art, New York** (to 3rd February), conveys that freshness and brings Artschwager's relaxed inventiveness to the fore.¹

The confident installation complements Artschwager's high standards of construction and finish. It also emphasises his ability to convert immediacy into salience. He has identified the origins of the *Portrait zero* (Fig.79) – a suspended stack of plywood nailed together in a near-Suprematist form – in a children's television programme whose narrator bemoaned his son's habit of pointlessly nailing boards together. The inspiration and the result were barely separated in time. Far from seeming hasty and slapdash, *Portrait zero* displays the craftsmanship upon which Artschwager – for several years a cabinet-maker by profession – depended for a living. Prior to that, he had worked for a while photographing babies for the Stork Diaper Service, which led in time to *Baby* (Fig.79). That painting is in acrylic on Celotex, a heavily textured ceiling material that Artschwager used until it vanished from the market in 2003. Paintings on Celotex are inconsistently legible: they lose resolution as one approaches them, and the constituent marks of the image get lost in the texture of the surface. As with *Portrait zero*, Artschwager's paintings on Celotex preserve the momentary – the glimpsed or overheard – without disclosing more than a modicum of context.

Contextual scarcity may explain why Artschwager's works have so frequently been described as enigmatic or idiosyncratic. They are lucid without being explanatory. It is, therefore, easy to see how Artschwager's works could apparently confirm multiple

79. Installation view of Richard Artschwager! showing, at right, *Baby* (1962) and *Portrait zero* (1961). (Photograph by Bill Orcutt; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).



artistic directions without taking sides. The paintings on Celotex, for example, intersect with several strands of painterly experimentation that emerged in the wake of gestural abstraction. Many of Artschwager's paintings share common ground with Gerhard Richter's paintings from photographs, which also stress the fragility of pictorial information. In *Seated group* (1962), Artschwager applied acrylic paint broadly, effectively reducing the resolution of the photographic source. The similarly depleted details in *Train wreck* (1968) convert the journalistic urgency of a newspaper photograph into something altogether more elegiac, more concerned with loss than with the trauma or shock – or exploitation – that Warhol emphasised in his treatments of similar subjects. Where Artschwager's works seem to echo or presage works by others, they do so because he has consistently employed media and images as tools for investigating the problems and ethical consequences of visual engagement.

That is particularly true of his Formica-on-wood sculptures of furniture. These have the cartoon-like quality of being pared down, reduced to the fewest possible planes and details. Depth is suppressed and graphic clarity accentuated until three-dimensional modelling collapses into swift legibility. *Description of a table* (1964) is a cuboid that uses woodgrain, pink and black Formica to depict a table, an overhanging tablecloth and the void beneath the table. Despite the prevalence of visual puns in these sculptures, they are often misread as parodies of Minimalism rather than as explorations of perceptual doubt. They are part of an American tradition of *trompe-l'œil* that includes painters such as John Frederick Peto and William Harnett, a tradition in which Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein also figure prominently. This lineage is particularly noticeable in a few sculptures that have moving parts, such as hinges or swivels, which underline the artificiality of the whole.

The effortless good cheer of Artschwager's Formica sculptures is as much a veneer as the material itself: a covering that quickly yields to nagging uncertainties about time, space, utility and illusion. Such uncertainties reveal

the quiescence beneath the gloss. A slightly unnerving sense of daily life interrupted and arrested punctuates the exhibition as a whole. *Triptych (with nude)* (*Diptych IV*) (1966) shows a mildly erotic photograph, enlarged and rendered in acrylic on Celotex, of a model feeding a dog. The image is bisected vertically by an amber-toned piece of patterned Formica. This interplay of readymade patterning and converted imagery not only generates formal dissonance, but also perpetuates a kind of visual impropriety. In terms of the way we see things in daily life, anything that interrupts the coherence of an image – or a series of images – is a breach of etiquette. The tangibility of that breach in Artschwager's *Triptych* draws attention to the power and vulnerability of images.

Tangibility serves Artschwager well. He skilfully gives heft to slight visual clues, which prompt the viewer to read beyond the given moment. His sculpted punctuation marks not only isolate components of linguistic meaning but also exaggerate their physical presence. Exclamation marks, Artschwager's preferred punctuation for sculptural realisa-

tion, denote certain types of emphasis and attitude. The graceful form of an exclamation mark – its economical, curvilinear assertiveness – is less obvious but no less striking when one sees the relief *Exclamation point* (1966). The human-sized *Exclamation point* (*chartreuse*) (2008) – fluffy and irrepressible – perfectly embodies the spirit of joyful exclamation. When Artschwager began to use this motif in the mid-1960s, the comic-strip convention of depicting intangible stimuli with graphic marks was familiar in pop culture and Pop art alike. Artschwager's punctuation marks, however, are objects in their own right rather than signposts to meanings to be found elsewhere.

Artschwager's linguistic and Conceptual projects are not prone to ludic philosophical meandering. If anything, his emphasis on sculpture led him towards materialisation rather than dematerialisation, even as contemporaries travelled in the opposite direction. He developed his 'blps' – simple monochrome ovals with two parallel sides – during a teaching stint at the University of California, Davis, in 1967. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, 'blps' appeared in numerous now-legendary exhibitions of site-specific and Conceptual art. 'Blps' excel at focusing attention by stealth: by appearing unexpectedly and catching the eye; or, as with the 'blps' installed along the High Line in New York's Chelsea to coincide with this exhibition, by prompting a visual treasure hunt. One way or another, they make us see things differently. That said, Artschwager has produced 'blps' in materials ranging from wood to rubberised horsehair. Conceptual art is seldom as cute as *Bristle corner* (1995), which resembles a sleeping cat. There is a tactile promise in Artschwager's objects even when they strike cerebral chords. The splendidly constructed *Four approximate objects* (Fig.81), for example, is a box containing four smooth but slightly irregular forms in chrome-plated brass. They suggest immaculate imperfection.



80. *Natural selection*, by Richard Artschwager. 1995. Acrylic on Celotex with aluminium frame, 72.4 by 87.6 cm. (Private collection; photograph by Robert McKeever; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).



81. *Four approximate objects*, by Richard Artschwager. 1970–91. Edition of 30. Mahogany, Formica, brass, chrome-plated brass and flocking, 8.9 by 37.2 by 34.6 cm. (Private collection, New York; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

Many of the recurring qualities in Artschwager's work hold the viewer at bay. Paintings on Celotex frustrate close scrutiny. Formica sculptures shrink the depth of the real into *trompe-l'œil* slickness. His wooden shipping crates from 1994 imply art in a ceaselessly dormant, concealed state, as though the viewer has arrived at an exhibition a day too early or too late. There is something professionally dispassionate rather than emotionally indifferent in these distancing tactics, which renders his politically charged pieces all the more telling. In the long aftermath of the attacks of 11th September 2001, he painted *Arizona* (2002) from a well-known photograph of the USS *Arizona* burning at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, as well as judiciously disinterested portraits of George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden and himself. Given time, these hints of moral complicity might gain the poignancy of *Natural selection* (Fig. 80), a painting after an army photograph of Timothy McVeigh. The photograph appeared in the *New York Times* soon after McVeigh was arrested for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. McVeigh represented an extreme form of anti-government paranoia, which remains politically corrosive in the United States. Artschwager, a conscript who was wounded at the Battle of the Bulge and who subsequently served in counterintelligence in Vienna until his discharge, grew up with more subtle notions of how the private self survives in the world. His more recent paintings take their cues from Post-Impressionist interiors. Some things have changed: he uses a colour palette rather than greys, and a sugarcane-fibre composite has replaced Celotex. The desolation that lurks in some of his earlier Celotex interiors, however, remains. Artschwager's world is resilient. It never conceals reality behind an ideal.

¹ Catalogue: *Richard Artschwager!*. By Jennifer R. Gross, with contributions by Cathleen Chaffee, Ingrid Schaffner and Adam D. Weinberg. 256 pp. incl. 190 col. + 20 b. & w. ills. (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012), \$65 (HB). ISBN 978-0-300-18531-7. The exhibition will travel to the **Hammer Museum, Los Angeles** (16th June to 1st September)