

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Inverted Craftsmanship

The Diverse Oeuvre of the American Richard Artschwager in Munich

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(Left) Richard Artschwager, *Self Portrait*, 2003.

Photo: Collection of Milton and Sheila Fine, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2013.

(Right) *Exclamation Point (Chartreuse)*, 2008

Photo: Robert McKeever, Gagosian Gallery, New York.

Artschwager—the distinctive German name carried by an American artist—sounds like two odd pieces that were screwed together artificially. The name was not only vividly imprinted in the visitors' memories of large shows like *Documenta*—Artschwager has been invited to Kassel five times—and their related associations, but also, because the works exhibited seem to be screwed together in a way similar to his surname, they too were imprinted in the memories like the name of the one who created them.

Richard Artschwager has been well known for many years by visitors of art exhibitions throughout Europe, but they were never able to get a coherent idea of the artist's oeuvre, which experimented beyond the avant-garde movement. It was 24 years after his first major survey in 1988–89, that the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York created the first retrospective. With that profound show, America will celebrate on December 26, 2013, the 90th birthday of its internationally esteemed, but still too unknown artist. On February 9, 2013, six days after closing the exhibition at the Whitney, Richard Artschwager passed away in Albany. In two and a half months, on his 90th birthday, this impressive retrospective of his work will still be open in Haus der Kuns in Munich, where it occupies all of the first floor galleries of the East wing—his stages of development can be observed in the most beautiful and striking ways in these rooms.

There is no other artist in the categories of Pop art, Minimalism or Conceptual Art, that is on par with Artschwager, who analyzed systematically the main conditions of the genre of painting and sculpture. In a similar way, there is no other artist who parodies it in such a passionate and radical way by eliminating the meaning through deconstructions like the late appointee Artschwager. Having studied biology, chemistry and mathematics it was as a photographer and cabinetmaker that he accomplished the wishes of his wealthy clientele for years.

One day, as he watched a children's program on TV in which a policeman punished his son for tacking wooden slats together haphazardly, Artschwager must have felt the urge as a craftsman to get carried away in a similarly provocative way. So he tacked the panels which were lying about in his workshop together into a bulky pile and hung it up with a rope under the ceiling.

The deconstructivist piece from the year 1961 with the corresponding title *Portrait Zero*, marks the beginning of Artschwager's purposeless artistic oeuvre and hangs in the Haus der Kunst next to other experimental pioneering work from the early years. Not far away is the *Description Table*, a waist-high cubic structure consisting of melamine laminate on plywood. With its black, white, and brown-grained areas it indicates a table with four legs and a white tablecloth which does not really exist. Artschwager has simply fitted the white panels seamlessly together. The elegantly smooth cube distinguishes itself from its simulated function as a piece of furniture most of all through the obtrusive glaring of the cheap synthetic material evident on its surface. From the beginning, Artschwager makes his works from material that is extremely artificial, industrially manufactured, and taken out of its original context. One can find in the first room a *Triptych*, a conventionally modeled altar shrine, whose middle altarpiece, as well as the two movable side pieces, were extremely carefully framed, but only offers the spectator a Formica panel partially covered with grey acrylic.

Formica, the classic laminate once popular as a floor and furniture covering, would play from this point on a central role as a disillusioning and distancing element in the artistic and sculptural oeuvre.

In many other works, especially in his large-sized paintings, Artschwager used another man-made material, Celotex, a bristly, rough fiberboard, which was used as insulation material. Thinly applied colors and graphic motifs are randomly cover the rough surface. The blurring effect that resulted from the technique was successfully refined by Artschwager for its picturesque and suggestive appeal.

His depictions of large interiors, the different phases of the demolition of a luxurious Hotel in Atlantic City, illustrations of newspaper photos as well as the late self-portrait, are all reduced to a grey tone and with the rough industrial undercoat, have taken on a bloom and crispness, which they would never been accomplished with conventional materials.

The best place to experience the development of his sculptures after the first cubic version of a table is in the hall with the five *Piano* sculptures. No matter if it's a grand piano, a square piano, or a small piano—the pianist Artschwager has combined the elements of his favorite instrument, the body, the lid, the keyboard, the pedals in such extreme different way, that you can almost hear the skewed tones they would have created.

Another ironic form of the obliteration of three-dimensionality is presented by the *Splatter* works: They try to give the impression that a massive item of furniture has been hurled into the

corner of the room and the pieces stick on both sides flat to the wall. Next to these massive fragments, Artschwager's *blps* seem to be literally minimalistic. These are lengthened dots, which come in any kind of material and turn every place they are installed into a place of art, leaving the place in a different light.

Whether with his paintings, the experimental drawings, the sculptures, or the late three-dimensional room signs—in every genre Artschwager was able to distinguish himself as an individualist, as a creative reinterpreter of technical requirements.

This late, but opulent retrospective turns him into a classic figure of modern art in an impressive way, and indeed it reserves him an honorable place in the history of art.