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Q&A: Richard Serra on His Monumental Qatari Desert Sculpture

Nicholas Forrest



Richard Serra (Photographer: Matthew Sumner; Brunswick Group)

In celebration of renowned American sculptor Richard Serra's first solo exhibition in the Middle East, which opened in Qatar on April 10, the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), under the patronage of QMA Chairperson Sheikha Al Mayassa Bint Hamad Al Thani, commissioned Serra to produce a site-specific standing-plate work conceived for the dramatic desert landscape of the Brouq Nature Reserve, near Zekreet in western Qatar.

Consisting of four steel plates measured by their relation to the topography, "East-West/West-East" spans more than one kilometer in length through a natural corridor formed by gypsum plateaus. According to the QMA, all four of the level plates, each rising between 14.7 meters and 16.7 meters above the ground, can be seen and explored from either end of the sculpture.

To learn more about "East-West/West-East," ARTINFO recently spoke with Serra about the new work.

How did the opportunity to install a work in the desert come about?

It came about around November 2010. I was doing a piece here for the Islamic Museum by I. M. Pei — I was building a large vertical structure, and at the time the Qatar Museum Authority asked me if I would think about building a piece into the landscape. And I asked them, "Which landscape?" And they said, "The desert." I had no real desire to do that, but I said I would take a look, as I had never worked in the desert before. And they gave me an assistant who was a Bedouin, who knew every foot of every desert. We went to three of four deserts, and we finally came to a place called the Brouq Nature Reserve, which is a desert park that is a preserved park.

And the main feature of this park is that it has a series of gypsum plateaus, which are about 50 feet high, and it's as if there was an ancient sea there once, and the sea eroded, so you have two levels — you have the levels of the gypsum plateaus, and the level of the seabed as it is now. I think you could probably compare it to the South West and John Ford country, only much more evaporated, and made of white, chalky plateaus, rather than hard, high plateaus; it's a plateaued desert, it's very craggy, it's not a sandy desert.

What we did was made various trips into the desert and we had to find a location or a site where we thought we could make a place within the undifferentiated space of the desert with its gypsum plateaus. And while I was working on the piece called “7,” during the daytime I would go out into the desert with my wife and John Silverman, a friend of mine, and we would explore different sites. And that took about a year. And we located two sites, and then those were translated into topographical maps; and then actual full-scale, inch to a foot models were made back in New York. I had one where I live in Long Island, North Fork, and one in New York. Then we worked with the models, arrived at some possible conclusion of what we could do, and we came back and chose one site.

What was it about the Zekreet Peninsula location that appealed to you?

The site we chose is a site that has two gypsum plateaus that are separate by about 400 to 500 yards, and it bisects the peninsula of this desert — this desert is like a little peninsula that sits off the southern part of Qatar. The peninsula is not too wide, maybe four to five miles wide and 10 to 15 miles long, and we found a place where we thought we could connect both borders of the peninsula by placing something between these two gypsum plateaus. You have to realize that the sea level of the desert is relatively flat, and the space between the two plateaus is more or less like a saddle in that it has a curvature that goes over, and a curvature that is flattened like a low u-shape — more or less a topographical saddle.

From a great distance you can't see over the plateaus, if you are two or three miles away, but when you actually walk to the centers, between the two plateaus, an entirely different region of the landscape opens, so there is two landscapes in terms of the terrain that I wanted to adjoin. And I went back and looked at my models and tried out various insertions into the possibility of what could be done. But then I finally arrived at the conclusion that I had to use the elevations of the gypsum plateaus. So what I did is I made four plates that are level to each other and level to the gypsum plateaus. And their placement was derived through a topological map. So in order to align them I had to find the place where they would be level to each other, and their heights are 16.7 meters and 14.7 meters, which is about 54 feet high and 48 feet high, and they are level to each other, which means the landscape falls in two directions — two meters through the gypsum plateaus, the end plates are higher than the two center plates and all they are all level to each other and level to the gypsum plateaus. And the placement is very irregular because the placement is decided by where they would be aligned and where they would fall on the plan. And it stands at little under a kilometer. We weren't sure actually until we got the fourth one up that you would be able to see all four from either end.

What do you want people to think and feel when they experience the work?

I don't want to force a meaning on anyone. I think what happens is people go to the desert and it's a place where one contemplates one's own existence to some degree, it's a very solitary place. It's a place where one doesn't really contemplate the past or the future, where one can really be in the presence of what the place allows in terms of internal reflection. And this place makes a space within that place to walk and measure yourself against the rise and fall of the

landscape. And what I found is that — we opened it the other day and hundreds of people arrived — and they walk the entire length and back, and for the most part people were very generous in the way that they felt about their experience.

Basically what the piece does is it collects the space, it makes a place within the space, and connects both sides of the peninsula where the water is both on the eastern and western side. The piece is directly on axis with east-west, so I called it “East-West” not only because it is on the axis of east-west, but also because I am a Westerner working in the East, and it kind of multiplies that joining of both propositions.

Some people have questioned the relevance of the sculpture in the middle of the desert and whether it was worth the cost. What is your response?

I think that I am making a cultural contribution to the country. The pieces are of a certain height and thickness where I think they will last; the piece has an implied timelessness, and I think it is seen as that.

You have said that you consider space to be your primary material. How is that reflected in “East-West/West-East”?

What I do is use steel in order to collect space in relationship to how people understand their movement through space. So the piece deals with the nature of duration and time in relation to walking and looking, and people went out there and that’s what they did. I think in the future that is what people will do. I think it’s gotten quite a bit of notification here, people are starting to go out there — it’s not that far from Doha, it’s about an hour and 20 minute drive out there so I think people will explore it and it’s my hope that as people go through this area of the country that they’ll go and have a look.

You have called “East-West/West-East” your most fulfilling piece to date.

“East-West/West-East” is definitely one of the most fulfilling pieces I have done in my life. I have spent a long time coming and going in and out of the desert. Since I have been here for the last three weeks I have only missed one or two days. And during the installation, which lasted five days, I was there the entire time. And what you find there is that every day the light changes, every day the wind changes, every day your relationship to the place changes. It’s not the kind of desert that has soft sand, it’s a really hard, rough, craggly desert — the only place I could compare it to in the United States that would make any sense at all is the South West, but it is not really like that. It is a gypsum plateaued desert with two very distinct sea levels — with these enormous gypsum plateaus.