

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

THE UPCOMING

Richard Serra: *Backdoor Pipeline, Ramble, Dead Load* and *London Cross* at Gagosian Gallery | Exhibition review

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Photo: Mike Bruce

During the 1960s, artists of the minimalist movement began to explore questions of philosophy and artistic practice. Questions like: can sculpture achieve something that, say, painting or musical composition cannot? Can the deliberate removal of external paraphernalia enhance the experience of encountering a work of art?

Richard Serra (born in 1939), one of the 20th century's most respected and influential artists, returns to the Gagosian Britannia Street Gallery. With four works, *Backdoor Pipeline*, *Ramble*, *Dead Load* and *London Cross*, he offers superbly crafted replies to the metaphysical questions that vex the minimalists.

As a child Serra would often visit Californian shipyards, and later funded his college studies by working in steel mills. Perhaps this explains his affinity for large-scale engineering and his ability to create art by taming the geometries of massive steel structures. This preoccupation with unifying engineering and sculpture is exemplified in the dazzling *London Cross* – a gravity defying conjuring trick. *London Cross* is constructed from two steel panels; each vertical panel weighs over ten tonnes and is about 40-feet long, yet balances in cruciform with such delicacy that more than one visitor has wondered aloud how he did it.

An adjacent room is host to *Rambles*. Each of the dozen or so upright blocks of unpainted rolled steel possesses subtly different dimensions to its neighbour. As the whole work weighs more than 60 tonnes it's easy to imagine one has stumbled into an unfinished maze or ancient, and mercifully inert, security mechanism.

With profound simplicity the two blocks of forged steel forming *Dead Load* echo a sarcophagus so fully that the room begins to feel like a crypt. Finally, there is the serpentine *Backdoor Pipeline*: a simple vaulted tunnel of about 30 feet in length, crafted from two ribs of weathered steel. Visitors, claustrophobia permitting, are free to investigate.

The minimalist manifesto demands a focus only on the art, each display free of labels. Visitors can find guidance by borrowing an informative laminated floorplan from the reception area. This exhibition is neither a gimmick nor a cynical pseudo-intellectual prank. Everything here is the product of very real sweat and tears, and provides a rare opportunity to explore one of arts most misunderstood movements performed by one of its greatest exponents.