

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Richard Serra at Gagosian Gallery, WC1

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Richard Serra's Backdoor Pipeline.

★★★★☆

“Like a walk in the woods” is probably not the first way you would think to describe a sculpture by arch-monumentalist Richard Serra. Without experiencing his new work, *Ramble*, it’s hard to imagine how you could compare it to a trundle through a forest. And yet . . .

Serra was originally part of the team that worked on Berlin’s celebrated Holocaust memorial, but he withdrew partway through the process that led to the (very moving) installation that now sits near to the Brandenburg Gate. Its slightly chilling echo is found in *Ramble* though: great slabs of metal, no more than 23cm wide and of varying heights but no taller than a man, stand together, massed at irregular but narrow intervals like trees in a dense woodland. Walk through them (weirdly, apparently adults tend to walk around, thus missing the point) and you are forced to take a slow, winding path, allowing you to notice the textures that the casting process has wrought upon the steel, like lichen on bark but also — in a more sinister way — like the phantom shadows of damaged photographic negatives. You feel, as you might in a silent woodland, that there is something lurking behind, or beneath.

Ramble is one of only four works in the show (the gallery, which opened in 2004, was built very much with Serra in mind, he being its most demanding artist, in terms of scale). *Backdoor Pipeline* sits in the back room. Two curved pieces of steel, weathered to a rich terracotta, lean gently against each other, creating a yawning, inviting but slightly scary mouth that draws you

into what feels like an underground chamber. Viewed from the outside, the structure seems impossible — it curves like a slinky, giving the impression of tautness on one side and on the other an almost Rubenesque voluptuousness.

This tension is a constant in Serra's work. *Dead Load* is two rectangular blocks of solid forged steel, one on top of the other, but you can see daylight between them, leavening their evident weight. In *London Cross*, for which a large part of the gallery was knocked down and rebuilt, two vast slabs of steel, more than 8m long but only 6.2cm wide, balance one above the other in a cruciform shape. You pass beneath the upper slab, which looks both delicate, precarious and utterly massive at the same time. The surface, its industrial bloom visible in the afternoon daylight, is like a Monet, but huge and a bit terrifying. The overall effect is one of disconcerted delight.

The exhibition runs to Feb 28