

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



The Reinvented Visions of Richard Serra

For over 50 years, WSJ. Magazine's 2015 Art Innovator has pushed boundaries with his dramatic sculptures and drawings that explore gravity, space and time

Kelly Crow



Photographs by Adrian Gaut. Serra's work 'East-West/West-East'

IN THE TINY GULF NATION of Qatar, an hour's drive west of the capital of Doha, amid miles of hazy hot sand, the artist Richard Serra last year planted a row of four thin, steel plates. Each one of these rectangular planks shoots straight up nearly five stories tall, and collectively they span a distance of roughly half a mile. From afar, these slats project an alien beauty, as though a mysterious shrine has been staked into a blanched expanse. Serra's truer intention becomes clear only close-up.

Like a surveyor, Serra aligned his plates so that their tops sit level with a horizon line created by a pair of nearby gypsum mesas. These ancient plateaus are covered with crushed fossil shells, because they once served as the floor of a sea that has long since disappeared, and the land around them has eroded. Yet stand near a plank—or better yet, walk by them all—and suddenly Serra's reconstructed skyline makes it easy to imagine waves surging over the topography once more.

Who else could make people in a desert feel as though they are, for one miraculous moment, underwater?

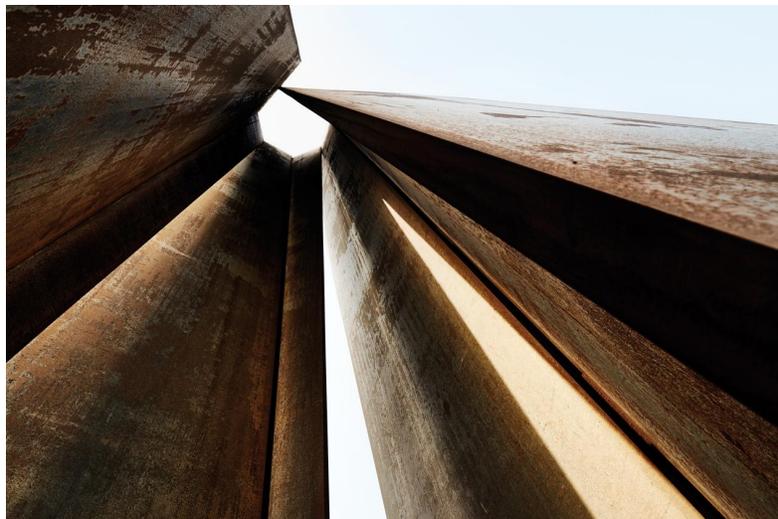
“Utterly riveting,” Glenn Lowry, director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, said of the experience when he visited shortly before the piece, *East-West/West-East*, debuted in April 2014. “It’s so simple yet deeply moving.”

Serra, who for decades has lived in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, and Orient, New York, on the northern tip of Long Island, says he may have been seeking the familiar in this unfamiliar land. “Until now, I’ve never worked in a desert,” he says. “I live by the sea.”

Over the past half-century, Serra has earned an international reputation creating steel sculptures that swoop, splice, zigzag and bulge like ship’s hulls, often taking on forms and tonnage no one in art history ever attempted before. Many associate him with his mid-career series of *Torqued* works, including those on view at the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, New York. Each coiling steel piece there stands 13 feet tall and weighs at least 25 tons. With narrow openings into the curving works, it is possible to meander through, like a hiker in an undulating, sandstone canyon. The effect can be disorienting, but it’s also a rush.

The artist’s own story feels similarly outsized. The son of a San Francisco candy factory foreman, Serra, now 76, grew up to be brawny and intellectually curious, a surfer and steelworker who chose a life in art. He applied to Yale, one of the country’s most rigorous art schools, and was accepted on the basis of a dozen drawings. At the time, postwar painters like Jackson Pollock—who dripped or slathered their emotions on canvas—reigned over the art world. But when Serra moved to New York in the 1960s, he fell in with a freewheeling group of artists, dancers, playwrights and musicians whose experiments helped redefine what art could be. Serra and his artistic peers, like Robert Smithson, Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman, put down their paintbrushes and started making radical pieces using materials like dirt, rubber and wax. Serra chose lead and steel.

Composer Philip Glass, who befriended Serra in 1964 and later worked as his assistant, says they often hung out in downtown Manhattan coffeehouses, where they would endlessly debate ways to invent something, anything, new. “We were the outsiders of art—and we liked it,” Glass says.



2011 sculpture ‘7’ is nearly 80 feet tall. PHOTO: RICHARD SERRA, 7 © 2015 RICHARD SERRA/ARS, NY

Serra says he determined early on to make sculptures that didn't look like recognizable objects; he didn't want to decorate a spot on a pedestal or a coffee table. Instead, he wanted to see if he could make sculptures hefty enough to carve up the physical voids around them, compelling people to see and experience a room or a field differently. For *Strike: To Roberta and Rudy* (1969–1971), he wedged a plate of steel that was 24 feet long and 8 feet high into a corner, essentially bisecting the entire room. A few years later, in Los Angeles, he laid a huge steel plate on a floor and hung a matching plate flush against the ceiling, drawing eyes up. Crowds packed Ace Gallery to see the piece, *Delineator* (1974–1975), transfixed by Serra's wizardry.

"You're not actually there to see the metal," says art historian Richard Shiff, the director of the Center for the Study of Modernism at the University of Texas, of those early works. "You're there to feel the space with the help of Serra's sculpture."

Even so, Serra's best-known pieces are gravity-defying feats of engineering. At the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain, visitors can thread through *Snake*, a 104-foot-long row of three freestanding steel strips that tilt, yet never topple. The 1996 work later became part of a larger 2005 group for the Bilbao called *The Matter of Time*. This series of soaring steel shapes has paths that curl inward to reveal hidden chambers or spiral outward to the gallery beyond.

By embracing the ambition and scale of an architect rather than a studio artist, Serra has helped salvage sculpture from being treated like an art-historical lightweight compared to painting. The Renaissance masters had treated these mediums equally, but they were supported by patrons who had the space and budgets for massive commissions. Fast-forward a few centuries, and private collectors preferred more manageable pieces to adorn their homes, essentially reducing sculpture to tabletop décor until titans like Auguste Rodin and Alberto Giacometti took up the cause again. But Serra's works also summon questions about structure, gravity, balance, time—and the human body, since he's interested in how people interact with his structures. Serra says he's wandered into his own work over the years to discover people taking naps inside or doing yoga or exchanging marriage vows.

"A lot of people wanted to reduce sculpture to object making," says art critic and historian Hal Foster, "but he reclaimed sculpture for space making."

Sometimes that space can feel precarious. Artist Matthew Barney says he remembers the first time he saw Serra's arc pieces in the 1980s, large steel plates Serra rolled into wave shapes and half-moon shapes and arranged, without anchors or buttressing, in the compressed space of Leo Castelli's Greene Street gallery in New York. "I loved the impossibility of it standing and the possibility of it falling," Barney says. "Those pieces were about what could potentially happen."

Weight is a genuine concern. "Welcome to Richard's world," says Larry Gagosian, with whom he's worked since 1983. While installing his first Serra show in Los Angeles that same year, Gagosian learned the hard way that Serra's pieces don't fit or sit neatly into spaces with typical weight-bearing loads when a forklift was used to carry in a pair of steel plates for a piece called *Plunge*. The work's title proved prophetic: "As soon as the forklift hit the threshold, it collapsed and so did the floor," Gagosian says. Luckily, the floor was repaired, and the show wowed critics and fans alike. "He's extraordinary."

Serra is likewise unpredictable—friends say he can be stormy. Ann Temkin, MoMA's chief curator, says the artist reminds her of his abstract expressionist forebears, because Serra is

“clearly in love with art, a romantic” who is passionate about debating his positions on art—or anything, for that matter. California collector Steve Oliver, a construction mogul, says he once watched in awe as Serra, along with the artist’s wife, Clara Weyergraf, an art historian he married in 1981, and critic Robert Hughes, debated for more than an hour about whether a hand that was painted on a figure in a 16th-century portrait had been depicted palm up or down. “I just sat there with my jaw open,” Oliver says.

“Richard is very direct and honest and hard to deal with—we fought for years until we really became friends,” says one of Serra’s first dealers, Alexander von Berswordt. Von Berswordt, who runs a gallery in Bochum, Germany, says he persuaded Serra to join the gallery in the mid-’70s after mailing the artist a transatlantic plane ticket, and he works with him to this day. (Besides Gagosian Gallery, Serra is also represented in the U.S. by David Zwirner gallery, which he began working with in 2013.)



2011 sculpture ‘7’ in Doha, Qatar PHOTO: RICHARD SERRA, 7 © 2015 RICHARD SERRA/ARS, NY

Serra can also be endearing. His gray eyes light up beneath his white, bushy eyebrows whenever he hits upon a fresh insight or wants to chew over the memory of another artist’s work. Ask him about one of his long-gone friends like Smithson or Walter De Maria and his voice will soften, turn reverential. Barney, who cast Serra as a father-figure architect in his *CREMASTER Cycle* film series (released between 1994 and 2002), thinks Serra’s intensity isn’t a flaw—it’s his plumb line. “Richard is pure,” Barney says. “He’s very much like his work in that way.”

Lately, Serra has ventured into new visual terrain. His most recent pieces, like *East-West/West-East* in Qatar, feel more primordial than the candy-ribboned curls he was erecting a decade ago. This summer at David Zwirner gallery in New York, he unveiled *Equal*, a group of eight car-size blocks stacked into four towers. Because they weigh 320 tons in all, the artist had to position the pairs over four weight-bearing pylons beneath the gallery floor. Otherwise, they might have sunk through.

MoMA's Lowry says he wanted *Equal* as soon as he saw it. "He keeps moving sculpture in ways we've never seen," Lowry says. The museum bought the entire work and plans to exhibit *Equal* after it finishes a planned expansion. Lowry says that Serra's piece will likely get its own gallery.

Serra continues to push himself as he enters his late 70s. Next spring he is planning for a show of new sculptures at Gagosian's gallery. "I don't participate in the great social life," Serra says. "I'm fairly obsessively internally driven." He and Weyergraf don't have children. They spend most of their time in their home in Orient, which was renovated by the architect Richard Gluckman. Every morning, Serra says, he wakes up around 5:30 a.m., swims in the indoor pool attached by a long walkway to his home and sits down to work from 10 a.m. to about 6 p.m. He invariably makes a few calls to Germany, where steelworkers help fabricate the huge pieces he designs in three dimensions using lead models that get translated into computerized production drawings.

Almost everything for him starts in a sketchbook, though. He maintains a parallel practice of making drawings—mark making that he says is separate from his sculptures but hews to the same artistic ideas. These drawings are often black or mottled, never figurative, and they have gained their own following over the years. (This past September, he unveiled a series of new drawings at Gagosian Gallery inspired in part by his mazelike 2014 sculpture *Ramble*.) Everywhere he goes he maps his thoughts in sketchbooks, and these notes represent a daily account of his creative life comparable in detail to the work of famed diarists like Benjamin Franklin. Serra has a room in Manhattan lined nearly floor to ceiling with boxes and trunks containing notebooks and sketchbooks he's saved since college.

Gary Garrels, a curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which held a retrospective of Serra's drawings four years ago, says the artist rarely lets anyone into the sketchbook room: "It's like Ali Baba's cave."

Pedro Moreira Salles, a Brazilian banking billionaire who five years ago commissioned Serra to build a 250-ton steel piece, *Cambuhy*, a curving sculpture atop a former green maze at his country estate north of São Paulo, says artists often become "a caricature of their former selves" later in life, producing less-potent examples of their earlier breakthroughs. Serra, on the other hand, "refuses to be on that path."

"You have to be obstinate," Serra says. "You have to have an internal necessity. If you decide early on that you want an alternate life, no matter your success or reward, you have to stick with it."

RICHARD SERRA cannot remember a time he didn't like to draw. By age 4 he was already carrying a small notebook around, sketching zoo animals and family portraits; his parents could tell when he was angry because then he would refuse to draw in protest.

His mother, Gladys, had grown up in a bourgeois home in Los Angeles, the daughter of a milliner who sold Panama hats. She admired 18th-century painters like Thomas Gainsborough and Jean-Antoine Watteau, and she fell for Serra's father, Tony, after hearing him play Spanish guitar songs on a ferryboat ride.

During World War II, Serra's father worked as a pipe fitter for a shipyard near San Francisco, and afterward the family bought a spec home on the western edge of the city, south of Golden

Gate Park, in an area that had been mainly sand dunes. Gladys tried to teach her three sons—Tony Jr., Richard and Rudy—to embrace cultural pursuits. Serra took to art first and realized it was “a way to catch my parents’ eyes,” he says. In the third grade, his teacher summoned his mother and told her to start taking him to art museums. “After that, she would introduce me as ‘Richard the artist,’ ” he says. “It was preordained.”

Artist Mary Heilmann met Serra when she was 15 and he was a year older. All the teenage girls along Ocean Beach nursed crushes on him, including her. “He was a tough macho dude,” she says, a 185-pound halfback for the Lincoln High football team and a surfer who would hit the waves even when it was cold and foggy. Serra took her to a few car parties—where teenagers parked along the dunes and turned up their radios—but they soon determined they were better as friends. After Serra graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a degree in English and got admitted to Yale’s M.F.A. program, she visited him once. He seemed in sync with the Ivy Leaguers, she says, adding, “He was wild and worldly and everyone seemed to know him.”

In fact, initially Serra felt out of place. To save money for Yale’s tuition, he had worked summers for Bethlehem Steel as a sticker—a steelworker who sat poised on the bare trusses of a building under construction. His job was to catch hot rivets tossed up from workers below and cram them quickly into the girders’ nail-like holes while they were still warm, a task he says he enjoyed. The second day after he arrived at Yale in 1961, he says a woman from Vassar asked him what was wrong with the palms of his hands. “Calluses,” he told her.

He says now that he didn’t find his artistic niche at Yale, making paintings he would later trash, but he reveled in the school’s competitive, analytical culture. He also befriended classmates like Chuck Close and Brice Marden, who like him felt sympathetic to the nascent counterculture. Serra joined in, wearing his hair in a ponytail and sporting a green military jacket even as he protested the Vietnam War.

Things started to click for him after he and Nancy Graves, a fellow artist whom he met at Yale, traveled after graduation in 1964 to France, where they married a year later. In Paris, he started hanging out in the renowned café La Coupole because the sculptor Alberto Giacometti—already known for his bronze sculptures of reedy figures—often stopped in for a late-night drink, plaster still stuck in his curly hair. To Serra, Giacometti epitomized the serious artist he aspired to become, and Giacometti made sculptures. Serra also spent hours drawing inside the Paris studio of the late sculptor Constantin Brancusi, which had been left to the French government. When Glass arrived in Paris to study music on a Fulbright fellowship, one of the first things Serra did was take him to visit Brancusi’s re-created studio in the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

A side trip to Spain in 1966 sealed Serra’s fate. Standing in the Prado museum in Madrid, he marveled at Diego Velázquez’s 1656 masterpiece, *Las Meninas*, in which the Spanish painter depicts himself in a courtly scene but looks outward, with his easel nearby, possibly because he is painting the viewer’s portrait. Serra says, “I realized I would never get beyond the virtuosity of that painting, how Velázquez somehow made the viewer the subject.”

After that, he stopped painting. He and Graves moved to New York in 1966, where he started experimenting with industrial materials, from rubber belts to lead pipes. (The couple divorced in 1970.) Glass moved to New York as well and got a day job as a plumber but agreed to help Serra

in his studio as well. A question bedeviled Serra: Could sculptures be configured so that, instead of serving as decoration, they could serve as a space or a stage for the audience in the same electrifying way Velázquez had done with his masterpiece? “I wanted the viewer to become the subject of his own experience,” he says.

In New York, young artists of Serra’s generation were smitten with the idea that the process of making art could be as interesting as the final product, and Serra started with that. In 1967, he made a list of action-minded infinitives—“to roll,” “to crease,” “to fold,” “to bend”—and he started making works that demonstrated each one. He pulled one side of a thick rubber mat off the ground, so that it made a triangular, cavelike shape, which became the sculpture *To Lift*, now in MoMA’s collection.

Other rising stars like Eva Hesse were already garnering recognition for working with rubber, so instead, Serra soon shifted his focus to metal. Classic sculptors typically cast their bronzes using molds, so he tried mixing it up by casting from architecture. He did so by scooping up ladles full of molten lead and splashing it against the bottom of a wall in the Whitney Museum of American Art. Once cooled, these wispy trails of silvery metal were pried off and lined up in ragged rows. Serra’s *Casting* impressed the artist Jasper Johns, who already was considered the reigning champion of the New York art scene. Johns later commissioned Serra to make another version for his own Delancey Street studio. (Johns eventually donated this piece, *Gutter Corner Splash: Night Shift*, to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where it will be displayed once the museum reopens next year.)

Around the same time, Serra began experimenting with gravity. He propped lead poles against lead plates, sometimes pinning the plate against a wall several feet off the ground or tilting four plates so that they leaned together. These pieces carried an air of danger, and Glass says he could tell his friend was entering uncharted artistic territory. One day, he and Close and another friend went to Serra’s Duane Street studio to help him tip lead plates together for the 1969 piece *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)*. Each square plate stood 4 feet tall and weighed 500 pounds. After the pieces were positioned, Glass says Serra whispered, “OK, now very slowly walk away.” The men didn’t even dare congratulate each other by slapping each other on the back for fear the plates would fall. (They didn’t.)

Serra savored these creative breakthroughs—*One Ton Prop* and other pieces gained him a dealer in Leo Castelli and a \$500 monthly stipend—but he knew the viewer wasn’t yet playing a starring role with these works. In fact, the main thing his audience had to do was avoid accidentally knocking the pieces over. Then, in 1970, he and his girlfriend at the time, the artist Joan Jonas, took a five-week trip to Japan because they had been invited to participate in a group show in Tokyo. Jonas says they spent most of their days walking around the Zen gardens in Kyoto; at night, they went to the theater.

What Serra discovered was that the gardens he saw were constantly changing depending on where he was standing in the moment—his own body position allowed him to line up, or obscure, certain vistas. “He loved those gardens,” Jonas says.

He went back to the U.S. and told his dealer he “needed a bigger field.” He and Castelli found a collector, Roger Davidson, who was willing to give Serra part of his family’s potato field in rural King City, Ontario, in exchange for two Prop pieces. Serra and Jonas surveyed the land, starting in one place and walking in opposite directions, stopping the moment they could no longer see

each other. At that point, Serra placed a stake, and so did she. From there he walked back to the center, eventually installing six concrete slabs that stand 5 feet high and snake across the field in a leisurely, zigzag pattern. From a distance it looks like a meandering garden path that's been turned on its side. Instead of walking on top, though, viewers are invited to walk alongside it and around it—and take in the vista as they go.

Fittingly, the 10-acre piece is called *Shift*, and it marked a turning point in Serra's career. "Right there, as you walk around the piece, you become the content as you go," he says. In 2013, the local township declared Shift a cultural heritage site.

The epiphany didn't hit everyone else at first. When he tried to pull off a similar feat in 1981 by installing a 120-foot-long, curved-steel wall near the federal courthouse in downtown Manhattan, people who worked in the area called *Tilted Arc* an impasse and petitioned for its removal. The U.S. government, which had approved the design as part of its commission, eventually sent in a team in 1989 to dismantle the piece at night, plate by plate. Serra was embittered by the affair and unsuccessfully sued the government before it was torn down. Today, he says it was "an albatross that hung around my neck for years."

Redemption came in an unusual form, via the soaring ribbonlike structures he started making in the mid-1990s—inspired by the Baroque church San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome by architect Francesco Borromini, whose oculus mirrors a mosaic tile oval on the floor below. In the mid-1990s, Serra visited the spot, entering the church's central oval from a side aisle. Because of the perspective, he briefly thought the two ovals weren't lined up. Even after he realized his mistake, he says, "I was more intrigued by my misunderstanding."

It would take him years to sort out the engineering that would allow him to mold vast sheets of steel into elliptical ovals of his own. Lynne Cooke, a friend and curator at Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art, visited him at a Bethlehem Steel plant in Baltimore during his early attempts and said she couldn't believe what she was seeing. "These sheets turn in space, so as you walk into the work, you can tell something is happening but you can't see it all at once," Cooke says. "It's totally exhilarating."

Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, worked for Dia at the time and unveiled Serra's first *Torqued Ellipses* at the Dia's Chelsea space in 1997. The whorled forms barely fit into the space, and lines quickly formed around the block. "It was a miracle," Govan says, particularly since wary audiences were expecting work similar to his infamous *Tilted Arc*. "People saw this artist they thought they knew surprise the hell out of everyone."

These days, dozens of top museums and collectors boast their own Serras, having won the right to commission site-specific pieces after being informally vetted by his dealers and lawyer. The more logistically hairy they are to install, the more status they seem to convey. Serra's tilting and curved sculptures require days and huge cranes to arrange in place, which is usually done under the artist's watchful eye. Eli Broad has a 1995 Serra in his front yard that Serra titled *No Problem*; Broad also helped LACMA buy a 2006 work, *Band*, which cost \$10 million. Barnes & Noble founder Len Riggio has a Serra splicing his yard on Long Island, and French luxury mogul François Pinault has an earlier outdoor plate piece at his château outside Paris.



Richard Serra's 'East-West/West-East' in Qatar. PHOTO: RICHARD SERRA, EAST-WEST/WEST-EAST © 2015 RICHARD SERRA/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Steve Oliver, the Bay Area collector, invited the artist to make a work, *Snake Eyes and Boxcars*, in the early '90s on his sheep ranch in Sonoma County. Serra installed six pairs of steel blocks whose varying heights match each other across an undulating seven-acre stretch. "They transform the valley," Oliver says. (On chilly nights, he said, his sheep also cluster around them because they absorb heat throughout the day.)

New York collector Agnes Gund said the cows on her farm in South Kent, Connecticut, sidle up to her Serra as well—for shade. The 2002 piece, *Iron Mountain Run*, comprises seven 15-foot-square steel plates. From a certain angle, she says, they appear to be sliding headlong into a pond.

"I once told Richard, 'These pieces look tipsy, like they're drunk!' and I thought he would get mad," Gund says, even though the two are longtime friends. "He said, 'They do have humor.'"

Serra's piece in Qatar ranks among his most complicated installations, in large part because sandstorms kept obscuring the pouring of the concrete bases. Cranes were also at risk of shifting in the sand below. Jean-Paul Engelen, then-director of public art programs for the Qatar Museums Authority, said it took 10 days and four cranes to get the steel plates upright and locked into their concrete bases. "It felt like *Mad Max*," he says.

Serra was there throughout, no longer ruffled by the chaos. The same could be said about Serra while he endured the art-world furor he caused two years ago when he decided he wanted to continue working with his longtime dealer, Larry Gagosian, but also wanted to do projects with gallerist David Zwirner. He didn't ask permission; he simply did it. The same global art-market boom that made it possible for so many private collectors to afford and house Serra's monumental artworks has ultimately placed a few artists like him and sculptor Jeff Koons atop the power heap. Few can rival Serra for stature now.

Zwirner says he approached Serra three years ago because “he’s one of my heroes,” and he was surprised the artist agreed to help the gallery organize a show of his earliest work. Zwirner has since flown to Qatar to see *East-West/West-East* and saw a simplicity in common with Serra’s older works. “His works look like the last thing you’ll ever see,” Zwirner says. “Civilization may burn up, but his art will survive.”

Earlier this year, Serra called Zwirner asking if he and his friend Glass could hold a benefit concert in the gallery. Serra said he wanted to hear how music would interact with *Equal*, and how the combination might make an audience react. On the day in late June, nearly 150 people arrived and tucked themselves in chairs surrounding Serra’s 320 tons of steel blocks. Glass, sitting at a piano in the middle and accompanied by a violinist, played.

Mary Heilmann, who had gone to parties with Serra so long ago, was in the audience. At one point, she looked over and saw that the artist’s eyes had welled up, and then her own vision grew blurry: “I got to thinking about this man and all that history—and that beautiful moment.”