

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Richard Serra due to receive the French government's highest honour

The sculptor, who has a history of being fêted by the French, will accept the award at the French Embassy on 1 June

Charlotte Burns



Richard Serra at his exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris (2008). Photo: Kai Juenemann

The American artist Richard Serra is set to be awarded France's premier award, les Insignes de Chevalier de l'Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur (insignia of Chevalier of the French Legion of Honour) at a ceremony at the French Embassy in New York on 1 June. "This is truly an unexpected award and I am very honored," Serra says.

"In the long legacy of French artistic history, Richard Serra's contributions are undeniable. His style has impacted all of our artists, art historians and theoreticians," says Gérard Araud, the French ambassador to the US, who will present the award.

The Legion d'Honneur is the highest decoration given by the French government and was created by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802. It is conferred either upon French nationals or foreigners who have served the country and upheld its ideals.

The French have a history of making a fuss over Serra: he has already received France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1985), Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1991) and Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2008).

The insignia is a tribute to Serra's "extensive collaboration with French art institutions, museums and galleries, keen ability to marry his monumental creations with French urban and natural

landscapes, and great contribution to contemporary art,” according to a press statement.

Serra, known for his monumental steel sculptures, has been creating major works in France for decades. These include Clara-Clara (1983), a sculpture comprising two elegant, curving slabs of steel which rest together like a pair of backward ‘C’s. Named for his wife, Clara Weyergraf-Serra, the sculpture is around 108 feet in length and was originally installed in the Tuileries.

In 2008, Serra installed Promenade, a series of five colossal steel sheets placed at 100-foot intervals through in the Grand Palais as part of the Monumenta exhibition. Although each sheet weighed 75 tonnes and was 17 metres in height, the installation appeared weightless in the steel and glass atrium of the Palais.

“For the French,” Araud says, “Richard Serra is among the greatest sculptors today.”