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Richard Serra, Gagosian, London — review

These new works speak a familiar sculptural language, yet their sheer presence is hard to resist

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'NJ-2' (2016) by Richard Serra at Gagosian © Mike Bruce

To the physicist, gravity is a weakling. True, he or she would admit, it keeps everything stuck on our fast-spinning earth as it whizzes around the sun. But then, he or she would point out, if we want to jump — we just jump. The earth consists of trillions of tons of matter — yet with a little spring in our puny legs we can (briefly) leave its surface whenever we like. Gravity, it transpires, is feeble compared with the other forces in the universe.

You would never know it from looking at the works in Richard's Serra's new exhibition at London's Gagosian Gallery. The three works here are all about gravity and about the sheer, visceral weight of steel. They are so dense, so weighty they seem to exert a gravitational effect on the viewer, pulling you in.

“Rotate” is two massive blocks of metal of the same size with one rotated 45 degrees so that it stands slightly taller and slightly slimmer than the other. “Rounds: Equal Weight, Unequal Measure” is a pair of cylinders, one taller and slimmer, one shorter and fatter — the title tells you

the rest. The gallery says they weigh about 50 tons each but it might as well be 500; they look so heavy you fear for the concrete floor.

And then there's "NJ-2", a looming, leaning steel labyrinth, its rust so orange it almost glows. And it is big. So big that the gallery needed to shut down the street at night, put in place a massive crane and have one of its walls demolished to get the piece in.

Many people are familiar with this sculptural language from Serra: the minimalist forms; the refusal to ascribe specific meaning or representation to any of it; the withering response to any effete enquires about existential angst or monumental intent; the reflections on industry and the echoes and memories of the clanging San Francisco shipyard where his father worked as a pipe-fitter. But if we're left alone with these objects, we can't fail to make associations.

"Rotate", for instance, is nothing if not tomblike. These huge slabs recall the heft of a sarcophagus, their weight intended to keep a separation between the worlds of the living and the dead. The cylinders of "Rounds" look like raw material, rolls of lead perhaps or massive bollards to tether a rusty ship. Also there is the surface. Serra proclaims a lack of interest in the outer layer, which emerges from the process "as found".

Yet the richness of the skin of these objects expresses the heat and the pressure, the blistering furnaces and the forging — trauma is inscribed on it. The skin is beautiful — as exquisite and textured as a soft calf-hide — and rich colours emerge: mauves, rusty browns, slate greys and deep blacks.

"NJ-2" is something else. This work draws us in. Yet there's something funereal about this too — primitive, Neolithic — the angled space, the leaning-in of the planes, the slender slot as the surfaces don't quite meet each other at the top. It's unsettling. If they don't meet, what, exactly, is holding them up? Like much of Serra's work this is architecture more than it is art, a piece concerned more with space, light, weight and the body's passage through the volume it defines. But here too there's something deathly, the dark silence of an extreme solidity that allows for no hollow echo and the disorientating, labyrinthine journey which winds you around until you have lost your place in space.

It is the sheer physical presence of all these works that attracts. Perhaps they have such mass that they knock something out of kilter deep in our minds, drawing us in a way we can't quite explain. (Magnetism, maybe?) Though there's not much here that Serra hasn't done before — you could even say it's predictable — the work has the gravity, or perhaps, from an artist now 76, the gravitas, to keep you absorbed.

The determined lack of precise meaning in minimal art can lead to over-interpretation, and these works lurk between meaning and meaninglessness, between the raw and elemental and the powerfully forged and made. It's only when you feel their presence that you understand.

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