

GAGOSIAN



Richard Artschwager: Primary Sources and Self-Portraits and the American Southwest

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Richard Artschwager, Tintoretto's "The Rescue of the Body of St. Mark", 1969. Acrylic on Celotex, in metal artist's frame, 46 1/2 x 51 1/4 inches. © 2019 Richard Artschwager / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian.

While critics have argued that Richard Artschwager was an artist whose works alternated between Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptual Art, there was little doubt he possessed his own singularity removed from the fray. Whether he chose to work with bewildering banal subject matter or media references to sex and violence, Artschwager maintained the position that he would continue to paint and construct whatever he chose to do. His followers celebrated the artist's autonomy and openly praised his use of eccentric materials, including rubberized horsehair (normally used in overstuffed furniture), rawhide, Formica, and Celotex (a compressed fabricated material that replaced canvas as a surface on which to paint).

Two parallel exhibitions, *Primary Sources*, at Gagosian, and *Self-Portraits and the American Southwest* at the David Nolan Gallery, both devoted primarily to later works by Artschwager, opened earlier this year, representing two discrete, yet complementary points of view.

In the Gagosian exhibition, *Primary Sources*, excavated remnants from files in the artist's studio offer visitors a treasure trove of previously unexhibited notes and images. These include ephemeral scraps of paper, newspaper photos, Xeroxes culled from brochures and magazines, and random sketches, collaged together with masking tape, mounted side-by-side in glass

vitrines, each of which is positioned in relative proximity to the paintings, drawings, and constructions mounted on the gallery walls.

It is one thing to see portraits of Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush, painted on Celotex, hanging side-by-side in the artist's frames; and another to see these relatively inscrutable paintings adjacent to a vitrine filled with photographs, collages, and sketches that are clearly meant to give the artist's subject matter a kind of daunting neutrality incisively removed from politics. Rather than looking at these portraits as oppositional, we are invited to view them simply as two portraits.

The same might be said of a small black and white painting of the *USS Arizona* sinking off the coast of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. While the explosion of the battleship is purposefully difficult to read, viewers may sense the violence necessarily apart from any motive other than the fact of its happening. Again, as one peruses the vitrine nearby, there is no reportage or narrative that fully describes the violence one is seeing. The absence of a context further suggests that the patriotic meaning normally ascribed to this image has been consciously removed. Now, as a painting, one may struggle to retrieve its clichéd meaning, which the artist so willfully has withdrawn.

As one moves throughout this rather extensive thematic exhibition on two floors, there are extraordinary works that include both painting and drawing, but which also defy painting in favor of inaudible strands of fake hair woven into figures that bend, run, lean, or cycle, in various non-descript ways. One may carefully identify their sources in the vitrines where one discovers the photographs—either taken, found, or reproduced—that inspired these works. In any case, the artist's final results prove ordinary enough as perhaps they should be, while emptied of any rhyme or reason other than they exist apart from what we think they should mean.



Richard Artschwager, Arizona, 2002. Acrylic on fiber panel, in metal artist's frame. 26 x 22 inches. © 2019 Richard Artschwager / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy Gagosian.

In contrast, the David Nolan counterpart, *Self-Portraits and the American Southwest*, focuses largely on autobiographical pastels representing the artist's return to his "growing-up" years in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Most but not all of these occupied Artschwager's attention during his later years, roughly from 2008 to the artist's death in 2013. These works include landscapes and occasional genre scenes related to the New Mexico desert—presumably in locations inspired by

his mother who taught him to draw. Included with these are occasional self-portraits, both in pencil and pastel.

In the landscapes, we get a very different take on the artist's work than we do with *Primary Sources* in that these autographical works transform reality according to Artschwager's perceptual imagination. Although their appearance is simple, the complexity of these works alters our understanding of what we are seeing. I refer to the "dramatic vistas and unbounded typography," in which a sunset repeats multiple bright orange and red striations or the illusion of a vast sky filled with the furrows of the land or a deep green field in which the sparsely planted crops are seen without linear perspective (resembling an early work by the Dutch conceptualist Jan Dibbets). In other works, the titles contribute to the work's meaning as in *Bontecou Crater* (2009) in which an indescribable still-life shape, resembling a work by the artist Lee Bontecou, sits atop a desert tableau or *Blue Sky with Green Moon* (2007) where a watermelon shape (meteor?) supplants a full moon.

Poised in the middle of the large exhibition space at the David Nolan Gallery is a large horsehair exclamation point, a thematic property that began to define the artist's presence by the late 1970s. Originally forged in steel, here it exists in horsehair, which gives the marker both its sculptural identity and an acute sense of transformation. But then why not? Many have attested to the fact that this was typical of such a remarkably unpredictable artist as Artschwager who worked on his own track without adhering to the multitude of seductions that comprise the art world as we know it today.