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Reflecting on Surfaces With a Man of Steel

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

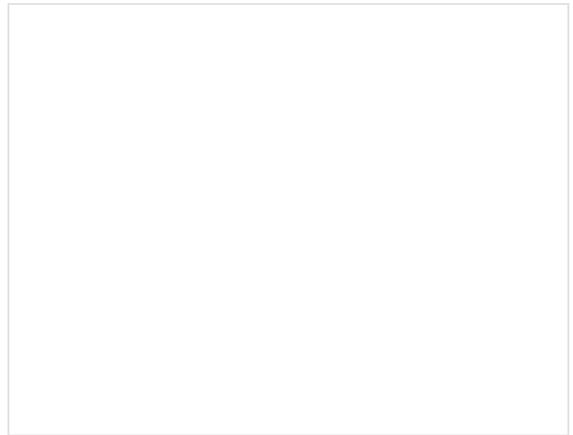


Bryan Derballe for The Wall Street Journal

Richard Serra at David Zwirner's new 20th Street space, where an exhibit of his early work opens Friday.

On a recent morning in Chelsea, Richard Serra was surveying the origin story of an artist who rewards revisitation: himself. Revered for the rapture and disorientation that attends his monumental rusted-steel sculptures—most notably those in his celebrated series of "Torqued Ellipses"—Mr. Serra, now 73, has long brought an artistic sense to architecture and an architectural sense to art, wresting animated states from inanimate matter. Starting Friday, formative examples of that mission will be on display in "Early Work," an exhibition at the new outpost of the David Zwirner gallery on West 20th Street.

Focusing on work between 1966 and 1971, the exhibit shows Mr. Serra playing with mixed materials in his early years in New York, when he worked closely with the musician Philip Glass and illustrious others in the downtown arts scene. Among the works are "To Lift," a piece of vulcanized rubber made to twist and stand on its own; "One Ton Prop (House of Cards)," an arrangement of lead plates standing together against gravity; and "Strike," a monolithic rusted-steel sculpture suggestive of later work to come.



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Walking through the exhibit before crowds had a chance to assemble, Mr. Serra spoke with The Wall Street Journal about downtown resourcefulness, thinking through sculptural moves with Mr. Glass and learning to look at materials as malleable forms.



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Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal
An untitled piece of lead from 1968.

What do you think about when you recall your start in New York in the '60s?

There wasn't any cultural industry at that time. There were very few artists. The first year I met Philip Glass and we became close friends. We started a moving company, Low-Rate Movers.

There were other people in the neighborhood: Chuck Close, Spalding Gray, Steve Reich, Michael Snow. We

rotated the truck between us. We would work maybe two days a week and the truck would be free for five days. You would have enough money to keep yourself going. It kept everybody afloat.

What brought such a multi-disciplinary group of people together?

They were all interested in making something that hadn't been made before, and they were making it for each other. What seemed to define the group were two notions: time and process. It was a common link between all of us. It didn't matter what you were making in terms of calling yourself a "sculptor" or a "painter."

Your early work makes use of a wide range of materials.

There was a warehouse right across the street from me, on Reade Street and West Broadway, that was emptying out truckfulls of rubber. I phoned up the CEO and asked, "Can I take away your rubber?" He said, "Take away as much as you can." So I got Reich and Close and Glass to haul away all this rubber and bring it up to my loft. It was like getting a grant.



Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal
A neon work called 'Untitled' is seen with 'Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure,' foreground.

Let's look at that big rubber piece over there.

First look at this. [He points to "Verb List," a handwritten sheet of hypothetical actions, from 1967]. I wanted to figure how I would go about involving myself with matter, any matter, in relation to trying to make a form without having to deal with my sensibility. How can I take myself away from my aesthetics? I wrote down a bunch of verbs and said I am going to enact them in relation to a material. If something happens, fine; if nothing happens, we'll try something else. I did it quite faithfully. The first one was we took 35-foot sheets of lead, Phil and I, and rolled it up. We thought, "Not much." So we took another piece of lead and rolled it in both ways—"not much." Then we got a piece of lead and rolled it this way and that way, and then doubled

it back on itself so that one sheet made a triple roll. We thought, "Oh, we're getting somewhere here!"

What's most elemental verb on the list to you?

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This one right here ["to continue"].

I like "to disarrange."

That's a good one. This piece basically ended up being disarranged. [He points at "Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47," from 1968]. I took a sheet of lead and started tearing up one corner, then tore another corner and another corner, and just kept following myself around and leaving what was left over. Did I think anybody was ever going to collect it? No. But that wasn't the reason to do it.

Some of the early pieces mix materials together.

We put ["Cutting Device: Base Plate Measure," from 1969] at the entrance so you come in and really have to confront it and deal with it splaying out. When Phil and I were working together, we always had a problem with collage and how to avoid the poetics of putting two pieces of diverse material together without falling into the trap or a metaphorical reading. We would talk for hours, and we couldn't figure out how to do it. Phil was really into time and measure, so we thought, "What if we just took a plate and laid it down on the ground as a measuring device?" Then we took all this material and stacked it on top: steel pipes, lead rolls, wood. Then we took a saw and sawed. We thought that the activity of sawing and spreading things apart to fall where they may would override the juxtaposition of, "This is a piece of lead next to a piece of pipe." The process overrides it—we hoped.

What's your objection to collage?

Collage too easily falls into assemblage, and that too easily falls, for me, into a poetic license that leads to a lot of free Duchampian playful nonsense. Not to say a lot of people haven't done a lot with it, but it's the ongoing subtext of American art since Duchamp, and it kind of overrides everything. A lot of assemblage is just bad Rauschenberg.

Some of this show signals the kind of larger work you would do later on.

The interesting thing is that you don't know, as you move on, how your early work is going to inform your later work. This piece ["To Lift," from 1967] sets up the possibility for topology inside and outside a continuous surface. The later work that gets into curves, the "Torqued Ellipses" and whatever, this is what they are. But at the time, did I know I was going to be involved with topological surfaces? I didn't know what the word topology was.

Some pieces touch on your interest in architectural support and integrity from within.

Another prime object is this ["One Ton Prop (House of Cards)," from 1969]. At the time I did this, I was married. I put this piece up, and when she came to see it, she said, "You can't show that. It's not art, and it's too dangerous." I said, "I don't think we can stay married." We got divorced. Boom, that was it. At that time, the issue of how to open a space or a place for yourself to make your own work was crucial. People took this stuff very seriously, and there wasn't really a scene around to support you, so what you took seriously was the dialogue you had with other artists.

What was the danger in it?

It weighs a ton. When we first built it in the loft, we put wood dunnage on the inside because we thought if it imploded, if it fell, it was going to go right through the floor, and if it went through the floor it was going to go through the next floor.

How did you move into the kind of large rusted-steel sculptures you're most known for today?

Jasper Johns asked Phil and I to build a piece for him in his loft. We were heating up lead and I took a plate that we were going to boil down and put it in the corner, just to get it out of the way. And we thought, "Whoa, the corner stands the plate up. It's not

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going anywhere!" After that, I was looking in the paper and found an article about a helicopter that had crashed on top of the Pan Am Building, and nobody knew how to get it off. Later there was a picture of these riggers with a propeller and part of the fuselage—they were pulling it down. I got in my truck and went up there and said, "Look, I have a plate I want to put in a corner." The guy said, "How big?" I said, "10 by 20 [feet]." He said, "How thick?" I said, "An inch, inch and a half." He said, "Can you get it through the door?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "What substructure is there?" I said, "I don't know, I'll find out." He said, "You're on." I've been working for him and then his son since then. Now they're [a rigging and construction-contracting company] called Budco Enterprises. They're like an extension of my arm.

Do you ever miss working on a smaller scale?

Once you get involved with space and context, then you get involved with movement and time. Then your whole relationship with subject to object changes. Once you start getting into context, you become the subject of the space you are in. Your own experience of the work kicks it off. The content is not steel or whatever. The content is you in that space as you navigate it and are implicit in the space.

What guided your interest in taking expression out of the work?

What's interesting about solving a constructive problem is that you don't have to get into your subjectivity. It's not about that—it's about getting the job done. It's about figuring out the simplest and most parsimonious way of bringing these things together that make sense. That seemed to be enough.

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