
This exhibition is generously supported by Laura and John Arnold, National Endowment for the Arts, Sotheby’s, Eddie Allen and Chimbui John, the Franco Dittmer Family Foundation, Paul and Janet Hobby, David and Anne Kirkland, Emily Rauh Pulitzer, The Menil Foundation, Mary W. Salmon, J. H. and Helen R. Tanf, and The Stiviale Foundation.

This is a chronological presentation of Serra’s diverse drawing practice and his innovative exploration of techniques, supports, and means of making and presentation. Together, the works in the show reflect the artist’s dynamic understanding of process and spatial perception in relationship to drawing, affirming the simple yet profound notion that drawing has long been an important, yet under-examined, aspect of his work. It serves as both a practice that is independent from the artist’s sculpture, and one that informs it. Unlike many, Serra does not use drawing as a preliminary step for his sculptures. In fact, he frequently reverses its typical role and draws his sculptures after they are completed. As can be seen in his notebooks, Serra does not draw to generate or sketch ideas but rather to respond to the world around him while looking, walking, and thinking.

One of the most notable features of Serra’s drawings is the predominant use of black. The artist considers it a color with a graphic intensity strong enough to counter metaphysical associations. Black, he believes, has intrinsic characteristics such as weight and volume. Indeed, black has a distinct presence in his work, a physicality that you can feel. A black line or plane in a Serra drawing is not a description or representation of something: it is something.

This retrospective is a chronological presentation of Serra’s diverse drawing practice and his innovative exploration of techniques, supports, and means of making and presentation. Together, the works in the show reflect the artist’s dynamic understanding of process and spatial perception in relationship to drawing, affirming the simple yet profound notion that drawing is a temporal art. It is a body coming into contact with a surface and making a mark. The drag of pencil on paper, the gesture of graphite swept across a surface, the pressure of a block of paintstick pressed against a support, all are traces of touch—indications of physical movement in time, across space.

For Richard Serra, drawing is a way to be in the world, and his works demand a physical relationship with the viewer. As such, they provide an alternative at a time when direct relationships with reality are often diminished in our hyper and virtual environments. In a recent commencement speech, Serra cautioned the future generation not to “let the rhetoric of simulation steal away the intimacy of your experience. Keep it real, keep it in the moment.”

RICHARD SERRA DRAWING
Exhibition Catalogue
Available at The Menil Collection

SELECTED GROUPS OF WORK IN THE EXHIBITION

The Early Films, 1968
Serra moved to New York City in 1966, an important time for process art, or what has been called Postminimalism. Along with Serra, artists such as Eva Hesse, Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, and Robert Smithson shared an interest in the tactile immediacy of found materials such as malleable rubber, lumpy felt, neon, and fiberglass. They worked on ways to allow the processes involved in creating the work of art to be a visible component of the finished work itself, as can be seen in Serra’s early films.

Hands Scraping, Hands Tied, Hand Catching Lead, and Hand Lead Fulcrum capture the motions of the artist’s hands manipulating material. In one, his outstretched fingers try to grasp falling chunks of lead rhythmically dropped from above by composer Philip Glass. In another, two pairs of hands work together to remove a pile of lead filings, their palms, and eventually fingers, sweeping the wood floor. Foregrounding the artist’s hands at work, the role of the body, and the time-based tasks that constitute the creation of a work of art, the films, like his drawings, reflect Serra’s early investigations of process.
Verbs, 1967–68
For Verb List, Serra handwrote in the neat Palmer script of his elementary school days a list of action verbs (‘to roll, to crease, to fold …’) along with nouns preceded by the word ‘of,’ as if to indicate a particular material state of being (‘of refraction, of simultaneity, of blades’). Proceduralizing the parameters of his early sculptures, the list essentially provided the artist with instructions—what he called a ‘guidepost of possibilities’—to be carried out as direct actions on material.3 The Verb List has become an iconic work in Serra’s oeuvre because it so clearly illustrates his interest in the process of making.

Drawings after Circuit, 1971
In the 1970s, Serra increased the scale of his work and engaged architecture as never before. In the sculpture Circuit, 1972, he extended one steel plate from each of four corners of a gallery to form a claustrophobic interstice in the middle of the sliced space. The confrontational work relates to the rarely exhibited Drawings after Circuit, which Serra made while walking in and out of the sculpture. Moving along the steel surfaces, Serra made vertical marks in spaced intervals, sequentially responding to his shifting encounters with the metal as the visual vacillation from plate to line. The order of the drawings documents the artist’s movement in and out of the center of the work. In Serra’s words, ‘If you walked the room, the vertical lines of the drawings would open and close and repeat themselves and thus diagram the walk.’

The Installation Drawings
In the early 1970s, Serra began experimenting with paintstick (a wax- and carbon-based medium) on canvas. Having studied the early-twentieth-century work of the Mexican muralists while an art student in Santa Barbara, California, and subsequently traveling to view those at the Hospicio Cabañas in Guadalajara, Serra saw how surface intervention could perceptually subvert physical structures: that a painting of fire, for example, could destroy the column it was painted on. He wanted to create a work that would not only subvert the space it functioned in but also the physical construction on which it was applied. The emerging black fields either touch at their top edges, making a wedge, or are squeezed so that the forms slightly thrust outward to create a narrow V.

To make the Diptychs, the artist ran the pigment through a meat grinder, creating a viscous drawing substance. He collected the granular material on the soft edge of a paintstick block, which he used as a tool to spread the black over the surface of the paper.

In the 1990s, Serra embarked on several new series of works on paper involving a round form. The Rounds, 1996–97, which includes Robert Frank, 1996, are composed of a single, uniformly thick and tightly bound loop made of coarse accumulated pigment. Slightly larger, the out-of-rounds, 1999–2010, follow. For both series, Serra worked on a low horizontal platform. Pushing the heavy pigment into the paper, sometimes using his feet, he formed an edge by working from the center. The gravitational force of the artist’s weight pushing against the paper often formed a spattered pattern on the back of the paper. For the Line Drawings, 2001–2012, including Black Tracks, 2002, Serra laid the paper on a pool of the black pigment, sometimes using a wire mesh in between the paintstick and the paper, and applied a blunt tool to the verso in circular gestures. The pressure he exerted on the back of the paper is light, and the lines breathe like a loose ball of string.

The Diptychs, 1979
In 1981, the United States government, after a highly publicized eight-year legal battle, removed Richard Serra’s Tilted Arc, installed at 26 Federal Plaza in New York City in 1981, was removed by the United States government following a highly publicized eight-year legal battle. A case that has come to define the debates surrounding the efficacy of public art, it resulted in one of Serra’s most ambitious and largest-scale public artworks. In the process of making.

The Solids, 2003
Among Serra’s most recent series are the Solids. In these works the artist has continued to experiment with surface texture and to develop new methods of drawing. What makes the group technically unique is that he heaped the black pigment to a higher degree, achieving a more dense consistency. Placing a wire-mesh screen between the pool of pigment and sheet of paper, he applies his weight with a stylus on the back of the sheet to make a mark. After the pigment is pressed and moved through the mesh to the drawing surface, he lifts the paper directly off of the screen. The motion creates a succion effect with the fluid material that results in a dense texture of ridges.

Notes
3. Lynne Cooke and Richard Serra, “Interview by Lynne Cooke (May 21, 1992),” in 
5. ibid, 12.


No Mandatory Patriotism, 2002
Watercolor on handmade paper. 35 7/8 x 27 1/2 in. Collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, New York. Photo: Robert McKeever

The Solids, 2003
Among Serra’s most recent series are the Solids. In these works the artist has continued to experiment with surface texture and to develop new methods of drawing. What makes the group technically unique is that he heaped the black pigment to a higher degree, achieving a more dense consistency. Placing a wire-mesh screen between the pool of pigment and sheet of paper, he applies his weight with a stylus on the back of the sheet to make a mark. After the pigment is pressed and moved through the mesh to the drawing surface, he lifts the paper directly off of the screen. The motion creates a succion effect with the fluid material that results in a dense texture of ridges.

Notes
5. ibid, 12.