"Richard Serra Drawing: A Retrospective" is curated by Bernice Rose, Chief Curator Emerita, The Menil Collection; Michelle White, Curator, The Menil Collection; and Gary Garrels, Elise S. Hass Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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Public Programs

Cinematic Graphite
Friday, March 23, 2012, 8:00 p.m.
"Under the Leaves," east end of the museum
Inspired by the exhibition, Aurora Picture Show Curator Mary Magsamen organizes a selection of short films that explore mark making. The videos include work by Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom, Magali Charrier, Cheryl Donegan, and Robert Todd. Co-presented with Aurora Picture Show

Panel Discussion
Wednesday, April 11, 2012, 7:30 p.m.
Michelle White is joined by scholars Richard Shiff, University of Texas at Austin, and Gordon Hughes, Rice University, in a discussion of Richard Serra's drawn work.

Exhibition Catalogue

Available at the Menil Bookstore
Edited by Gary Garrels, Bernice Rose, and Michelle White, with additional contributions by Lizzie Borden, Magdalena Dabrowski, and Richard Shiff.
230 pp., 149 color illus. Hardcover $50, Softcover $40

cover: Serra at work on Alameda Street, 1981 . Photo: Ulrich Baatz, Essen, Germany

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RICHARD SERRA DRAWING
A RETROSPECTIVE

THE MENIL COLLECTION
March 2–June 10, 2012

RICHARD SERRA DRAWING

This exhibition presents the work of the American artist Richard Serra. The first retrospective of the artist's drawings, it is an unprecedented survey that showcases a career-long investigation that he began in the late 1960s. For Serra, drawing is more than lines or marks on a piece of paper. It is perceptual, experiential, and conceptual; it is a way to see, to feel, and to think.

While Serra is best known for his large and powerful steel sculptures, 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 metaphorical 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."[1]

***Hands Scraping*, 1968**. 16 mm film transferred to DVD, black-and-white, 4 min. 30 sec. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: D. James Dee

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 with the creation of 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 hand 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.

***Verb List*, 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 tides …"). Predicating the parameters of his early sculptures, the list essentially provided the artist with instructions—what he has called "a guidepost of possibilities"—to be carried out as direct actions on material.[2] The *Verb List* has become an iconic work in Serra's oeuvre because it so clearly illustrates his interest in the process of making.

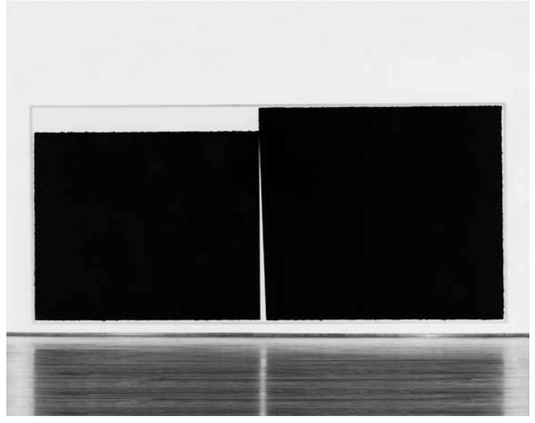
***Drawings after* Circuit, 1972**

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 the four corners of a gallery to form a claustrophobic intersection 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, he made vertical marks in spaced intervals, sequentially responding to his shifting encounters with the metal as the visual vacillated 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, "As you walked the room, the vertical lines of the drawings would open and close and repeat themselves and thus diagram the walk."[3]

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 challenge architecture through his drawings in the same way.

The term "Installation Drawings" encompasses these site-specific paintstick drawings on linen, which he continues to make. Examples include *Zadikians* and *Abstract Slavery*, both 1974, as well as *Two Corner Cut: High Low*, 2012, completed for this exhibition at the Menil. To make them, Serra first prepares a Belgian linen canvas in the studio with gesso and rabbit-skin glue (which slightly stiffens the fabric) and then laboriously covers the expansive surface with paintstick. To install the work, he fastens it to the wall with staples, cuts the canvas, and then builds up more pigment.



***No Mandatory Patriotism*, 1989**. Paintstick on two sheets of paper, 98⅛ x 201⅛ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Partial and promised gift of UBS, 2002. Photo: Dorothy Zeidman

The increasingly ambitious scale of Serra's Installation Drawings in the mid-1970s—they began to fill rooms and wrap around corners—led to a practical development in his technical procedure. He discovered a more effective way of covering his large canvases by melting the paintsticks (commercially available in crayon-sized sticks) together into brick-sized blocks. The result, a molded chunk of pigment that you hold with two hands, requires the whole body to be in motion, bending at the knees and hips, to apply the black substance. The process of repeatedly going over the surface with the paintstick on site helps the artist determine his own physical relationship to the architecture of the gallery or museum. "It's my way of keeping track of how my sense of the space functions," he explains. "Working has its own spatial dimensions."[4]

The Diptychs, 1989

In 1989, Serra's sculpture *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 impassioned art-for-art's-sake battle cries, which articulated the conceptual basis of a site-specific artwork. "To remove the work is to destroy the work," he famously wrote.[5]

This struggle yielded a distinct group of drawings: the Diptychs. A series of large works on paper with inflammatory titles corresponding to the emotional fervor and anger of the artist after his confrontation with the federal government, they include *The United States Government Destroys Art*, *No Mandatory Patriotism*, and *The United States Courts are Partial to Government*. With these works, Serra invented a new construction technique based on his interest in balance and figuring out how to use two forms, with their inherent properties of weight, to build a drawing that would not be a pictorial composition. Abutting, but arranged at slightly tilted angles, two pieces of paintstick-covered paper leave thin slices of space between them, revealing the white support underneath. The leaning 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 grainy 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.

The Rounds, out-of-rounds, and Line Drawings (1996–2002)

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*, 1997, are characterized by contained and tightly bound looped marks of coarse accumulated pigment. Slightly larger, the out-of-rounds, 1999–2000, 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 paintstick halo. For the Line Drawings, 2000–2002, 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 legible, and the lines breathe like a loose ball of string.

***Black Tracks*, 2002**. Paintstick on handmade paper, 51¼ x 50 inches. Collection of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky, New York. Photo: Robert McKeever

The Solids, 2008

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 heats the black pigment to a higher degree, achieving a more liquid 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 paintstick is pressed and moved through the wire to the drawing surface, he lifts the paper directly off of the screen. The motion creates a suction effect with the fluid material that results in a dense texture of ridges.

Curator Michelle White, text adapted from her essay "Drawing as Drawing" in the exhibition catalogue

Notes

1. Richard Serra, commencement address at Williams College, Williamstown, MA, June 1, 2008.
2. Richard Serra, conversation with the author, March 4, 2010.
3. Lynne Cooke and Richard Serra, "Interview by Lynne Cooke (May 21, 1992)," in *Richard Serra: Drawings* (London: Serpentine Gallery; Düsseldorf: Richter, 1992), 23.
4. Ibid., 13.
5. Richard Serra to Don Thalacker, January 1, 1985, quoted in *Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc,"* ed. Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (Eindhoven, The Netherlands: Van Abbemuseum, 1988), 40.