

Richard Serra

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Art 1

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Imagine at the age of four walking along the beach and noticing not the waves crashing on the shore or the birds flying above, but noticing your own footprints and how they compress the sand below (Serra). This is Richard Serra's earliest memory that defines the incredible sculptor that he is today.

Richard Serra was born in 1939 in San Francisco to a Spanish shipyard worker and a Jewish mother. He began working in a steel mill at the age of 16 to support himself and pay for college (Belcove). In the mill was where Serra first discovered the materials that would later thrust him into the art world in a gigantic way.

Serra grew up a feisty boy, the middle of three sons. Early drawings became a way for him to compete for his parent's attention. His mother, strong in her convictions, began bringing him to art museums in the third grade and so named him "Richard the Artist" (Serra). Although he received a bachelor's degree in literature from the University of California at Santa Barbara, it was at Yale studying painting that he began to find inspiration as an artist (Hogan). However, it wasn't until a visit to Spain and the experience of seeing Velasquez's painting *Las Meninas* for the first time did Serra discover his place as an artist. The painting of Velasquez standing at his easel staring back at Serra made him come to the realization that he was an extension of his art (Hogan). At that moment, Serra's ideas about art would change forever.

Serra took home from Spain the inspiration that the viewer of art should be the subject not an image found within the piece. He soon gave up painting altogether and begun sculpting to express his artistic desires. He sought to create works that the viewer could move about and experience (Belcove). He also became extremely interested in movement and gravity. One of

his earliest sculptures *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* was simply four 48x48x1" lead squares strategically leaning against one another to form the shape of a box (Lacayo). At first glance it does not appear to be so impressive, until one realizes that the only thing keeping these giant pieces from falling are the other three leaning against them, the pieces are not welded together. I imagine walking into an art gallery and seeing *One Ton Prop* could be slightly intimidating, one wrong move and not only could you destroy the whole sculpture, but you could also get very hurt. The use of space and gravity is what makes the piece remarkable not the image itself. "Richard Serra was determined to redefine sculpture" (Belcove).

Tough is one of many words used to describe Richard Serra. In the 1980's he created and fought for what would be one of his most controversial works, a 121 ft. long, 12 ft. high undulating steel wall titled *Tilted Arc*. *Tilted Arc* was commissioned for the Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan, New York. The steel sculpture was so large and cumbersome that workers in the surrounding buildings claimed that the wall made the plaza area "useless" (Lacayo). Some also complained that the piece did nothing but invite graffiti. The workers did not see the monstrous being as art, they saw the sculpture as an obstacle that they must overcome on a daily basis. Unfortunately, in 1985 it was decided by the federal court that *Tilted Arc* would be dismantled and removed. Serra sued the United States Government but to no avail and the piece was removed and placed in storage where, sadly, it still lies today (Hogan).

*Tilted Arc* was not the only piece of controversy in Serra's portfolio. One critic wrote that "Serra's pieces are about as communal as the walls of Gulag," in response to a piece commissioned for Yale University. Another piece had poster's portraying a man being shot in

the head with the words “Kill Serra” written on them. Serra himself has painted pieces as controversial as the ones used against him. In rage against the Bush administration he painted two posters in response to the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Thousands of posters sold online. Serra remarks, “I don’t consider myself a political artist, but anything I can do to make a difference, I will,” (Hogan).

Creating space of a new kind, Serra began building pieces that you “enter and absorb by moving through them” (Lacayo). Through this idea came *Torqued Ellipses* in 1997. This sculpture was a turning point in Serra’s career. When Serra was asked why he thought people had changed their minds about his sculptures, he answered, “It was the curves,” “They hadn’t seen that before. Modernism was a right angle, the whole 20<sup>th</sup> Century was a right angle” (Hogan). Always looking for ways to separate himself from the stigma of modernism, and straight lines, Serra created curves. *Torqued Ellipses* didn’t only curve vertically, the rolled steel plates also curved horizontally as they rose 13 feet into the air and created a space to be entered into through a single opening. Eventually, the top of the sculpture reached a 90 degree angle of what it had started at, at the base (Belcove).

Not only is the shape mesmerizing, but so is the experience. Entering a modern Serra sculpture is a release of oneself to time and space. The viewer/participant often discovers that they must right themselves with each footstep, for what they see in front of them is not the same at their feet, nor is it the same overhead. To walk through a Serra sculpture such a *Torqued Ellipses*, is a journey of one’s internal self being exceptionally aware and cognizant of their physical being. Richard Serra does not intend to create meaning with his sculptures, he is

interested in space, form, process and material, all ideas rooted in abstract art. The viewer creates their own meaning. Each individual with their own doubts, courageousness, poise, or gaucheness tell a different story. Furthermore, the overwhelming size, simplicity of materials, and pure genius use of space make Serra's modern sculptures, not only thought provoking and intimidating, but visually breathtaking.

Richard Serra throughout his lengthy career has gone from, "being a steely pariah to New York's favorite sculptor," according to one New York art critic (Hogan). Serra is still creating his enormous sculptures today at almost 70. He has seen his sculptures transform from obstructions and eye sores to beloved pieces of art.

## Works Cited

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