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Band on the run: Coming to LACMA (Photo by Lorenz Kienzle)

Steeling Beauty

TOM CHRISTIE AND HOLLY MYERS | **AUGUST 15, 2007** | **10:00AM**

There's nothing in the art world – or any world, really – quite like the sensory experience of a Richard Serra piece. As cool as Serra's 40-year retrospective looks on the Museum of Modern Art's Web site, there is no way to get the spatial vibe, the static sway of those organic slabs that manage to evoke both hull and sail. Nor is there a way to intuit the effect of the Corten steel itself, two inches thick and burnt sienna with a fine mottled rust. What could well be off-putting and distant is in fact strangely affecting, and sensual: You may find yourself running your hand across the surface of a torqued ellipse as you would the ribs of a horse, or – despite Serra's protestations – imagining the form in miniature and appreciating the delicacy of its spirit. So it is quite strange and entirely inadequate to find oneself in an empty, half-finished building at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, imagining how the overall space is going to look and feel with two enormous Serra works in it, and how the individual pieces themselves (and *their* spaces) are going to look and feel here. And it is especially strange to find oneself doing this with Richard Serra himself, in a hard hat.

Serra is all intensity and sharpness, intellectually and otherwise. (Though he would

likely scorn the analogy, he could easily be cast as a battle-hardened Marine officer.) Today he is relatively affable and engaged. *Interested*. He's come west to work out the space and the logistics for the installation of two of the three new pieces he made for the MoMA retrospective in the Broad Contemporary Art Museum building now under construction at LACMA. *Band*, an undulating ribbon nearly 72 feet long and the standard Serra height of just under 13 feet, has been purchased for the museum by Broad. Its partner, *Sequence*, resembles two gigantic violin scrolls back to back. Both pieces will be in place when BCAM opens in February, each in their own vast room, and while *Sequence* will eventually move on to a yet-to-be-determined destination, *Band* will stay on at LACMA, happily.

Until recently, when UCLA got its own torqued ellipse (also thanks to Broad), and the Orange County Performing Arts Center received its stunning, 66-foot-tall *Connector*, the L.A. area was weirdly bereft of Serras – weird because of the artist's California roots. Maybe being raised in the Bay Area and schooled in part at UC Santa Barbara didn't make him quite Southern California enough. Maybe there's something about the work that seemed, in the past, antithetical to Los Angeles – too heavy, too earnest, too serious, too *sculptural*. No more.

Band and *Sequence* are probably the most complex works Serra has created on this scale to date in terms of movement and the division of space. "They're both pieces you can walk into and through and around," he told us. "*Band* has a contradiction when you walk into it, in that the inside and the outside seem to be continuous, so you get very confused about where you are – if you're on the inside of the outside or the outside of the inside. It's confusing even for me when I walk in. It's a continuing unfurled curve, and there are four cavities and they seem similar but they're all dissimilar – even though if you draw it on the floor, the plan is very logical. The problem is that it changes in elevation, so the walls either lean toward you or away from you, which means that every square inch of it is different. So nothing is the same, nothing repeats."

L.A. WEEKLY: *What is the difference for you between installing inside buildings and outside?*

RICHARD SERRA: It depends on the context and it depends on the piece. That's going to be one of the problems here: After we show the piece and it's owned by

this museum, where is it going to go? That hasn't been determined yet. [LACMA director] Michael Govan and Eli [Broad] and I will get our heads together and try to figure out what's best for the space and what's best for the piece. A courtyard situation – a place in between buildings or close to a building – would probably be better. But the first two showings of it are going to be inside, and I really don't know how it's going to function outside. I'd rather keep it in a contained space. I don't want to put it out on a flat lawn or something. And I'd like to keep in on a hard, flat ground. It needs an architectural right angle to play off of.

As far as your heights go, you tend to stay around 13 feet. How do you determine that?

These last few pieces really relate to the body. They deal with how you know the verticality of the space, the horizontal quality of the space, how you measure yourself against the movement of the space, how you're implicated in the space. If something gets too high you actually lose the volume – it dissipates out and upward and the piece becomes just a high thing. These particular pieces function in different ways. *Band* has a strong horizontal movement. Even though it's exactly the same height as *Sequence*, it functions almost horizontally by you moving around, so you really feel like it's hunkered to the ground. It has to do with the compartmentalization of the different caverns you walk into: They're very low and very sheltered. *Band* is sort of a new template for me, one I've never made before. For me, it is the most innovative piece in the show, though people tend to like *Sequence* more. I don't know why. *Band* is more an abstract piece. There's more drawing in it.

You've talked a lot about the importance of play in making art. What is play for you now?

Play is not setting a problem with a conclusion. Play is about trying to put ideas into motion without the expectation of solving a problem. The ideas might not even lead to a solution but to another idea. So you set up a system of, say, playing with torqued ellipse sections or whatever – whatever you're dealing with – and you say, I'm not going to try to make anything, I'm just going to see what happens when I move these things around, when I connect them in ways I haven't connected them before, when I make a series of paths. Or what if I just thought, where do I want to walk? Let's have time and paths drive these pieces and then let's fit the pieces to the paths or the time. So you set up situations that don't have conclusions at the end,

and then you get lost. If you get involved with the activity itself and you're not hung up on the solution, then things might occur that you couldn't have foreseen. When you're really pushing hard to come to a conclusion, then somehow in the back of your mind you've got a narrative or a script or something, and that gets like pulling teeth. I mean, I've worked that way also but I like to keep the situation more freewheeling. I like to say, at the end of the day, I don't give a shit. I like to be able to walk away from it. And then come back the next day and play some more. And I don't mean play without consequences – I take it very seriously. I mean putting in a full day and if you don't get something you don't get something and don't beat yourself up over it.

You start from models.

Yes. I don't make drawings before, I start from models.

How big are these models?

Inch per foot.

Do you ever show them? Do they hold any interest for you as art objects?

I used to give them away. I gave a lot of them to Dia. And at one point I had to raise some money for a lawsuit going against the government so I sold a few. But I don't consider them works of art, I consider them models.

But isn't that space equally interesting, even though it's smaller?

No, because you can't project yourself into it. If you could, I wouldn't build the pieces. With the show at the Modern, I had no idea what these pieces were going to look like – I was as surprised walking through that space as anyone else. You don't know until you stand them up in the steel mill what they're like. And then even with these pieces – when [an associate] was over there [in Germany] measuring them in the steel mill, he got confused about where he was. That happens.

Is that good?

For me it's good. I'm interested in disorientation, so if you lose your coordinates – that interests me. Usually it happens if there's no vertical to align yourself to. In

these pieces it happens because of where you are in relation to the path, where you are in relation to where you've been. So you anticipate something and you remember something, but you can't really anticipate from your memory because the path doesn't lead to what your memory's telling you. That interests me.

You know who figures them out right away? Kids. Kids, if you tell them to draw one – they don't draw it in pieces, they don't draw the elevation, they draw the plan. Kids draw where they've been, where they've gone. Even if they're wrong, that's what they do.

What is your interest in Zen gardens, and their influence?

If you grew up in the Western tradition of the frame – defining perspective in terms of orthogonals – then that's the way you know space: placing things in relation to a vanishing point. In Japan, in the history of Japanese culture, they don't see things that way. They see things all coming in simultaneously. And they don't distinguish between solid and void. If you don't distinguish between solid and void, then everything is matter, and matter kind of imposes its own form on form, so you have to start thinking of the space of this room.

One of the problems with the space of this room right now is that the space kind of gets away from you. The room is a little too big, it's a little too long. The sculpture's going to kind of collect the space, and hopefully bring it into itself. But if you're in Japan and you walk those gardens and you pay attention, you can see that everything – from the detail of the stone to the way the rocks are set – is meant to be seen simultaneously as you walk. Well, that's different than measuring something in the field that's in perspective in relation to its height or its elevation. That idea of a continuum of time, or time being ever present, is something that really changed how I thought about my work.

Your work relates so clearly, in many ways, to New York. What does it mean to you to come to L.A.? Do you feel like it makes a difference for your work?

I was just in New York and I had a guy from France, from Brittany, say: These pieces remind me of when I walk through the small streets of Brittany and then I come out to the wharf. Another guy who was an Islamic scholar was telling me that they have to do with the inscription of Islam. I think that the references are

they have to do with the inscription of identity. I think that the references are multifaceted. People bring all kinds of references to the pieces, regardless of place. I don't know that that matters. I grew up out here, after all. I grew up in San Francisco, I went to school in Santa Barbara. I've been printing out here for 40 years. And I've been working out here. I've never had a piece in this museum, ever. I won't go into that sad history. [Chuckles.]

That sad history ends February 16, with the opening of BCAM at LACMA.?

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