

ALEXANDRE

Gallery Going, by DAVID COHEN

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Richard Serra at Gagosian Gallery until October 25 (555 W. 24th St., at Eleventh Avenue, 212-741-1111). Prices: \$2 million-\$5 million.

"A Survey of the Work of Harvey Quaytman: Paintings and Drawings 1969-1998" at McKee Gallery until November 1 (745 Fifth Avenue, between 57th and 58th Streets, 212-688-5951). Prices: \$6,000-\$60,000.

Stephen Westfall, "New Paintings 2002-03" at Lennon, Weinberg Inc. until November 1 (560 Broadway, between Prince and Spring Streets, 212-941-0012). Prices: \$15,000-\$20,000.

DAVID COHEN



Richard Serra **Wake** 2003
weatherproof steel, 14 x 75 x 46 feet
photo Rob McKeever, Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

There isn't much sculpture around today that competes with Richard Serra's in terms of audacity, poise, and presence. His latest works, which continue a line of investigation in spirals and shapes created from mammoth sheets of weatherproof steel, crowd Gagosian's airplane hangar-like galleries on West 24th Street. But without seeming to look the gift horse in the mouth, it's difficult to sustain the exclamation of "simply gorgeous" that these objects first elicit. Thanks in no small measure to the artist's own considerable efforts, nothing about Mr. Serra is ever simple.

His career, indeed, has been consecrated to the act of unsettling. There's invariably an existentialist edge to his activities: From the he-man in his warehouse garret slinging around pots of molten lead ("Casting," 1969) to the übermensch right out of the pages of "Fountainhead" daring the authorities to destroy his public monument ("Tilted Arc," 1981, removed from Federal Plaza, New York, 1989), Mr. Serra's public image has always been of a man who thrives on confrontation.

The risk that precarious-seeming structures might topple over and crush whatever is below and the menace implicit in rustiness are no doubt supposed to engender a frisson of fear. But everyone, including Mr. Serra, seems entirely at ease these days with tilt and rust; they are the device and patina of choice. At the end of the day, Mr. Serra is big and in steel rather the way Wagner is long and in German.

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The feelings engendered by the new works have to do with subtler sensations than the sublime, dealing as they do with nuanced inflections of geometry and perception. The strongest, most original work in the show is "Wake" (2003). Five wavy, bulbous asymmetrical forms present themselves in echelon, wobbling like battleships reflected in water.

A new Serra show is like a big budget Hollywood blockbuster ("The Terminator" meets "Titanic"?). At the multiplex, you pay your \$10, so what is it to you that the special effects, sumptuous scenery, exotic locales, and cast of thousands happen to cost millions? Similarly, at Gagosian: Why allow extraneous considerations of facture and installation to interfere with pure aesthetic pleasure? The point, however, is that art is more than entertainment precisely because of the criticality it demands from the viewer. Indeed, Mr. Serra is the type of artist who has always sought to shake his audience from complacency. The active, as opposed to passive, onlooker at Gagosian has to question the discrepancy in bringing brutal, hefty materials to bear for what are ultimately subtle, delicate results.

In Matthew Barney's "Cremaster 3" (2002), Mr. Serra participated in the diminution of his own aura in a brave but consequential gesture that, together with his recent work, forces a new consideration of the earlier: He re-enacted his legendary lead-wielding antics, only this time - in harmony with Mr. Barney's peculiar private lexicon of meanings - replacing the lead in his melting pot with Vaseline. Director and actor alike were having a bit of fun at the expense of the younger Mr. Serra's hubris.

In just such a way, the exploration of elegant, visually soft effects in massive steel configurations at the very least destabilizes the effect of classic Serra. Stand a suitable distance from "Wake," and you could be enjoying the flowing forms of a recent Bridget Riley. Momentarily, the awesome bulks become weightless and immaterial. Which is no bad thing, but who would have expected that inside sculpture's Superman a Barbie had been waiting to escape?



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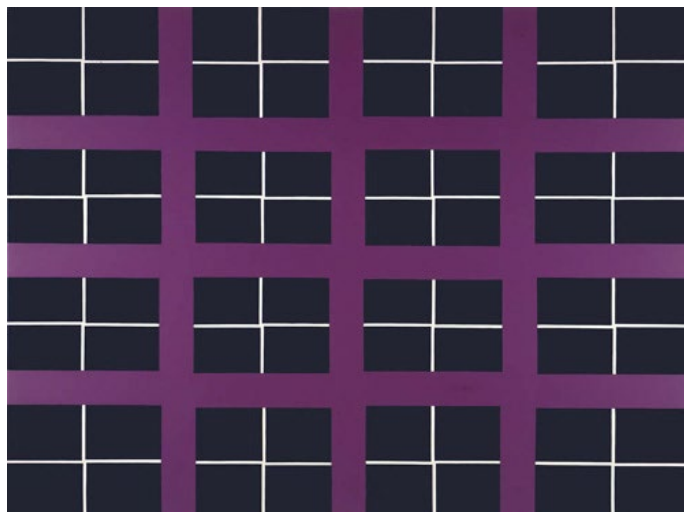


Harvey Quaytman **Moon Fancy** 1969
acrylic on shaped canvas, 36 x 109 inches
Courtesy McKee Gallery, New York

A contemporary of Richard Serra's, the late Harvey Quaytman, also had a penchant for rust and a predilection for curving arcs. McKee's moving tribute to the artist, who died last year, is a survey that extends through 1998, the last year in which he was able to work. He emerges as a substantial abstractionist, shaped but not circumscribed by minimalism.

The earliest work in this show, from 1961-63, with the enigmatic, Beckett-like title "Riley Mumbling to Himself at Night," is a de Kooning-esque maze of abstracted limb and torso forms abutting each other. Although this fine painting is untypical of later work, a tension between geometry and vitality resurfaces throughout his career. In the late 1960s, Quaytman produced expressively shaped canvases in somewhat melancholy hues, which often feature a bent or arced element attached in such a way as to create pulsating negative space in the cutout area exposed. Works in rust and acrylic on paper have the tough energy of sculptures by Chillida.

The late works are cruciform, and push geometry to a harder edge. Still, the surfaces are animate, the contrast of colors and textures dynamic. Leo Steinberg, who professed himself startled by the 1998 exhibition of these works at McKee, found it "astounding to see the most familiar of signs de-semanticized, de-centered, de-Christianized, and emancipated to exercise its own territorial power." A cross is a cross, however, and it is impossible not to detect an almost monastic spirit of discipline and denial in Quaytman's austere sensualism.



Stephen Westfall **Mingus** 2002, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 inches; cover, **Harlem**

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Window, 2003, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches, Courtesy Lennon, Weinberg, Inc

Restraint with a smile has always been the hallmark of Stephen Westfall. As surely as his method of tight, almost heraldic geometric abstraction remains focused, so are his stylistic references correspondingly diverse. His works acknowledge both minimalism and pop in their serial logic and jazzy, synthetic color. They also have blandness with attitude.

A typical recent composition comprises a dumb, insistent grid subtly subverted by a slight skewing at the joints. "Mingus" (2002), in Mr. Westfall's current show at Lennon, Weinberg, is a masterful example in this idiom, in sumptuous black and ecclesiastical purple. Inevitably, this somewhat designer-ish, language-game take on abstraction places the artist in the dubious company of postmodern contemporaries Peter Halley and Jonathan Lasker, but Mr. Westfall seems incapable of irony: His work is pervaded by ingenuousness. He seems, indeed, to be in genuine and respectful dialogue with the luminaries of the purist tradition in modern painting.

Mr. Westfall's new show represents a significant departure. Because of his work's connection to design and fabric, representation has always been implicit even in his flattest, most severe abstractions. Now, in several pictures, it has become explicit: The view of a Harlem street as seen through a window, for instance, places him in direct relationship to Charles Sheeler, Ralston Crawford, and the American precisionist tradition. And yet "Harlem Window" (2003) seems as involved with De Stijl painting and design as it does with Americana. Mr. Westfall's delightful and promising departure lays the foundation of new bridges without burning old ones.

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