



## Abstract Art's New World, Forged for All

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BILBAO, Spain, June 6 - A virtual Richard Serra museum opens on Wednesday within the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim here: a permanent installation of more giant bent steel sculptures. Even if you know Mr. Serra's other recent work (over the past decade, he has made

more than a dozen "Torqued Ellipses," "Double Torqued Ellipses," "Torqued Spirals" and so on), you won't quite grasp the eloquence of what he has done now without seeing it.

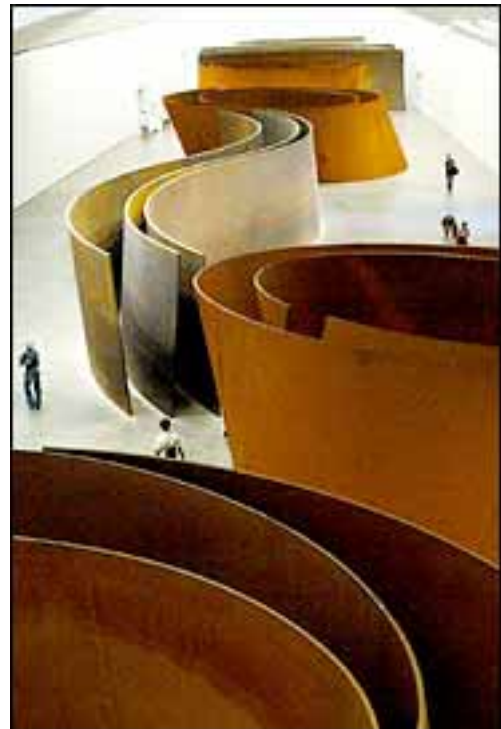
Visitors observe eight massive steel sculptures by the sculptor Richard Serra during a special preview at the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. The installation opens to the public on June 8 and will be a permanent feature of the museum.

The installation is one of the great works of the past half-century, the culmination of a remarkable fruition in Mr. Serra's career. It rejuvenates and pushes abstraction to a fresh level. And it is deeply humane, not least because it counts on individual perception, individual discovery.

This last observation may seem somewhat at odds with the complaints thrown around a couple of decades ago when Mr. Serra's "Tilted Arc" was installed in Foley Square in downtown Manhattan, then ignominiously carted off to a dump in 1989, after he had come to be regarded as an angry man devising menacing sculptures.

Testifying to the extraordinary nature of art, with its moving-target quality, Mr. Serra's recent works, which evolve right out of "Tilted Arc," elaborating on its concept of a curved, space-enclosing slab of steel, have become stupendously popular.

The shift in perceptions entails more than the difference between a public plaza and the inside of a museum like the Guggenheim. Mr. Serra has perfected his visual language, and in so doing led people to





recognize as compelling, and even uplifting, what had been deemed downright hostile. Mothers now cheerfully push strollers and kids dash through his sculptures as if they were playgrounds. There are broad lessons to be gleaned, about the virtues of patience and keeping one's eyes and mind open, virtues that not coincidentally are also at the heart of Mr. Serra's current installation.

That installation, in one vast and eccentric room, consists of eight sculptures, seven new or recent ones, plus "Snake," which was already parked at the Guggenheim Bilbao. How they combine is their point: how they press on from one to another, how the spaces inside the sculptures, which are private, psychological and tight, yield to the ones outside, which are public, social and open, and vice-versa - how swelling shapes play off one another and also against the architecture, creating views, openings, passages, even sounds: sound here is a surprising, felicitous factor, the works acting like echo chambers in Mr. Gehry's cavernous gallery.

There is no particular path to follow, no prime vantage point from which to "get" the whole thing. What there is to be gotten is the experience itself, over time: the walk into and around the room.

The installation is fragmentary. Different people will engage it differently, will linger at one place or another, will move quickly or slowly, and will then retain different memories, in different orders. The sculptures are catalysts for memory.

They come in shapes never dreamed of before - massive, tilting, twisting, wildly complicated enclosures whose colors and textured surfaces are the happenstance condition of raw, unpolished steel. The works are heavy, although they can look oddly soft and almost weightless because of how their shapes bend, billow and droop, like melting wax or like sails or like the rubber sculptures that Mr. Serra made at the start of his career more than 40 years ago.

It is the spaces they define that really matter. You can perceive the works at each instant as you move through them - you can feel their walls closing in, forcing you along, or slowing your movement, or cutting off light, or thrusting outward. The narrowest spaces feel vertiginous, the openings like arenas, or bull rings, fields or pastures, places of shock or relief or repose, suddenly arrived at. But you can't keep the shapes whole in your mind, can't retain definite mental pictures of the sculptures, which are in the end the accumulation of successive impressions. What sticks in the mind are the general sensations they provoke - that one

is claustrophobic, that one, mazelike. Mr. Serra's sculptures are massive, but their materiality is subordinated to intangibles of perception.



You might say that they shift the focus from sculpture as object to the viewer as subject. During the 1960's, Donald Judd stressed the integrity of sculptural objects made of industrial materials, whose meanings were meant to be fixed and instantly present. Then Mr. Serra came along, with Robert Smithson, Bruce Nauman, Richard Long and a generation of other artists who enlisted time and movement - the time it took to move through or past their works. Meaning became variable and contingent, reliant

on how people experienced the art.

"The Matter of Time" is Mr. Serra's title for the installation here, the apotheosis of this line of thinking. It solves a nagging problem for the Guggenheim.

When the museum opened eight years ago, Mr. Gehry's titanium and glass confection was a tourist boon, architectural icon and tremendous engine of civic revival for this sober, hard-scrabble city. But it was also clear that the building wasn't a practical place for showing art - that, in many parts, it actually warred with what went into it. How practical, after all, is a room shaped like an airplane wing that's a third again as long as a football field?



It was made manageable in 1999 when Mr. Serra first installed several "Torqued Ellipses." They held their own. Eight of them joined the Guggenheim's "Snake," which, within the grammar of that exhibition, became a kind of dash in the sentence, a break or pause, separating one ensemble of ellipses from the other.

Give the Guggenheim and the



Basque regional government credit. They recognized there was a problem and turned it into an opportunity. Faced with a white elephant and desiring a lasting attraction, they gave over this most conspicuous part of the museum, its signature space, to a serious artist able to cope with it.

His solution takes in and also subtly does in Mr. Gehry's architecture. The installation, for which the previous one was a useful trial balloon, again uses

"Snake" as a connector in the middle. The new works consist of a single torqued ellipse; a double ellipse (like mismatched nesting dolls); three spirals; an ensemble of differently curved plates titled "Between the Torus and the Sphere," the shapes deriving from sections of toruses and spheres. And at the far end of the room, nearly hidden behind the toruses and spheres, "Blind Spot Reversed," which uses those same shapes to make a zigzag enclosure roughly resembling an eye, its rear edge hugging the curve of the room's back wall.

The earlier show respected Mr. Gehry's gigantic space, with its obtrusive, expressionistic ceiling. This installation seems almost subversive by comparison. Standing in the center of one of the spirals, halfway down the room, you get a sweeping view of the lofted ceiling, and it's possible to think that Mr. Serra meant to contrast his own elastic forms, which are truly sculptural, with the building's odd shapes, which are applied and decorative. From the single ellipse through "Blind Spot Reversed" the installation lays out the evolution of torques and spirals. Even if you don't know an ellipse from a sphere, the gist is as transparent as the drama.

Not just drama in the sense that the sculptures are striking, but also in the sense that they entail time, sound, movement, change. These are terms of theater or cinema. Mr. Serra's work is abstract, but it unfolds like a play or film. It withholds and controls disclosure. Its climaxes (the concealed interiors of each sculpture) are surprise endings. The work presses attributes of the temporal arts into the service of static forms.

This is a radical condition for abstract sculpture. Now enshrined here, it becomes a benchmark for the young century.