

# ARTS IN REVIEW



By ERIC GIBSON

APPRECIATION

## A Monumental Sculptor

Richard Serra created metal artwork that was accessible and exhilarating

Richard Serra, who died on Tuesday, age 85, was the greatest sculptor of his generation and one of the greatest in the history of American art. Born in 1938 and the recipient of an MFA in 1964 from the Yale School of Art (where he studied under Josef Albers), he was best known for enormous outdoor works that he began making in the 1980s consisting of precariously angled steel walls set on one edge that snaked insouciantly across the landscape. When a wall curved in on itself, or when two or more were set side by side, spaces were created that, when entered, were alternately terrifying and exhilarating, as the monumental steel planes pressed in one moment and in the next expanded.

Coming after the Pop artists, who made sport with American consumer culture, the artists of Mr. Serra's generation returned to a hardheaded modernism, asking what art could be and what new directions it could move into, and answering those questions by experimenting with new materials and processes. In Mr. Serra's case this meant making sculpture using vulcanized rubber or neon, and splashing molten lead into the corner formed at the meeting point of a wall and the floor. It also meant

moving sculpture off the pedestal to interact with the full space of the gallery or museum.

But Mr. Serra's most potent "material" was an invisible one—gravity. In the 1960s he began making what he called Prop pieces, sculptures such as "One Ton Prop (House of Cards)." Com-

posed of lead or steel elements leaning into or balanced on one another, they are held together only by the weight of the parts and the equilibrium of opposing forces among them. In this way process was rendered transparent and sculpture's innate properties of weight, mass and monumental-

ity were made manifest, becoming the "subject" of Mr. Serra's art.

The effect of these Prop pieces was, and remains, electric (though unfortunately somewhat muted today by many museums' practice of roping them off for liability reasons). They made constructed sculpture stretching all the way back to Picasso, where the parts were welded together, look timid or passé. And, particularly in those works that were scaled up so the viewer could enter them, the feeling of precariousness and even threat they engendered dramatically engaged the viewer in a visceral, full-body experience unlike anything to be found in the prior history of the art form.

An often overlooked fact about Mr. Serra's art is that for all its materiality and what-you-see-is-what-you-get character, its effects often depend on old-fashioned illusionism. "House of Cards" may look light and insubstantial, yet it's anything but. And illusionism is central to his drawings. In the main these consist of mural-size sheets of paper covered edge to edge in black paintstick, a type of solid paint in stick form, and shaped and positioned on the wall

to communicate the same sense of mass, weight and spatial displacement as his sculptures.

He put himself through college working in steel plants, but the roots of Mr. Serra's sensibility lay, as he wrote in a 1988 text, in a childhood visit to the shipyard where his father worked, to watch a launch. "When we arrived, the black, blue and orange steel-plated tanker was in way, balanced up on its perch. It was disproportionately horizontal and to a four-year-old was as large as a skyscraper on its side," he wrote. Then, "freed from its stays, the logs rolling, the ship slid off its cradle with an ever-increasing motion. It was a moment of tremendous anxiety as the oiler enroute rattled, swayed, tipped, and bounced into the sea, half-submerged, to then raise and lift itself and find its balance. . . . The ship went through a transformation from an enormous obdurate weight to a buoyant structure, free, afloat and adrift. My awe and wonder of that moment remained."

Mr. Serra's sculptures in museums and parks routinely attract scores of contented onlookers, meaning he managed that rare feat of making work that was uncompromisingly true to his modernist principles yet accessible to the lay public. But perhaps his greatest achievement is to have created a body of work that is in equal measure both profoundly original and exciting.

Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Arts in Review editor.



'Inside Out' (2013), a snaking steel sculpture by Mr. Serra, who died on Tuesday at age 85.

### ARCHITECTURE REVIEW

## Buildings That Prioritize Plants

By MICHAEL J. LEWIS

A garden differs from nature in only one respect: It has a boundary. It is pleasing to learn that the word "garden" itself derives from an ancient Indo-European root meaning "to enclose," giving rise to such distantly related words as "yard" and "girdle." And so to girdle a garden, so to speak, and give it a boundary is one of the most ancient of human pursuits.

Now it is pursued again at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, and in the most sophisticated and technologically innovative way imaginable. Happily, it has been done in a way that does full justice to the primal nature of a garden.

Upon her death in 1971 Marie Selby, a philanthropist supported by a great oil fortune, left her Sarasota estate to be developed as a public botanical garden. It grew over time, adding greenhouses and service buildings, and incorporating adjoining properties, to reach its present 15-acre size. (It has an additional 30-acre campus at nearby Spanish Point.) As a garden, it is surpassingly lovely, but having grown incrementally, by fits and starts, it had no distinct archi-

tectural character. That it now does is the achievement of Overland Partners, a firm of architects based in Texas, working in collaboration with OLIN, the prominent landscape architects.

Their \$51.6 million project has given the Selby nearly 190,000 square feet of new construction, comprising a visitors center, laboratory building and parking garage, each remarkable in its own way. While buildings and parking had previously sprawled across the site, they have now been concentrated

at the north end so that one passes quickly from architecture to nature.

The Selby presides over the world's most extensive collection of living epiphytes, "air plants" as they are commonly known. These are plants that grow on other plants without hurting them, and they include some of the most spectacular orchids. They are the great glory of the Selby, and at the reconfigured entrance they are brought into view as soon as possible.

Botanical gardens are usually fenced off from the public, but Bob Shemwell of Overland told me he wanted "a sense of transparency" at the threshold, rather than funneling visitors through a controlled



ducing energy and vegetables, the building also stores rainwater for the restaurant and returns excess water, after filtering, to the Sarasota Bay. All this in a parking garage that is practically invisible beneath its green curtain of growing plants.

The casual visitor need not know any of this but will still sense the spirit of quiet purposefulness that underlies it all. Having strolled among the banyan trees and bamboo, and been dazzled by the elusive Osa pulchra, you make your way back to the building where you can eat a meal formed out of the same earth, water and air of the site.

There is hardly a more pleasant way of learning the essential interconnectedness of things.

Here for once is an institution that is in absolute harmony with the buildings it has made, both in function and image. There are no false claims, no wishful thinking, no curdling insecurity. It seems wrong to speak of its architecture as something separate from the garden itself. When I committed the faux-pas of pressing the architects to name the style of the buildings, they did so with obvious reluctance. Call it "environmental modernism with a nod to the Sarasota School," they said—then quickly added, with becoming modesty, better to think of the buildings as "an armature for plants."

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checkpoint. And so you enter under a broad spreading canopy, inspired by those of coastal trees. To the right is the visitors center and to the left the laboratory, with an open passage between them. No turnstile confronts you, and if you do happen to slip through, you are gently asked if you forgot to put on your sticker.

The architecture of the buildings is pleasantly understated, simple alabaster-colored volumes made of coquina, the local limestone made of fossilized shells. Thus the theme of life at the water's edge is sounded at the start of the Selby experience (quite literally, as you hear splashing water as you pass beneath the canopy).

The natural world makes itself felt even in the scientific laboratory. Here the central stairwell is framed in long slivers of mahogany,

▲ Exterior view of the newly renovated Marie Selby Botanical Gardens.

cut from a single tree, while the wooden conference-room table at which the Selby's botanists gather proudly flaunts its live edges. These spaces are not generally open to the public, but you can (and should) inspect them on group tours.

A visit to the Selby begins and ends at the Living Energy Access Facility (LEAF), a portentous name for a parking garage but one that is amply justified. It is a multipurpose building with a rooftop garden that supplies the vegetables for its restaurant below. Its array of solar cells powers not only the restaurant but the entire new complex, laboratory and all, making the Selby "the first net-positive energy botanical complex in the world." Besides pro-