

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON FOUNDATION DAY 2009

Chancellor, in accordance with the Charter, Statutes and Ordinances of the University, I present to you this person on whom we wish you to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature:

Richard Serra

The young Richard Serra, fresh from studying literature at Berkeley and Santa Barbara and painting at Yale, had the good fortune to spend a year in Paris on a Fulbright grant. Each evening he'd hang out at the café *La Coupole* until the sculptor Alberto Giacometti, with plaster still in his hair, came in for a drink late at night. They never met, but Serra kept returning because, as he put it, he wanted to see an artist who'd spent the whole day in the studio trying to figure out how to make sculpture credible in the present.

That may be seen as the challenge that Richard Serra finally set himself, and his response has made him one of the very greatest artists of our time. In 2007 his work was the subject of a remarkable retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and last year saw his opening exhibition for the Monumenta event at the Grand Palais in Paris. The art historian Robert Hughes has called him 'not only the best sculptor alive, but the only great one at work anywhere in the 21st century'.

Although he worked in the earlier part of his career with other materials (rubber and lead) and processes (performance and film amongst them) it is large-scale works in steel that are most evoked by the name of Richard Serra. They are often made for a specific site, such as *Fulcrum* with its five vast steel sheets that appear to balance precariously against one another by Liverpool Street Station here in London. Or *Spin out (for Bob Smithson)* whose massive steel plates set in the landscape of the Kroller-Muller Museum in Holland subvert the conventions of the sculpture park and create a very different kind of space and dynamic. Or the collection of curved and torqued steel structures, collectively known as *The Matter of Time*, permanently installed in the Guggenheim Bilbao in 2005.

The site, the material and the viewer, and the way they relate to each other, form the core to Serra's work and to its individuality. 'In most of my work', he explained 'the site is part and parcel of the content. It takes the focus of the object and makes the viewer the subject'. This is a radical subversion of the way we think about the art work that he traces back to that same early experience in Europe, when he saw the astonishing *Las Meninas* by Velasquez. It is a group portrait with the artist poised at his easel in the background, his gaze directed back at the viewer. 'It just knocked me sideways', he recalled. 'I looked at it for a long time before it hit me that I was an extension of the painting.... It made me think about art, and about what I was doing, in a radically different way.'

From that moment evolved the idea of the viewer not gazing at a separate art object, a painting on a wall or a sculpture on a plinth, but actually becoming the subject of the piece. We feel that powerfully as we navigate the curved and towering spaces of the sculptures in the Guggenheim. Again in Serra's own words, 'If you don't walk into the work and engage with it, there isn't any content. That's really what I've been dealing with ever since I saw the Velasquez painting.'

It is the physical character and physical potential of the materials with which he worked that matter to him. He'd worked in steel mills in his late teens, and as part of a rivet gang he'd

help build the Crown Zellerbach building in San Francisco. Sculptors such as Picasso and later Calder had used steel in the past, but the problem was that they had cut and folded it, pictorialised it. For Serra steel was an industrial material, and that is how we experience it in his monumental works.

These are extraordinary feats of engineering but they don't show the mark of the artist's intervention in the way that sculpture before him did. What he thinks about is mass, weight, counterbalance, load-bearing capacity and the like. When we experience the results they unsettle us more than they intimidate us. They're pieces that move us, evoking emotions and uncertainty. They are works born in confidence whose effect is very much the opposite. His sculptures move us not because of what they seem to represent but because of their direct effect on our bodies and our emotions. They overwhelm us and they touch us in a way that has been likened to the effect of the sublime.

This can be hugely successful with the public but it can also create controversy, as was the case with *Tilted Arc*, a gently curved 3.5 metre high curved wall of steel installed in Federal Plaza in New York. After an eight-year battle by some local residents the piece was removed and dismantled in 1989. It was a bruising experience for Serra, making him reflect on the role of the state and on the relation between art and the people.

Although one cannot imagine that controversy will never again surround his work – he is too uncompromising an artist for that to be likely – the last decade's work has achieved a level of popularity that has taken Serra by surprise. He puts down the success of his mesmerising torqued ellipses, works that push the engineering capacity of the material to its limits, to the fact that they're approachable and sensuous curves in contrast to the modernist 20th-century angles that had dominated his work before.

Perhaps, but there is a great deal more to it than that. We have of course learned how to experience Serra's work, and more importantly he has over the last decade found a way to work with space and time and materials towards which he has been grappling since those heady days on the New York art scene in the 1960s. It was a world in which Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Chuck Close, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra and others helped give each other the courage to find new ways of doing art in no matter what medium.

Richard Serra celebrated his 70th birthday just a few weeks ago. He delights in Matisse having learned to cut paper in the air at the age of 80, creating forms that electrified those who picked them up. That ability to challenge and think afresh is what Serra relishes and it is what makes us confident that whatever works come in the years ahead will, as with so many of those in the past, move sculpture forward in new ways. As he has done since Giacometti unwittingly threw down the gauntlet 45 years ago.

Your Royal Highness and Chancellor, it is with great pleasure that I ask you to confer the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* on Richard Serra.

Delivered by Professor Geoffrey Crossick, Warden, Goldsmiths, University of London