

# Richard Artschwager Won Me Over

## How I came to embrace his weirdness

By Jerry Saltz

For 30 years, my reaction to the complexly speculative art of Richard Artschwager has been “Huh?” It’s like his work speaks in some alien language that only occasionally gets through to me. I can love any one of his quasi-photo-realist monochromatic paintings on Celotex--odd-ball things on crenellated surfaces, with blurs of charcoal that coalesce into images that then disperse into abstract patterns. Yet seeing lots of them turns the effect redundant and I glaze over. Similarly, I can marvel at the magnificent oddity of any one of his oversize geometric Formica-covered furniture-sculptures that look like crates but are art that acts like furniture. In groups, they’re boring.

But my Artschwager ice has cracked. Perhaps that’s because almost every young artist I know adores his work. Maybe my eye has finally acclimated to the oddness. In this impressive Whitney retrospective, Artschwager’s “Huh?” feels vinegary and insistent, and I am reminded of what Ed Ruscha once said: “Good art should elicit a response of ‘Huh? Wow!’ as opposed to ‘Wow! Huh?’” That’s Artschwager.

To see what Ruscha means, consider two typical Artschwager sculptures. *Journal II* is a sprawling splat on the wall, hung in the corner. Made of plywood and Formica, it looks like a burst of marbeleized black-and-white painted woodgrain pattern exploding out of what looks like floorboards. (Artschwager once called Formica “the great ugly material, the horror of the age,” and has used it often.) The faux wood appears exaggerated, enlarged, unreal, visually out of focus, pictorial like a painting but solid like sculpture. Menacing, too, like it’s coming into your space--but



exists in another perceptual dimension where flatness has density. Its orientation flip-flops in your mind, from flat and frontal to 3-D isometric.

Nearby, *Description of a Table* is a classic minimalist cube, also made of melamine laminate, inlaid to look like a white tablecloth draping a piece of brown wooden furniture with dark space underneath. Yet the thing never stops being a solid. Or seeming extremely odd. Or creating rippling mental echoes. This is Artschwager’s primal “Huh?” You think, *What are these things? Sculpture? Furniture? Architectural ornament? Illusions? Jokes?* Categories cross and collapse. Slowly the works transform from “Huh?” into “Wow!” You also begin to understand that bad art does the opposite, ending up at “Who cares?” understand that bad art does the opposite, ending up at “Who cares?”

Artschwager’s sixties grisaille paintings of buildings, porno scenes, train wrecks, and rocket ships, made by gridding out photos, look spectacular here, and super-prescient. Like Warhol, Richter, and others, Artschwager explores the charged spaces between painting, photography, illustration, mechanical reproduction,

popular culture, and banality. Unlike them, however, Artschwager paints on kooky Celotex, an industrial material whose texture is irregular, with swirls of slightly raised fibers. This means that your eye is continually returning to the surface patterns of the painting. It’s like looking at a Seurat drawing or a painting by Vuillard. The weaves and irregularities become as important as what’s depicted. Wild! I surmise this is why Artschwager uses such bulky, ugly frames. He wants you to see them as part of the whole artistic ball of wax, not just as decorative fluff. Another wow.

The most unsatisfying part of Artschwager’s art, for me, is its near absence of color. When his sculptures do incorporate color, it’s always only when a material is left as he found it. Blue formica stays blue; raw plywood remains raw. But he somehow makes Formica look radical. As in the Guggenheim’s “Picasso Black and White,” or the Whitney’s own Wade Guyton survey, it’s as if adding one more formal element would just be too much for Artschwager to manage.

Why this should be might be explained by *Yes/No Ball*: a plain black bowling ball with the word *yes* and *no* on the other. A conceptual gimmick? Sure. Yet contrast the ball to a coin-flip, which always gives you one side or the other, black or white. Here is Artschwager’s permanent aesthetic condition: The coexistence of *yes* and *no*, *almost*, *in between*, *not quite*, *both*, and *neither*. Artschwager says, “If you have a lot of these balls, then you have a model for inductive reasoning, which is the only kind of reasoning we’ve got.” There’s that beautiful, bountiful “Huh? Wow!”

Richard Artschwager!  
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