



Richard Serra, *Sonny Rollins*, 1999, One color etching, 39 3/4 x 50 1/2 inches
Edition of 39, Signed lower right

Richard Serra: Paintstik and Silkscreens

By James Foritano

At: Barbara Krakow Gallery,
10 Newbury St.,
through February 1st.
617-262-4490,
barbarakrakowgallery.com

There are eight works hung in the twisting white spaces of Barbara Krakow's fifth floor gallery, half of which, despite their generous dimensions, seem to be mere moments of time, glimpses of movement, echoes of someplace beyond the physical spaces holding them momentarily captive.

If that description of "Richard Serra: Paintstik Silkscreens" sounds pretentious, I'm sorry, but pretentiousness seems to be at least half the space where words are banished when attempting to describe such determinedly non-objective dramas as Serra summons.

Take *Pasolini*," one of three pieces in this exhibition titled for strong public figures Serra wishes to memorialize. Having sworn off "the bronze figure on the pedestal" as hopelessly outmoded, Serra must find a space for *Pasolini* to "occupy" -- space that is unfixed and equivocal, a perceived rather than a pre-conceived space.

One of Serra's strategies for achieving such a multi-dimensional space is to create a palimpsest of blots, spatters, wipes, scrapes and jabs by utilizing three layers of viscous paintstik -- a crayon, of sorts, but packed with serious oil, to summon up, by chance and intent, a sensuous, seemingly depthless black veil which reflects a shimmering play of light back at the viewer.

"*Pasolini*" is the sum of the vibrations of light and texture that the engaged spectator creates in his motion

toward and away from this elusive portrait; not a calculable sum, but one that sits well with modern intuitions and theories of personality.

To multiply the effect of incalculability, there is also a volatile dynamic between the sides of the roughly five-foot by four-foot rectangle that represents *Pasolini* and the sides of the coated paper on which it sits. The bottom of this rectangle sits plump on the bottom of the paper, blocking, in a sense, the casual viewer who is intent on strolling into the "painting" and around the represented figure. On its two sides, space shows around a dense black mass as slim, uneven columns, one wider at the top, the other at the bottom. There's a tension in this asymmetry that enhances the viewer's feeling of confronting a shape that is apt to throw off willfully, perhaps dangerously, any pre-sorted definitions he might apply.

Again, description makes all these shifting boundaries seem dry, more an exercise for a geometrician than a layperson. But that's to calculate without the effect of the presence of the shapes that Serra conjures, at once subtle enough to reward our most minute scrutiny, and monumental enough to seem physical, a vector of motion from which we step aside, or toward.

Take "*Sonny Rollins*," a jazz legend on stage, whose energy if not his physiognomy seems fully enacted in the whirling, sucking oval of splattered edges that Serra conjures. Or "*Rosa Parks*," a legend of the civil rights movement. Three of the four sides of the rectangle representing Ms. Parks are coterminous with the sides of their paper ground; only the last section of her top side bends gracefully down to reveal a slice of white.

And in this gesture she seems to be that immovable but adaptable current of energy that galvanized around her every wavering impulse for freedom in the civil rights movement -- just as *Sonny Rollins* in the field of jazz and *Pasolini* in film created energies which extend beyond their arts and times.

Psychological spaces as well as people call to Serra for representation. In "*Shelter*, 2000," there's a palpable sense of enclosure, but a fragile enclosure, of wighted suspension, loosely woven substance that could tip either way.

If one needs some patience to appreciate the daring of these post-modern visions, then the there-ness of shapes that seem to dissolve into their own energies in "*Patience*, 1985," a kaleidoscope of velvety blacks and ambitious boundaries, will serve to entice and renew.

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