

# The Razor's Edge

## A memorial to Richard Serra: (1938-2024)

by Neil Goodman

For more than fifty years, Richard Serra reigned as the dominant force of sculpture throughout the United States. Seemingly, every major museum collection, sculpture park, or city wanted its signature Richard Serra. Pavilions were built to house his work, and museums were constructed to accommodate the weight load of his massive pieces. Given the engineering difficulty of so many of his projects, as well as the sheer daunting scale, his work was both technically brilliant and unrelentingly ambitious.

Few sculptors in history, have paralleled the amazing success and seemingly unlimited budgets to create massive public works throughout the world. Serra was in all respects, relentlessly ambitious, courageous, and uncompromising, as well as the most important minimalist sculptor of his generation.

Like many sculptors, I have had my own personal conversation with Richard's work since seeing my first Serra installation in NYC while an MFA student at the Ty-

Left) *Prop*, 1968, refabricated 2007. Lead antimony and steel, 89 1/2 × 60 × 54 inches. Photo: Whitney Museum of Art. Photo: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/31751> (Right) *Sight Point (for Leo Castelli)*, Stedelijk museum, Museumsplein, Amsterdam. Photo by C. Suthorn / cc-by-sa-4.0 / commons.wikimedia.org.





*Thirty-Five Feet of Lead Rolled Up*, 1968. Lead, 3 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 24 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 4 inches. Photo: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Thirty-Five-Feet-of-Lead-Rolled-Up/ODC-84B64EB76D8D4>

ler School of Art in 1979. He was the force in the sculpture world to be reckoned with, and his work was a never-ending topic of countless conversations, arguments, and discussions. Over the years, my thoughts have varied. Sometimes I found the work brutalist, dense, impenetrable, and inert, and at other times I have found the work poetic, graceful, gestural, uplifting, and profoundly beautiful. One thought shifts, while the other grabs hold, without a clear resolution or definitive conclusion. Perhaps that was the mystery of a Richard Serra sculpture, as his work always posed both question and answer, and the conclusions were uniquely his own.

He also seemed to be an artist that continued to find a larger audience for his work over the years, and, like other artists, the first impression was not the second. Whether the earlier prop sculptures (where massive steel plates are simply propped against each other, held by their own weight in a kind of gravitational détente) or the monumental, torqued ellipses, the sculptures resonate and linger. There is a moment where you get it, as you can recount the form, the feeling, the surface of a large immersive Serra. This is perhaps the power and poignancy of his work, as recollection and memory are equal partners in the experience of a Richard Serra sculpture. Equally over

*Tilted Spheres*, 2004. Steel, approximately 10.¾ x 45.½ x 39.¾ feet. Toronto Pearson Airport. Photo: <https://www.torontopearson.com/>



*The Matter of Time*, 1994–2005. Weathering steel, dimensions variable. Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa. Photo: <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/exhibitions/richard-serra-2>



a career that spanned more than six decades, the work always had a forward trajectory, challenging both earlier works in scale and form while developing a complexity and monumentality that was unparalleled in the history of postmodern sculpture.

Like the world we live in, Serra's sculptures have a precariousness between demise and safety. Being with a Richard Serra sculpture is like standing at the edge of a cliff, balanced between trepidation and wonder, a razor's

edge between life and death. For me, that was the sculpture of Richard Serra! ■

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*Te Tuhirangi Contour*, 1999/2001. 56 Corten steel plates, 275½ x 6½ x 54½ yards. Gibbs Farm, New Zealand. © Gibbs Farm 2013. Photo: <https://www.gibbsfarm.org.nz/serra.php>.

