

# Richard Serra AT COLBY:

Prints from the Collection of Paul J. Schupf  
in the Context of 4-5-6

OCTOBER 25 - DECEMBER 22, 2002

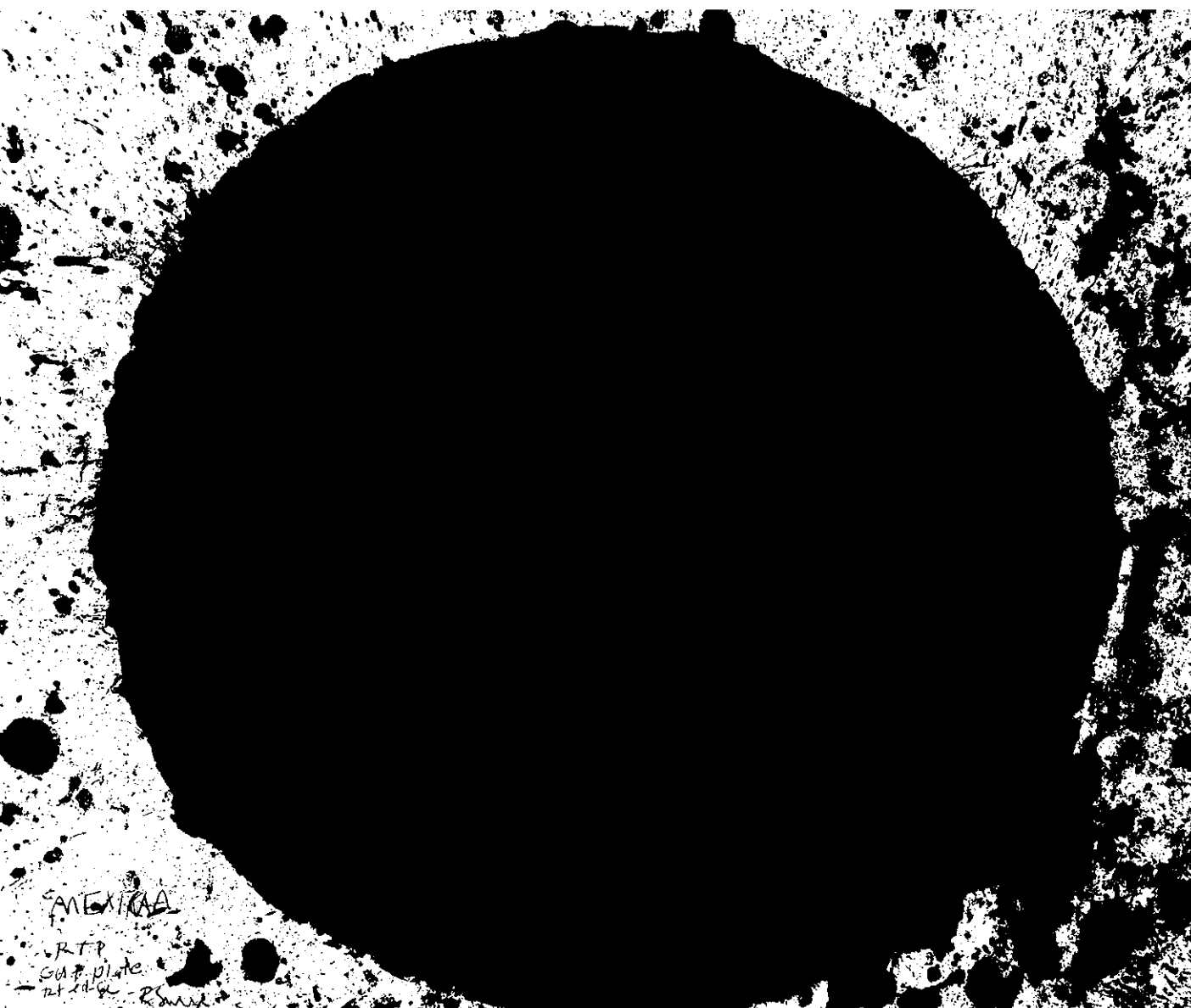


FIGURE 1: **Coltrane**, 1999, Etching on paper, 47 1/2" x 57"; Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91  
© 1999, Richard Serra and Gemini G.E.L. LLC, Los Angeles, California

# Richard Serra AT COLBY:

## Prints from the Collection of Paul J. Schupf in the Context of 4-5-6

Approaching the front steps of the Colby College Museum of Art, the viewer is greeted by three geometric monoliths in Corten steel strategically dispersed across the Paul J. Schupf Sculpture Court framing the museum's entrance (Fig. 3). This three-part sculpture, 4-5-6, was designed by Richard Serra (b. 1939), perhaps the most ambitious, and certainly the most prominent, sculptor working in America today. The artist's prominence borders on notoriety: his work is uncompromising in its physical demands, rigorously abstract, divested of narrative and illusion, and aggressive in the demands it imposes upon the viewer, who may be hard-pressed to remain passive in its presence. Serra typically works on a large scale, and the sheer physicality of his sculpture is an essential component of the viewer's experience. Typical of modernist art of the late 20th century, the experience of this sculpture—how we relate to it subjectively—is not prefigured. It encourages engagement that is potentially aesthetic, spatial, kinesthetic, but the work gives away little that allows the viewer to know its subject or meaning, and it does not draw upon preconceptions we may have regarding what is “art” (or monumental sculpture in particular), and why, independent of its context, this work qualifies. Open-endedness is fundamental to the experience, as is the absence of reference to meanings or devices that are independent of the literal experience of the objects themselves.<sup>1</sup>

4-5-6 is in many respects typical of the work that Serra began exhibiting in the late 1960s with the dealer Leo Castelli in New York, shortly after the artist's graduation from Yale. The forms are “minimalist,” a term devised by critics to describe the interest in primary forms that a group of sculptors and painters began to pursue in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Each element in Serra's sculpture, a simple rectangular mass, measures 4' x 5' x 6'—hence its title. Each rests on a different side, creating the illusion, at first glance, that they are each of a different dimension. The sculpture is emphatically spatial, intended to be read not as discrete, identical objects but as a constellation of forms that incorporate, and in fact define, the space surrounding, engaging the viewer in a temporal, ambulatory relationship that encourages a dynamic and mutable experience: as the viewer's physical relationship to the sculpture changes, so likewise does the perceived interrelationship of sculptural elements, aspects of solid and space, scale and proportion, light and shadow, the empirical “reality” and potential illusion—hence the ambiguity between what we know and what we see. Although the work avoids representation and symbolism as artists have employed these traditionally, it is subject to allusion, part of what the viewer brings to the experience—whether objectively or subjectively—the by-product of an interaction with all aspects of the sculpture.<sup>3</sup>

Serra, who is an articulate commentator on his work, defined an artistic program early in his public career that remains relevant to his current production:

*The experience of the art for me is the experience of living through the pieces, and that experience may have very little to do with the physical facts of the work of art. . . . But when you're talking about intentions, all you're telling people about is the relation of physical facts. And I think an artwork is not merely correctly predicting all the relations you can measure.*

<sup>1</sup> 4-5-6 was installed in July 2000, and was conceived and fabricated for this site. The sculpture is site-specific, scaled to the museum's façade, echoing its three surrounding walls. The elements of this sculpture are each solid, forged Corten steel, each of its three elements weighing 30 tons. Corten is a material that oxidizes naturally, weatherproofing the sculpture, while producing a warm color that is fundamental to the sculpture's esthetic. Renovation of the terrace was funded by Paul J. Schupf H'91, who is a trustee of Colby College, and the donor also of The Paul J. Schupf Wing that houses the collection of works by the painter Alex Katz. The redesign of the terrace into a sculpture court was the result of collaboration between Serra and the architect Frederick Fisher, who also designed the museum's Lunder Wing, which houses the museum's historical collection.

<sup>2</sup> Other artists associated with this movement include Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt (who is represented in the museum's collection by a wall drawing in the entrance lobby, a gouache, a print and the sculpture *Seven Walls* that rests outside the museum, adjacent to Mayflower Drive); painters include Frank Stella, Agnes Martin, Robert Ryman, and Ellsworth Kelly—among many others.

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy, for example, that one of the most successful works of art in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. is a monumental steel sculpture by Serra, obliquely named *Gravity*, in the Hall of Witness of the museum, its mass and tortured surfaces encouraging associations specific to this site, the product of its physical properties and context as distinguished from the rhetoric of gesture or symbol (see: [http://www.ushmm.org/uia/cgi/uia\\_doc/photos/6700?hr=null](http://www.ushmm.org/uia/cgi/uia_doc/photos/6700?hr=null)).

*[Artists] set up a construct and tell people their intentions, and then the construct verifies the intentions. Everybody has their own language structure that they put in it—they run it on a tape loop in their head—and what that does . . . is to preclude people from experiencing the work. . . . [M]y pieces are involved with walking and looking. But I can't tell someone how to walk and look.<sup>4</sup>*

This early statement of purpose is refreshingly undogmatic regarding the meanings that the viewer may bring to a work of art, quite separate from the artist's intentions. One may infer from this comment an aversion to formalist critical theory of the period, which sought to divest art of all qualities and concerns that were extrinsic to its irreducible formal characteristics. It reflects as well a temperament in tune with the political and cultural developments of the late 1960s, especially as they relate to a widespread suspicion of "authority"—whether artistic or social.

The museum's upper Jetté Gallery exhibition of prints by Serra, on loan from the collection of Paul J. Schupf, provides the occasion to examine the artist's parallel production as a printmaker and sculptor and to explore the common denominators of his aesthetic across these disparate activities. The works on view, comprising the lithograph *Spoletto Circle* from 1972 (the earliest work in the exhibition), two screenprints with paintstick from the series *Clara Clara* dating from 1985, and nine etchings from 1991 and 1999, enable a sampling of Serra's production as a printmaker over three decades, in three different techniques. The chronological spread of these works reveals the artist's lifelong involvement with printmaking: he began making prints tentatively during his graduate study at Yale University between 1961 and 1964, and he began making prints in earnest after 1972. The artist has produced more than 150 prints in the succeeding 30 years of his career. These are characteristically of a large scale, geometric in form, black and monolithic, tactile and physical in their execution and presence.<sup>5</sup>

As a body of work, Serra's prints represent an autonomous sphere of activity: they are neither studies for or after his sculpture, and have evolved as the result of processes specific to the materials and techniques of printmaking. Thirty-five of these prints are lithographs, his primary technique through 1991; twenty-five are screenprints, mostly printed between 1985 through 1991, most often using paintstick, a palpable material that distinguishes this body of work from the normally flat surface produced by this technique; the remainder are predominantly etchings, of which the first dates from 1981, and etchings have remained his preferred technique since 1991.<sup>6</sup> The etchings sometimes include aquatint, which adds to the tactility and variability of their surface. This technical evolution seems to be the result of the artist's consistent interest in the materiality of his work, combined with his lifelong interest in drawing. Etching is an "*intaglio*" process (which in Italian means "valley"), in which the image is burned into the surface of a copper plate by means of acid. These recessions into the surface of the plate hold the ink, which is impressed onto the surface of the paper when it is passed through a press, producing an impression that rests subtly on top of the paper surface, lending a physical aspect to the image that has historically been part of the attraction of etchings among collectors and which is exploited by Serra for his own purposes.

The viewer's awareness of the physical and tactile qualities of these prints is fundamental to the experience, as is their characteristically ambitious size. Historically, prints tended to be small, scaled to the dimensions of books or folios, and they are typically related to the history of the printed word and to the objectives of multiplicity and distribution. Serra is by no means the first printmaker to work on a large scale, or with limited editions, but the scale of this body of his work is more the exception than the rule, pushing the limits of printmaking technology while also affirming the autonomy of the print as a physical object whose presence can compete with painting or sculpture.

It is consequently relevant to Serra's printmaking activity to differentiate them from his sculptural production. Fundamentally, the prints are images on a ground, intrinsically two-dimensional in spite of their emphatic tactility,

<sup>4</sup> "Document: Spin Out '72-'73," interview by Liza Baer, 1973, in *Richard Serra. Writings. Interviews*. Chicago, 1994, 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Silke von Berswordt-Wallrabe, *Richard Serra: Druckgrafik, Prints, Estampes (Werkverzeichnis, Catalogue Raisonné, 1972-1999)*. Kleve, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> He has in addition created one monotype (1982), one woodcut (1989), and one linocut (1998).



**FIGURE 2: Richard Serra during his proofing session in the artist studio at Gemini during July and August, 1998.**

© Sidney B. Folsen, Los Angeles, California, 1998

the product of a process that is closely connected to the processes of drawing and painting (Fig. 2). Reminiscent of the painter Jackson Pollock, who also worked large, Serra works horizontally, frequently on the floor. As with Pollock, the product is conceived to be seen on a wall, viewed in relation to the viewer's vertical axis and an implicit horizon, but at the point of their conception they are removed from association with landscape and by extension with the illusion of spatial extension and the notion of a visual field that draws associations with a window looking out into the world. The prints are images in a literal sense, although they refer to nothing outside of themselves—they are not representations of something (a tree, a house, a bit of nature) so much as primary things—self-sufficient and non-illusionistic.

While acknowledging the qualities specific to Serra's prints, the viewer may also view them in the context of a broader vision that is connected to his sculptural achievement. *Coltrane* (Fig. 1), while emphatically non-illusionistic, is nevertheless spatial, and part of the image's expressiveness results from the compression of the form and its charged relationship to the edges of the sheet on which it is printed. This relationship, analogous to the disposition of 4-5-6 within the limits of the museum's terrace, is augmented by the impressive size, a feeling of massiveness and physical presence conveyed by

each of these pieces. In the lithograph as in the sculpture, notions of process are never far removed from the experience we have of them. One can imagine the process of drawing, of moving around masses of raw pigment, and of filling out the form (Fig. 2). In the sculpture, one may become aware of its solidity (try pounding it with your fist) and by extension the forging of these massive forms out of the raw ingot. The title of the print acknowledges the great jazz saxophonist John Coltrane (1926-1967), but it is neither a portrait nor an evocation of a particular musical piece by Coltrane, or a monument to his artistic genius such as one might encounter on a pedestal in a public park. One can describe the *physical* properties of the print (a black circle on a square sheet of Somerset yellow paper) or sculpture (three rectangular volumes made of oxidized forged steel, each measuring 4' x 5' x 6', each situated on a side of a different dimension, dispersed on a rectangular terrace paved with granite tiles). Such descriptions, while accurate and fundamental, ignore the expressiveness of each work and what we bring to them respectively of Coltrane's explosive and soulful musicianship, or of the counterpoint between the sculpture's raw, industrial facture and the stately finishes and human scale of the surrounding Georgian Revival architecture.

There is, finally, across Serra's work a quality of solemnity, of unflinching seriousness and occasional sublimity, absent the subversion of irony that is present in much contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> This seems to stem not so much from a softening of the artist's edge as from his fundamental grasp of sculpture's historical purposes, filtered through the temperament of a resolute modernist. It's enough to make a postmodernist blush, and it seems especially prescient in the wake of September 11.

Daniel Rosenfeld  
 Carolyn Muzzy Director of the Colby College Museum of Art  
 Exhibition and brochure prepared with the assistance of Patricia King.

<sup>7</sup> This observation was made by Kirk Varnedoe, former director of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as quoted in Calvin Tomkins, "Man of Steel," *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2002, 61.

FIGURE 3-

**4-5-6.** 2000

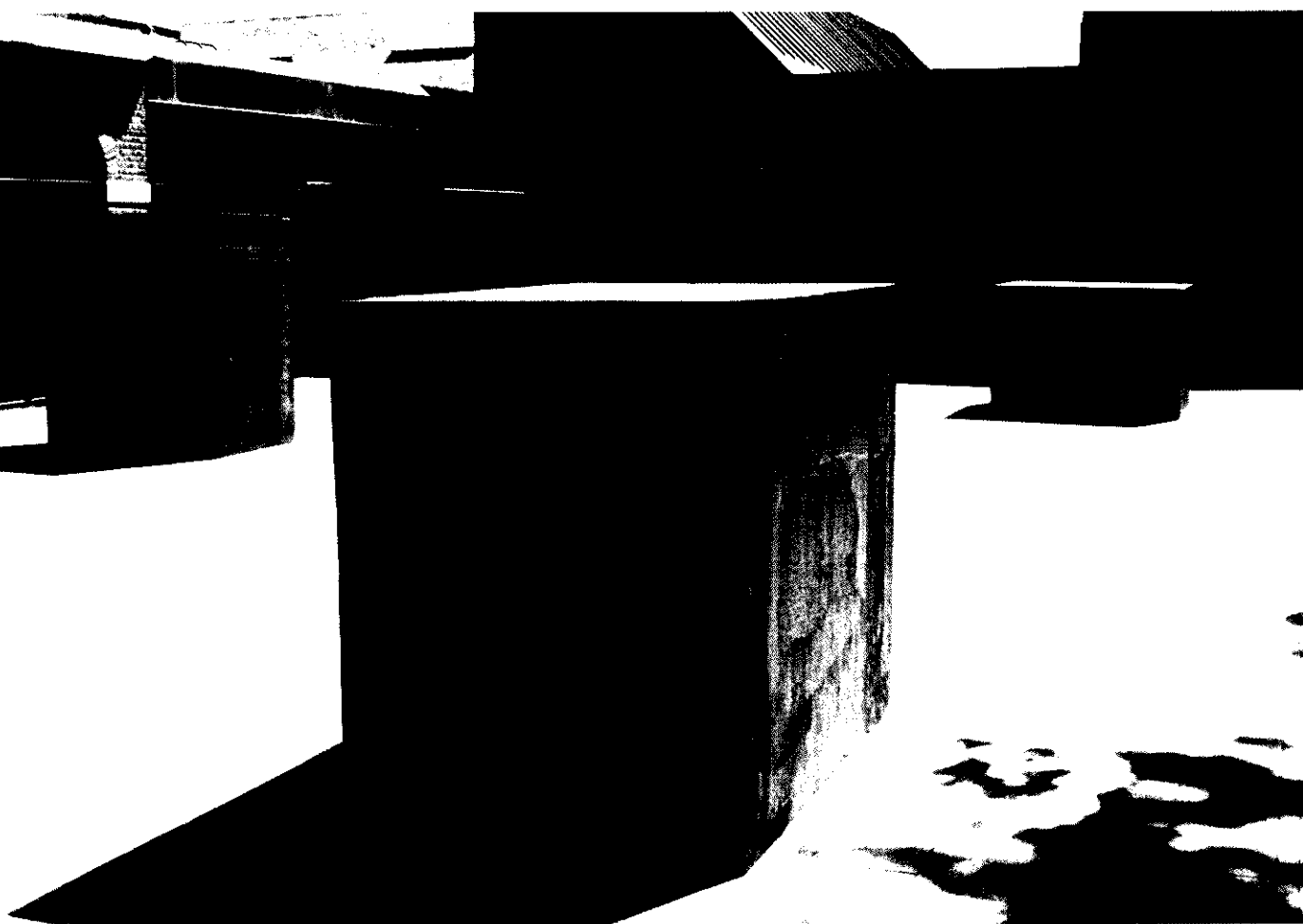
Forged weatherproof steel

3 Blocks, each 4 x 5 x 6'

(as seen in the Paul J. Schupf Sculpture Court)

MUSEUM PURCHASE FROM THE JEFFREY ABBOTT ACQUISITIONS FUND

2000.002



Photograph by Brian Speer

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST:

**Spoletto Circle.** 1972

Lithograph on paper  
35 x 51"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Clara Clara I.** 1985

Paintstick on screenprint on paper  
37 x 72"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Clara Clara II.** 1985

Paintstick on screenprint on paper  
37 x 72"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Vesturey I.** 1991

Etching with intaglio construction on paper  
71 1/2 x 35 1/2"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Vesturey II.** 1991

Etching with intaglio construction on paper  
71 1/2 x 35 1/2"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Vesturey III.** 1991

Etching with intaglio construction on paper  
71 1/2 x 35 1/2"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Mojo.** 1999

Etching on paper  
35 1/2 x 43 1/2"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**B.B. King.** 1999

Etching on paper  
44 1/2 x 44"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Coltrane.** 1999

Etching on paper  
47 1/2 x 57"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Billie Holiday.** 1999

Etching on paper  
60 x 48"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Bo Diddley.** 1999

Etching on paper  
47 1/2 x 47 1/2"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

**Keppler.** 1999

Etching, 25/40  
60 x 48"  
Collection Paul J. Schupf H '91

## VIDEOS

**Anxious Automation.** 1971

Video, 5 min.  
Soundtrack by Philip Glass

**Surprise Attack.** 1973

Video, 2 min.

**Boomerang.** 1974

Video, 10 min.

**Prisoner's Dilemma.** 1974

Video, 40 min.

## WORKS IN THE COLBY COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART:

**Reykjavik.** 1991

Paintstick on screenprint on paper  
67 x 76 1/2, ed. 23/46  
MUSEUM PURCHASE FROM THE JERE ABBOTT ACQUISITIONS FUND  
2001.003

**Brownie McGhee.** 1997

Paintstick on paper  
45 1/2 x 60"  
MUSEUM PURCHASE FROM THE JERE ABBOTT ACQUISITIONS FUND  
1998.098

**T.E. Siegen.** 1999

Color etching, 60 x 48", ed. 30/40  
MUSEUM PURCHASE FROM THE A.A. D'AMICO FUND  
1999.030

**4-5-6.** 2000

Forged weatherproof steel  
3 Blocks, each 4 x 5 x 6"  
MUSEUM PURCHASE FROM THE JERE ABBOTT ACQUISITIONS FUND  
2000.002