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Blackout? Three shows create meta-exhibition of contemporary art in Dallas and Fort Worth

<http://www.dallasnews.com/arts/visual-arts/2017/02/25/blackout-dallas-contemporary-nasher-sculpture-modern-art-museum-fort-worth>

by Rick Brettell



Untitled, 2008 edition etching by Richard Serra, is part of an exhibition of Serra's work at Nasher Sculpture Center.

Three exhibitions at North Texas museums seem dressed in mourning. All deal with black in ways that contrast and yet reinforce each other so powerfully that they create a sort of meta-exhibition.

Nasher Sculpture Center has the most extreme -- and, for that reason alone, the most aesthetically powerful -- of the three exhibitions, with an important selection of the monumental "prints" by sculptor Richard Serra. They were made available to the museum from the larger collection of Jordan Schnitzer, a

Portland, Ore., philanthropist who is the world's most active private collector of post-World War II prints.

From Schnitzer's definitive collection of Serra prints, Nasher curator Catherine Craft and assistant curator Leigh Arnold selected 52 to install in one of the three large bays of Renzo Piano's light-filled building devoted to sculpture.



T.E. Which Way Which Way?, a 2001 edition lithograph and etching.

Though the room is beautiful, it is not at all suited to the display of prints, because the natural light from two end walls of glass and the ceiling -- its principal glory -- had to be covered to create a curatorially responsible space for works on paper.

For Serra, a print is almost an editioned drawing in oil stick on paper, made from a master drawing by the artist translated in highly complex ways on paper by master printers at Los Angeles' Gemini Press. The sheer density of the blacks is essentially unmatched in art history except in Serra's drawings.

The prints are so visually heavy and large that they approach the sheer physicality of sculpture. Their shapes -- some swooping curves, others masses of black in various blocks of form -- are so powerful in the room that the Nasher's own seminal sculpture by Serra almost recedes from our visual world.

There are, quite simply, no blacks as thick, as impenetrable as Serra's blacks, making the prints transcend their medium.

'Peaceful Place' reveals Dallas Contemporary's role

In the capacious galleries of Dallas Contemporary is an exhibition devoted to the recent paintings of Ross Bleckner, an important American painter whose work is poorly represented in Texas collections.

This exhibition with the enchanting title, "Ross Bleckner: Find a Peaceful Place Where You Can Make Plans for the Future," is once again proof of the expanding and vital role that Dallas Contemporary is playing in the city's burgeoning art world.

Bleckner's blacks are everywhere, but are used completely different than Serra's. More often they are deep grays.

Ghostly waterlilies float in black or dark gray, visually polluted water, as if at night or in the mind. Geometric structures, usually with curvilinear patterns that expand beyond the canvas, are evoked in blacks and grays as if to deny the brilliant color of '60s op-art and '80s pattern art from which they seem, at first, to derive.

Bleckner's art is a gentle form of protest against the ravages of disease, particularly from HIV, and of ecological destruction. Yet, in these negative and even depressing ideas, Bleckner finds a beauty -- of surface, of composition, of value (dark and light) and, in a few canvases, of color.

Unlike Serra, who allows no color and all but worships black, Bleckner uses the funereal color with white and with colors to create a world dominated by black, but not limited to it.

It is the first large-scale exhibition of the artist's paintings since the 1995 retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the first monographic exhibition in Texas since 1989.

Since our museums have no major works by Bleckner, Dallas Contemporary is forcing us to ask "Why?"

His work is of a level of quality consistent with the collections of our museums and it raises moral and pictorial issues -- of disease and environmental degradation, in particular -- of real importance today.

In this meta-exhibition devoted to the use of black by living artists, Bleckner has all the subtlety of an old master painter, whose knowledge of the craft of painting is as loving and as beautiful as any artist now on view in North Texas.



Black Monet, 2015, oil on linen, by Ross Bleckner, at Dallas Contemporary. Ross Bleckner

Disaster paintings designed to terrify the viewer

It also prepares us to make the drive to Fort Worth to see "Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings."

If Bleckner is all subtlety, as his brush almost caresses the canvas, Sultan's paintings are bombastic and designed to terrify the viewer.

Evoking in its title Goya's The Disasters of War etchings, Sultan's paintings are the opposite of Goya's miniature marvels of mordant observation.

Painted in many cases on huge, heavy wood "stretchers," some of which are covered with squares of linoleum, the two mediums he uses are latex and tar -- industrial materials very different than the refined paint on canvas of Bleckner or the oil stick on paper of Serra.

The world evoked by Sultan is of industrial decay, chemical spills, forest fires, a Gothic cathedral dissolving in polluted air, a shootout, a railroad in China in a landscape of black smoke. The black, in most cases, is tar -- think asphalt roads, black smoke and acrid odors. The darkness engulfs the light in this series of paintings made between 1983 and 1990.



Artist Donald Sultan, right, talks to an exhibit attendee at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth on February 18, 2017. Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings will be on display at the modern till April 23, 2017

If hope is light, it flickers weakly through the darkness in these tour-de-force representations of disaster.

The fact that the meta-exhibition exists only in the mind of this critic -- having been foreseen by none of the three institutions -- makes its hold on the zeitgeist of the early 21st century all the greater. By the end, one feels like the legendary canary in the mine: flying to get out before death strikes.

Yet, in the cases of both Bleckner and Sultan, death is infused with a dark beauty. In Serra, the black is so absolute and unyielding that it speaks less of death than of the sheer power of art.

Plan your life

"Richard Serra: Prints," Jan. 28- April 30, Nasher Sculpture Center, nashersculpturecenter.org; 214-242-5100

"Ross Bleckner: Find a Peaceful Place Where You Can Make Plans for the Future"; Dallas Contemporary, Jan. 15-March 12, dallascontemporary.org; 214-821-2522

"Donald Sultan: The Disaster Paintings"; Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Feb 19- April 23, themodern.org; 817-738-9215