

# Richard Serra

## Teaching Resource

*Richard Serra: Prints* | January 28 – April 30, 2017

*"I wanted [...] to see anew without preconceptions, to try to avoid the histories of existing styles, even my own." - Richard Serra*

### About Richard Serra

Best known as a sculptor, artist Richard Serra is also an accomplished printmaker, who has made over 200 printed works in a span of 45 years. Like his sculpture, Serra's prints reflect his interest in process, the expansion of scale to monumental proportions, and pushing the boundaries of traditional artmaking methods and techniques.



Richard Serra drawing on a lithographic plate, Gemini G.E.L., Los Angeles, 1972, photograph by Daniel Freeman

### Printmaking

*"I deal with drawing as an autonomous activity, as a different area of work, in that it has to do with the materials that are invested in the making of the drawing" - Richard Serra*

Serra started making prints in 1972 with the Los Angeles-based print workshop and studio, Gemini G.E.L. (Graphic Editions Limited). Gemini had earned a reputation as a place of technical experimentation and was known for welcoming artists. For Serra, working with Gemini allowed him to collaborate with master printers who understood the limitations of printmaking and could work with him to explore new and innovative ways of using printmaking materials. Not knowing the "rules" of printmaking allowed Serra to believe that anything was possible.

- Imagine you had access to a master sculptor, painter or printmaker. How would you use his or her knowledge of the medium to achieve new ideas in your work?

Serra often used printmaking as a way to become more inventive in his work. In his prints, he was able to explore materials that he hadn't used in his sculptural practice, and he sometimes used two-dimensional drawing as a way to "re-see" his three-dimensional works.

- Try using drawing as a way to consider a sculpture from a new perspective. Create one drawing of a sculpture from your favorite angle, then create a second drawing from an unexpected perspective. How do the two drawings compare?

### Scale

*"When you walk into a room, you're not in a room with pieces in it, you're in the space of the pieces." - Richard Serra*

Like his monumental sculptures, Richard Serra's prints often use scale to affect how a viewer experiences his or her environment or to create a feeling of movement.



Left: Richard Serra, *Promenade*, 2008. Grand Palais, Paris. Right: Richard Serra, *Promenade Notebook Drawing V*, 2009. Etching, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the Jordan D. Schnitzer Family Foundation.

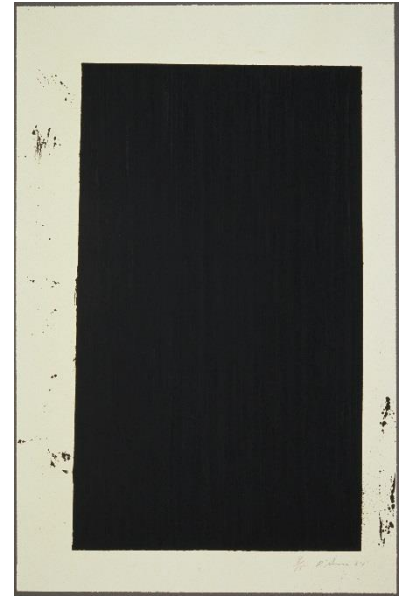
- Serra was deeply influenced by living in Kyoto, Japan, and said "the gardens demanded clarity of attention." Notice how you move through the gallery space. How do the works affect your path?
- How do you respond to the size of the works? Come up with five adjectives to describe one of Serra's large prints, and five adjectives to describe a small one.

## Process and Materials

"I think blackness is a property, not a quality. I made it black to divorce it from being a quality." - Richard Serra

Richard Serra used a variety of printmaking processes to achieve different types of images and forms in his work. His earliest prints were **lithographs**, a method of printmaking that faithfully captures the marks an artist draws. For later works, in which Serra wanted to emphasize mass instead of line, he experimented with **etching** and **screenprinting** (see glossary below). One of the largest examples made using the screenprinting technique is *Robeson*, measuring over eight feet tall and five feet wide.

- Which prints look "heavy" and which look "light" to you? How does the placement of the objects in the image create this effect? How does the printmaking technique contribute to these effects?
- Drawing only a rectangle, create a composition that makes the shape look weighty and one that makes it look weightless. Describe your thought process in choosing to draw each rectangle the way you did.



Richard Serra, *Robeson*, 1985. Screenprint and Paintstik on coated paper, 101 1/2 x 65 5/8 in. Courtesy of the Jordan D. Schnitzer Family Foundation.

Serra used black ink on white paper to emphasize the graphic qualities of the marks and shapes he made, but was also interested in the physical nature of his prints' surfaces. As he worked with master printers at Gemini to achieve certain textures and effects, he sometimes incorporated nontraditional materials into his prints. The thick, velvety surface texture of *Robeson* was created by applying a crayon-like medium called **Paintstik** over the surface of the completed screenprint. For the *Reversal* series of 2015, Serra hand-applied Paintstik and a grainy compound called **silica carbide** to the surface of each print to achieve a dimensional surface that almost becomes a relief sculpture.

- How does Serra's color choice affect the way you interpret his prints?
- What nontraditional art materials could you use to create a drawing or painting? Think, for example, of things you might find in your kitchen or yard. What could you use to create smooth, fluid marks and what could you use to create an interesting texture?

## Responding to *Richard Serra: Prints*

In response to Richard Serra's exhibition, write a concrete poem inside the silhouette of one of his prints. First, draw a large outline of the shape you see in the print. Next, write your response to the shape inside your drawing, making sure to fill the entire space. To start, consider the following prompts, or create your own prompt!

- If this were a place, what kind of landscape would it be? Who lives on this world? What do they do?
- Describe the shape as if it were a sculpture. What do you see and how does it look?
- Imagine you are moving through the print. Describe your experience.
- How do you respond to the print? How does it affect you physically and emotionally?

## Glossary

(Please note that these are simplified definitions of complex processes.)

**Lithography** – A traditional printing method in which an image is drawn on the surface of a smooth stone plate using a water-repellent material (like oil or wax). When the stone is dampened with water, an oil-based printing ink will stick only to the original drawing, which can then be transferred onto paper.

**Etching** – A printing method in which a smooth metal plate is coated with an acid-resistant substance. An artist removes parts of this substance, then submerges the plate in an acid bath. In the areas where the acid touches the surface of the plate, a rough texture is created. These rough areas retain ink, which can then be transferred onto paper.

**Screenprinting** – Also called "silkscreen," this process uses a fine mesh as the structure for a stencil, through which ink can be applied to paper.

**Paintstik** – A mixture of pigment, oil, and wax in block form that Serra applied in multiple layers to his prints.

**Silica Carbide** – A compound of silicon and carbon used for abrasives, ceramics, bulletproof vests, LED lights, and on the surface of some of Serra's prints.