

# The New York Times

## An Enigma Wrapped in Formica 'Richard Artschwager!' at Whitney Museum

By HOLLAND COTTER

The artist Richard Artschwager, who is having a second career retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, had his first in 1988. And the timing of it, everyone said, was genius.

Mr. Artschwager was then in his mid-60s — he is now 88 — and had already been on the New York scene for three decades, with art that was, at different times, identified with Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism, without landing squarely in any category. Part of his cachet was that no one quite knew what to do with him, this artist who made furniturelike sculptures covered with wood-grain Formica and paintings that appeared to be done with smudged soot. People called him an enigma so often that the word stuck to him like a middle name.

But in 1988 the moment of clarification seemed to arrive with the surfacing of a new art trend called Neo-Geo, a kind of Pop-Minimal-Conceptual mash-up with French theory thrown in. Mr. Artschwager's actual link to the young artists involved — Peter Halley, Jeff Koons and Haim Steinback among them — was tenuous, amounting to little more than a shared use of certain materials (plastic, rubber) and a sardonic take on middle-class culture. But when the market wants history to sell, any connecting dots will do.

Mr. Artschwager was suddenly a patriarch, and here were his progeny.

His present Whitney survey, emphatically titled "Richard Artschwager!" arrives without such packaging and positioning, though there's no question that the artist has pertinence to things going on today. His use of Formica to introduce faux-naturalism to sculpture is not so different from the way a young artist like Wade Guyton uses computers and inkjet printers to produce faux-paintings.

Both artists draw on technological innovations to step back from art, circle around it, and step in close again from another side, where there is no faux; all is authentic. Surely it's no accident that Mr. Guyton's first Whitney retrospective coincides with Mr. Artschwager's second.

The question is how necessary this second retrospective is, considering the number of other worthy American artists who still languish for comparable attention. The show doesn't add all that much to what we already know about Mr. Artschwager, who has had substantial New York gallery exposure over the past 20 years, of late with Gagosian Gallery, which has a way of getting museums to do its bidding. Anyway, the show's here, and Mr. Artschwager remains an interesting subject.

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The basic facts of his story are by now familiar. His parents were European immigrants. His father, a botanist, was from Germany; his mother, an amateur artist and designer, from Ukraine. The family made some big moves when Mr. Artschwager was a child: two extended stays in Europe followed by a relocation from Washington to Las Cruces, N.M. His early adult life would have a similarly unsettled rhythm.

Although deeply interested in art, he studied biology and math at Cornell University, leaving halfway through to join the Army in World War II. Wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, he recuperated in Europe and married there. Once back in the United States he wrapped up his college degree and moved to New York City to study art, supporting his family with a series of day jobs, as a baby photographer, a bank clerk and finally a furniture maker.

In the late 1950s his painting and drawing were good and strange enough to land him a few shows and decent reviews. A 1960 drawing titled "Road to Damascus," the earliest work at the Whitney, catches the offbeat flavor of his work then and to come: in it a tiny, blurry figure of man in a black coat sits behind a table as white and wide as a tundra while his eyes explode.



**Richard Artschwager!** "New Housing" (1964), part of a retrospective at the Whitney. Credit Richard Artschwager, Jason Mandella/Private Collection

That same year he made his first sculpture.

Inspired, according to his own account, by a cartoon he saw on television, he hammered together a big stack of plywood boards and called the result "Portrait Zero." The piece, which weighs hundreds of pounds, dangles from the ceiling at the beginning of the Whitney show.

After he'd gotten this bit of improvisation out of his system, he produced more sculpture, now with a furniture maker's skill and finesse, and he started painting again, bringing experimental materials to both mediums. He added Formica, a decorative staple of American kitchens, to sculpture, and started painting on Celotex, a rough-textured fiberboard used on ceilings as acoustic paneling.

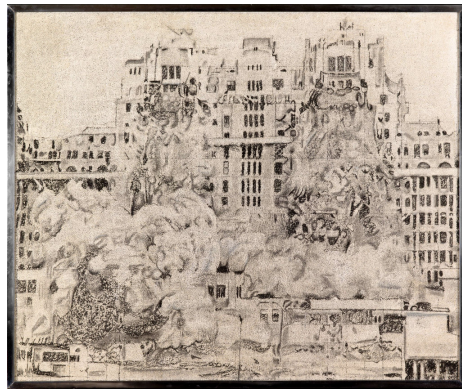
He also dropped a cold-call note, with slides, to the Leo Castelli Gallery, the city's leading showcase for new art. And like other surprised artists before him, he was snapped up for

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a group show that included Lee Bontecou, Roy Lichtenstein, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol. He remained in Castelli's protective commercial custody for 30 years.

In that context, as in all others, early and late, his work stood out for its blunt, mute weirdness. A 1963 sculpture called "Portrait II" was shaped like a bedroom dresser but it had no drawers and had a sheet of Formica in place of a mirror. The two facing seats in "Double Dinner," from 1988, are covered with rubberized horsehair, another favored material. And the table in the 1993 piece "Table Prepared in the Presence of Enemies" looks like a low-rise guillotine.

Violence is implicit in a lot of Mr. Artschwager's art, which may be the most intriguing thing about it, the element that gives bite to what would otherwise pass for Magrittean whimsy. The Whitney show, organized by Jennifer Gross, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Yale University Art Gallery, does a useful job in bringing this strand forward, both in the sculpture and in the Celotex paintings.



Richard Artschwager's "Destruction IV" (1972), acrylic on Celotex with metal frame. Credit Richard Artschwager, Photograph by Jason Mandella

With its scored, bumpy surface patterns Celotex insures that any image painted on it will appear broken up, as if viewed through static or caught in the process of disintegration. In 1972 he used it for a series of seven paintings derived from sequential photographs of the demolition of an Atlantic City hotel. In the end the building comes down in clouds of dust, though it seemed to have been made of dust to begin with due to the atomized texture of the paint.

Like Warhol, Mr. Artschwager, in his work, casts an avidly noncommittal eye on most of life, including politics.

In 2002 and 2003, with Sept. 11 still haunting the news, he painted three identically framed head-shot portraits: of a smiling, plump-faced Osama bin Laden; a blank George W. Bush; and himself, his face grim and thin. Each painting looks cracked, creviced and soiled, as if just dug up from rubble.

The other work in the gallery with these portraits — including a melty 2004 sculptural cross that seems to have been made by Mr. Softee — is strong and creepy and funny enough almost to justify a survey that covers a lot of familiar terrain. The very latest

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work in the final gallery doesn't cohere in the same way but does give something new: a burst of bright color in a 2007 landscape painting of the American Southwest and in a bristling, canary-yellow sculpture of an exclamation point that brings over the span of the past.

Almost from the start of his career Mr. Artschwager has been best known not for furniture-sculptures and paintings, but for what he called his "Blps," abstract lozenge forms, shaped like the uprights in an exclamation point and usually black. He would place dozens of these, in the form of reliefs or stencils or decals, inside and outside museums, for viewers to track down or come across by accident. You can spot several throughout the retrospective, and many more downtown, outdoors on the High Line in the vicinity of the Whitney's future home.

Mr. Artschwager has said that the "Blps"—pronounced blips—had just one purpose: to make us pay attention to what was around us. In the 1960s, when Conceptualism was just starting to move art out of museums and environmental work was rare, the "Blps" felt clever, upbeat, trippy. But a lot of history has happened since, and that's not necessarily the impression they make anymore. On the one hand, they suggest viral brand advertising; on the other, they feel sinister in a "see something, say something" way. Almost 50 years on Mr. Artschwager's art is still doing its enigmatic thing.