

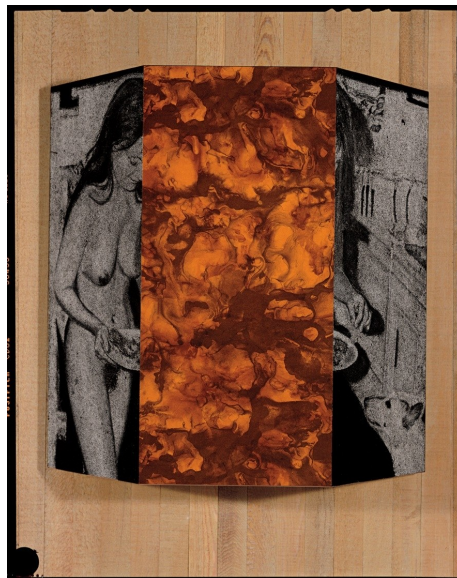
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Time Warp

A Richard Artschwager retrospective.

By Peter Schjeldahl



Artschwager's "Triptych (With Nude) (Diptych IV)," from 1966.

Art Courtesy Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection / ARS, NY

Sometimes you forget how good certain living artists used to seem. That's "seem," rather than "be," because seeming is art's job and its measure. Why should the early work in "Richard Artschwager!," a retrospective (with a frisky exclamation point) of the American artist, at the Whitney Museum, seem so powerful, and most of what follows it so frail? Artschwager, who remains active at the age of eighty-eight, has lost nothing in the way of talent, skill, or ambition since the nineteen-sixties, when he amazed the New York art world with superbly crafted paintings and sculptures in eccentric mediums: plywood, Celotex (a nubby fibreboard, familiar from cheap ceiling tiles), rubberized horsehair, and, especially, Formica, which he

chipperly called "the great ugly material, the horror of the age." The work blended the essences of the big movements of the sixties—Pop art, minimalism, and conceptualism—with a sweet frisson of outsidership, reflecting the late-blooming Artschwager's jump into art from his first career, as a furniture-maker. His guileless sophistication channelled the American optimism, know-how, and audacity that crested during the Kennedy Administration. So there's one answer to my question: circa the early seventies, the magic evanesces, through no fault of Artschwager's, but because the world darkened. The same fate befell nearly all American artists who had been blessed, and cursed, with stardom in the sixties.

Artschwager was born in Washington, D.C., in 1923, to a botanist father and an amateur-painter mother. When he was eleven, the family moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where his father took a teaching job. Artschwager studied science and mathematics at Cornell University before and after the Second World War, in which he served as a soldier, and was wounded, in the Battle of the Bulge. He settled in New York in 1949. There he had art instruction from the French painter Amédée Ozenfant and worked first as a baby photographer and later as a maker of fine furniture. In the show, three semi-abstract works from early 1962, based on Artschwager's sketches of the New Mexico desert, are gawky and unpromising. But, from later that year, "Baby," a grisaille painting of a photograph of a happy infant, in acrylic on Celotex, explodes with aesthetic mastery and prescience. Its marriage of painting and photography coincided with that of Andy Warhol's silk screens, and it predated Gerhard Richter's blurred photorealism. Its blunt presence, in a gleaming aluminum frame, also announced the keynote self-evidence of minimalism.

That same year, when Donald Judd and other minimalists were still formulating their sculptural revolution, Artschwager created such paeans to simplicity as "Triptych," a hinged wall piece that frames sheets of off-white Formica. He then turned to variations on furniture forms, including the classic "Description of Table" (1964), a block about thirty-two inches high by about twenty-six inches wide and deep, bearing flat representations of legs and a tablecloth. In the court of the art world, such elegant mockeries earned Artschwager a status somewhere between that of jester and duke. Both honorifics were confirmed by the site-specific works that he began making in the

late sixties: the multitudinous "blps"—his made-up word for uniform lozenge shapes, mostly small, and painted or sculpted in various materials, which appeared at random on museum and gallery walls or, graffiti-like, on the street. The blps became logos of a post-minimalist will to make aesthetic experience engulfing. They startle, with charm.

Early on, Artschwager declared his intention to create "useless objects." Accordingly, there is a mirror that doesn't reflect, books without pages, drawers without bottoms, and elaborately carpentered crates that contain nothing. Best of all are the vast gray paintings, on Celotex, of house-beautiful interiors, copied from early-seventies magazines. Their architecturally scaled descriptions of décor are decorative in character yet wonderfully grim. They both exalt and ridicule the mania for conspicuously tasteful consumption that for some constitutes the allure of art. The gesture is not mean. (Artschwager's satirical bent is always gentle.) But the pictures' crunching matter-of-factness casts a pall over the vanity of expensive overrefinement. Also excellent, from the same period, are the large, rough-textured paintings, from newspaper photographs, of the demolition of the old Traymore Hotel, in Atlantic City: blowups in more ways than one. In desultory grays that represent halftone printing, the building looks to be shuddering, then spills parts of itself into rising dust clouds. Taking destruction as a topic for creation is the sort of mental gymnastic that defines the Artschwagerian.

Remember Jimmy Carter and "malaise"? The President, in his famous speech, in 1979, didn't actually use the word, but he diagnosed the condition: a national loss of faith. He was right, while unwittingly prepping many for the "What, me worry?" afflatus of Ronald Reagan. The art world tracked the Reaganesque turn with a suddenly booming, albeit shallow, enthusiasm and market for neo-Expressionist painting. Formerly triumphant avant-gardists, including Artschwager, were marooned in time. Only the most obdurately consistent stylists—Roy Lichtenstein, for example, and the more dogged minimalists—were undeterred by the crisis. (Andy Warhol shrugged and embraced a new definition of art: making money.) Defensive denunciations of "hype and fashion" were heard. But, in culture, successful hype is prophetic, and fashion is destiny.

Like other boundary-breaching artists, Artschwager was reduced to seeking, in vain, rules not yet broken. The immense knowingness known as postmodernism erased the horizon of conceivable novelty. Artschwager's standing in the art world became less that of a maverick and more that of a mascot, who could be counted on for such japeries as a phonograph record with only the sound of a ticking clock on one side and that of a dripping faucet on the other, which accompanied the catalogue to an exhibit of blps in the Netherlands.

But his inventiveness increased as its impact declined, in riffs on furniture that became phantasmagorical. "Double Diner" (1988) combines, in one unit, bristling with rubberized hair, two chairs and a table whose top is gouged with abstracted designs of plates and silverware. The Alice in Wonderland-esque "Door II" (1992) is a Formica-faced mockup of a door, nearly nine feet tall, that leans into a corner of a gallery in the Whitney, its tapered false perspective suggesting that it rises sky-high. Once you have liked that—and how could you not?—you are done with it; there is no lasting effect. A try-anything-and-hope-for-the-best quality vitiates later works, including muddled forays into political commentary: a huge, cartoonishly wavering Christian cross, for example, and dull portraits, on Celotex, of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. Similarly feckless are would-be homages to past art, such as a garish 2004 copy of a painting by Édouard Vuillard.

But circle back, at the show's end, to its triumphant beginning, to see how the workings of an eccentric creative outsider can mesh with the gears of history. Artschwager's discovery of beauty in tacky industrial materials ratified the deep program of Pop art: reconciling Americans to American culture, as it happened to be. And his wizardly way with frames and framelike constructions distilled the minimalist vision of art works as internal framing devices for the space around them, displacing aesthetic experience from the object's glamour to the viewer's self-consciousness.

Artschwager remains a cherishable talent. In old age, he has been painting and drawing from his memories of New Mexico. Those pictures evince a rugged authenticity. Unless you rate your friends by the relative majesty of their position in the world, Artschwager won't have ceased to command, as he deserves to, your affectionate regard.