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## Richard Serra's Curved Sculptures Beg to be Caressed

February 02, 2009 06:39 PM EST

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**Richard Serra** is acclaimed as one of the foremost living sculptors in the world. Between his permanent exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and the 40 year retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan, I've come to love and hate how his magnificent metal creations are displayed.

On my 2005 visit to Bilbao, Spain, Richard Serra's sculpture was unimpressive at first glance. The entrance to the room the Guggenheim built to house his monumental rusting metal undulations was nearly blocked by the massive wall of steel the first piece presented. Fortunately, our guide insisted we climb to the next floor to stand on the balcony projecting over the gallery.



From there I got a true picture of the size and complexity of the pieces that filled the huge space below me. That's when the magnitude of the show hit me. The room was designed in the same computer program as the sculpture, with each curving line of the room complimenting the waves of the art, the whole a yin and yang of symmetry, with one ending and the other beginning in a seamless artistic wonder. It was visually stunning!



I raced back down to the gallery entrance and wound my way into and through the eight sculptures, twisting, ducking, sometimes running, sometimes inching into the heart of each, until I was consumed by them. It helped that there were classes of school children running and yelling through them also, experiencing art with all the innocence and exuberance youth possesses, and spends so freely. We had unfettered access, touching, pounding and clapping our way around the big hall, the cacophony of sound and its echoes trilling and ringing, ululating in the bowels of Serra's visions. It was a remarkable experience.

Back home in the Hudson Valley I learned that there were Richard Serra sculptures at Dia:Beacon, and nothing but I had to go there to see them. I brought friends to share the experience, for what I remembered of the Guggenheim show I was sure would infect them. Unfortunately, I felt sad when I saw the tiny crowded room the Serra's were in, and sadder still when I caught sight of my friends' faces. The overall, impressive hugeness of the work just wasn't there. The geometric factory walls could barely contain them. I halfheartedly circled and entered the sculptures, suffocating in the claustrophobia of the tiny space while my friends looked on. We left disillusioned.



I had the opportunity to go to Bilbao again last Spring. I stayed in the new five star Silken Gran Hotel just across the street from the Guggenheim, feeling as if I could almost embrace the titanium wave of Frank Gehry's genius from my upper floor window, while a more-colorful-than-I-remembered huge flowered topiary, called Puppy, looked up at me as if to ask could I come out to play. Inside, the Serra's were as impressive as I remembered, but the mood had changed. It was a staid visit, with a 'most proper' guide whose penchant for organized lectures corralled us into a stiff knot tighter than her bun. There were no school classes, no students to free the art from her stifling words. I bristled at her restraining monotone in the face of such colossus.

Suddenly I was a teenager again, running, yelling, pounding on the sides of the sculpture, trying to liberate our group so they could truly experience the awe and wonder of these massive, but somehow feminine steel curves which begged to be caressed, massaged and sung to by a lover, not simply observed. It was a moment of unbridled joy. Then I was back in my 58 year old body. I was scolded and admonished by the staff, but envied by my fellow travelers. Most importantly, I was happy to again be surrounded by sculpture that has to be experienced by the young, or young at heart, to be understood.



*Last year Serra's sculpture was displayed in Paris for everyone to touch & enjoy*

Two seasons ago the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan had a retrospective of 40 years of Richard Serra's work throughout the facility, but principally in the new second floor gallery they built especially to house his magnificent sculpture. House? I should say tame, for the angularity of the gallery, without a balcony to show off the 'ribbon-candy' and 'figure-eight' curves of the new works only served to minimize the artist's brilliance. Sadly, it was an enforced "hands-off" exhibit, as if I could harm a forty ton piece of steel with my touch.

To see Richard Serra's monumental sculptures, go to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Experience them as they were meant to be experienced. And, when you go, I dare you to touch them.

*interior Richard Serra photos copyright Bilbo Guggenheim Museum*

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*Richard Frisbie, FOOD Correspondent:*

**RICHARD FRISBIE** is published twice a month to Gather Essentials: Food. It is a food junkie's take on growing, raising, preparing and - above all else - eating food. Together we'll explore the trends, addictions, equipment and regional specialties that make up the sometimes mundane and sometimes sublime cooking and dining experience. You can keep up with my other postings and Gather activity by joining my Gather network -- I look forward to hearing from you.

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**BIO** - Richard Frisbie writes culinary travel articles, is a columnist for his local newspapers, and is a regular contributor to the many Hudson Valley, Catskill Mountain and other regional New York publications. Online, he writes frequent articles for EDGE publications, GoNomad and Travel Lady, as well as Gather.

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## Comments: 22

[Kimberly Ripley](#) Feb 2, 2009, 7:17pm EST

Fascinating work. I know little about art, but I do know what I like! As always your photo essays serve to inform and entertain!

[Dorine H.](#) Feb 2, 2009, 7:42pm EST

Oh, the delight of stayng young at heart!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 3, 2009, 4:54pm EST

You are so right, Dorine. I went to a meeting at a friend's house and all the chairs looked too soft to sit in, so I plunked down on the floor. She told everyone else who came to please be seated, or throw yourself on the floor like that 12 yr old over there. (meaning me) Sometimes the body fails me (like when I tried to get up off the floor) my my heart is still willing.

[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 3, 2009, 4:58pm EST

I'm hardly an art critic, Kimberly, but presentation counts for a lot. MOMA and Dia Beacon really ticked me off with their "Do Not Touch" policy. Even the two in the garden at MOMA were untouchable! The sculpture is so sensuous it really begs to be touched, but the guards followed me around, in and through each of them to protect the 40 ton steel plates. ARGH!!

[Dorine H.](#) Feb 3, 2009, 5:19pm EST

Ah, how you'd love a museum in Philadelphia called the Please Touch Museum. It's aimed at little kids, but hey, let's all stay young at heart!

[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 3, 2009, 5:38pm EST

I'm all for that - thanks Dorine!

[N. L. D.](#) Feb 5, 2009, 9:23am EST



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[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 7, 2009, 11:42am EST

Thanks Lisa - that never occurred to me. You inspired me! I clicked on the art gallery link in the ads next to the article and sent a link to this. We'll see if he likes it or not.

[Gisela S.](#) Feb 8, 2009, 5:12pm EST

Richard - this was a marvelous read. Fred and I have (amongst our many other places on the "bucket list") Spain to visit. I do hope this exhibit will still be there when we arrive.

I love interactive art. One of my favorite displays was the "fireflies" by Yayoi Kusama at the Phoenix Art Museum. My

youngest and I giggled our way through that tiny LED lit space, wondering at at the marvelous adventure the artist had created there.

[Mariana T.](#) Feb 19, 2009, 1:05pm EST

Richard, I totally loved this and can visualize you running around those sculptures - I would have been right with you and I'm sure Mr. Serra would not have minded as he probably did the same !!! I love art - it inspires my soul and when I go to Europe again- not sure when, of course, but it's in the plans, I will go here and think of you!!! Thanks so much for this experience which I felt through your words - which are as always powerful and creative!!!

Thanks for the recent comment on the hypertufa article. I know that you would enjoy creating these - it reminds me of making bread in a big way! check out the links - esp the video.

Again, thank you for sharing Richard Serra's lovely works - the pictures are awesome!!! Salud

[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 19, 2009, 1:31pm EST

Thanks, Mariana - I'm sure I'd be chasing you through the sculpture - it is too alive to staidly watch it from a distance. Thanks for the kind words.

FYI - I just published an article called "Greening up small spaces" for elsewhere on the web. I'll post it here on gather after a suitable time.

[Mariana T.](#) Feb 20, 2009, 1:36am EST

Richard, just let me know through a comment and I'll be right here - I don't want to miss any of your posts Ever!!!  
Salud

[Mariana T.](#) Feb 20, 2009, 1:36am EST

Check out my recent videos when you get a chance, by the way! Salud

[David C.](#) Feb 21, 2009, 6:01am EST

nice capture of this sculptor's work here. how does the Guggenheim there compare overall with other top museums? it's one I've always wanted to try.

[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 21, 2009, 1:42pm EST

Hey David - The Guggenheim is visually STUNNING - inside and out. Outside are fountains, reflecting pools and a wreathing mist envelopes it every hour - all on the banks of the beautiful river. Inside is the same shape as the outside - it isn't a box with a weird Gehry shell! I really like the Bilbao museum the best. (The fact that they have a top chef and a Michelin starred restaurant there is a real PLUS. In case you haven't seen this:

[Bilbao Spain Gastronomy Tour 2005](#)

[Barbary Chaapel](#) Feb 22, 2009, 4:03pm EST

I would have loved running through there, too.

[Richard Frisbie](#) Feb 24, 2009, 1:08pm EST

It really was a GREAT experience, Barbary.

[Melanie B.](#) Feb 25, 2009, 3:31pm EST

Wow that is very awesome. I bet it was a great experience for you.

[David K.](#) Mar 1, 2009, 12:48pm EST

Very interesting. I definitely need to get to Bilbao.

[Kathryn E.](#) Mar 2, 2009, 11:45am EST

My husband was at the Bilbao exhibit around the same time. Maybe you two crossed paths....

[Richard Frisbie](#) Mar 2, 2009, 12:08pm EST

Thanks David - GO!

Kathryn - I don't know. Show him my photo here, or just ask if he saw a crazy man running through the exhibit yelling and pounding on the sculpture. I'm sure he'd remember if he did (smiling still)

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