

Esplund, Lance. "Exploring Spaces and Life's Continuity", *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2011.

Note: This was a review of three exhibitions: Richard Serra, Dana Saulnier, and Jenny Saville.

### **Richard Serra: 'Junction'/'Cycle'**

Gagosian Gallery

555 W. 24th St., (212) 741-1111

Through Nov. 26

A trip to Egypt will forever alter not only your sense of sculpture as it relates to space, but also your sense of art's relationship to the larger world and to nature. The enormous tombs, pillars, Sphinx and pyramids don't occupy space so much as they carve, delineate and activate landscape and sky. In Egypt, art and nature, unified, extend each other to the point that it is nearly impossible to imagine that one could exist without the other.

Walking through and among the snaking 14-foot-tall passageways of Richard Serra's two enormous steel sculptures "Junction" (2011) and "Cycle" (2010), I was reminded of monumental Egyptian art. And it didn't hit me until I was deep within "Cycle"—which triggered memories of exploring caves and Egyptian tombs and of traversing the steep, slim causeway to the king's chamber inside the Great Pyramid at Giza—that the sculptor has traveled to Egypt.

Mr. Serra (b. 1938) has long been a master at twisting and torquing large, flat, leaning steel plates into mazelike journeys, intimate and epic. But with "Junction" and "Cycle" he has surpassed all trappings of his earlier sculpture, in which form and scale can sometimes bully as much as complement their surroundings.

At Gagosian, Mr. Serra's long, sinuous, narrow passageways and towering walls of streaked-burnt-orange steel planes are evocative of natural crevices, fine oiled hardwoods such as burl walnut, and nearly every color of sunset. The artist sculpts not just with steel but with light, air and space, which breathe and swell, moving inhabitants through dark, muscular channels to lighted clearings. The experience is primal, visceral, magically disorienting—an opportunity to challenge your sense of sculpture and space.

### **Dana Saulnier— Night Tides: Water, Flesh, and Sky**

First Street Gallery

526 W. 26th St., #209

(646) 336-8053

Through Oct. 29

The Romantic spirit is alive and well in this compelling exhibition of eight writhing, meaty, earth-toned oil paintings by Dana Saulnier, all roughly 7 feet by 8 feet. According to the artist, this group of "night paintings" began when a loved one lost her memory and "our relationship collapsed into darkness."

In these expressionistic paintings, inspired seemingly by Gustave Courbet, Eugène Delacroix, Peter Paul Rubens and Albert Pinkham Ryder, Mr. Saulnier (b. 1958) merges figure, landscape, serpent and sea, all fragmented to near-abstraction. Each painting is complete and unique, but feels part of a larger violent cycle exploring energies and dynamics personified. Trees, human limbs, fish scales, leaves, flesh, stones, feathers and fire converge into unnameable, shadowy mass, threatening the barriers of their canvases. Claiming to work through his loss, struggling with devouring and generative forces—a world simultaneously interior and exterior, claustrophobic and overwhelming—Mr. Saulnier grapples with the darkness. As light wanes, tactility is heightened.

### **Jenny Saville: Continuum**

Gagosian Gallery

980 Madison Ave., (212) 744-2313

Through Oct. 22

A popular genre of portraiture exists in which family snapshots are the source and subject. These often doting and sentimental photograph-based paintings (of the children at the beach, in the backyard or on parents' laps) make suitable gifts (if not readily saleable artworks) for aunts, uncles and grandparents. But their appeal generally ends there.

With this recent body of work, British artist Jenny Saville (b. 1970), a new mother herself, has given this genre a high profile. Ms. Saville, à la Lucian Freud and John Singer Sargent—and flying the flag of feminism—has made a flourishing career out of painting illustrative, exaggerated and fleshy, obese female nudes. Through grotesque presentation (and vilification) of the nude—a traditional subject that explores the nature of the sacred and the profane—Ms. Saville is mistakenly believed by many to have turned Western art's

objectifying "male gaze" on its head.

In "Continuum"—a show of 13 large portrait paintings, drawings, collages and studies after Old Masters—she has applied her loaded brush toward the subject of her own nude children and pregnant body; and has appropriated the surface aspects and/or figures of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Velázquez, Willem de Kooning, Picasso and Alberto Giacometti.

A fraudulent sense of earnestness and of Modernist discovery permeates these confused, formless pictures, in which fake "pentimenti" and searching "expressive" flourishes are applied razzle-dazzle to Norman Rockwell-style portraits.

Take just a passing look at this empty show and it will be clear that Ms. Saville has taken the genre of photo-based family portraiture not to a new high, but a new low.

By [LANCE ESPLUND](#)

—Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.

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