

The Presence of Absence

The Regardless Sculptures of Richard Swanson

Ben Mitchell

Note: This essay first appeared in the publication accompanying Richard Swanson's solo exhibition, "*The Regardless Series*," mounted by the Holter Museum of Art, Helena, Montana, in 2005. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the author and the Holter Museum of Art. Our thanks to the artist and to the staff of the Holter Museum for their invaluable assistance.

I wish I could have seen it. Richard Swanson's *Balance and Bounty* (1996–1997), ten large-scale dervish-like shapes constructed of straw and wire floating across the serene emptiness of a Northern Rockies foothills field outside Drummond, Montana. *Balance and Bounty* is a work simultaneously mobile and yet solidly rooted to the earth, each piece delicately poised on its narrow earthward end. The whole of the effect (sadly, I only know this from the photographs)—the broad sweep of land, arcing bowl of sky, and the utterly surprising presence of those sculptural forms—is elegant and profound, a potent visual mediation on space, landscape, gravity, animation, energy, and human presence.

I first met Richard in late 1999 and during subsequent studio visits over the years I learned much about his working methods, the challenges he accepts, his willingness, indeed his courage, to experiment with materials and forms, to often fail, and yet to press on. And then there was the day—easily three or four years ago



Installation view: Richard Swanson, Regardless Series, Holter Museum of Art, Helena, Montana, 2005. All works © 2004–2005 Richard Swanson. Photograph by Kurt Keller.

now—that I walked up those dark, rickety stairs to his spacious Helena studio and found not the works that I had become familiar with and loved: the vessel-like forms fashioned out of barb wire like *sonar* (1998) and *radio* (1997); *dryfall's* (1995) Rocky Mountain maple branches gracefully flowing outward from the wall; the lovely straw and wire constructions *Balance and Bounty* and *Prairie Totem* (1995); rope and copper constructions like *argentina* (1998). Rather, what I discovered that day on the studio's north wall were stark, flat, flowing black shapes cut out of roofing felt, a group of enormous, sweeping graphic forms like line drawings marking out the evocative interplay of opposites: the black presence of the felt against the negative white space of the wall's surface. And on the



Richard Swanson, Balance & Bounty, © 1996 Richard Swanson, a collaboration with the Montana Transport Company, Drummond, MT, Fall 1996–Fall 1997.

studio's floor there was a group of wildly colorful metal sculptures, stripped-down forms far more industrial-like and abstract in their approach and form than any of his earlier works.

At first I didn't much like this new work—and I was honest with Richard that first day. How much we hold on to the familiar, cling to the proverbial. Those new works were vaguely frustrating to me, yet somehow stayed with me in the following months, mysteriously compelling. So boldly different than anything Richard had made before, a virtually complete departure in approach, form and aesthetics by an accomplished mid-career artist. That took guts. Now, these years—and hard work—later, we arrive at this moving and fully accomplished body of new work: *Regardless*,

Rambunctious, and *AbraKadabra*. This work—with of course its roots sunk firmly in those first experiments—is marvelously and deceptively simple. Comprised of a single material, welded aluminum, and an almost monastically limited economy of means, in this new work there is an essential visual vocabulary of form: basic rectilinear shapes all connected by elegantly curved lines in space.

I think of these new sculptures as ink drawings, Swanson says. *The gallery is the space in which these three-dimensional drawings exist. I also think of them as jazz. . . .*

That's no mean boast. In these new works the encounter, the *experience*, of sensing three-dimensional form as a drawing is acute, and yet at the same time disconcerting in the most delightful of ways—like sensing music in the aura of Rothko's saturated colors. There is a sense of the *presence of absence* in these works, a delicious tension between the seen and the sensed. And the interplay of weight and airiness, of animation and poise, of vitality and delicacy, and the simple apparition and resonance of beauty is achieved through an astonishing sense of play, of joy.

The trails that Richard followed to arrive at these works include, most obviously, Alexander Calder's mobiles and large-scale stabiles. Richard says, *Calder is the artist whose work has defined everything that I find admirable in sculpture—innovation, a sense of play, simple color and form, an ability to create forms that hold and transform the space around them*. There's an important key here: the transformation of the space that surrounds us. As you walk around, in and through *Regardless*, *Rambunctious*, and *AbraKadabra*, the physical forms change relationships, the visual field is expanded and contracted (like breath), rhythms



Richard Swanson, Abrakadabra, 2005, painted aluminum, 156 x 177 x 91 inches, © 2005 Richard Swanson. Photograph by Kurt Keller.



Richard Swanson, Regardless, 2004, painted aluminum, 160 x 150 x 107 inches, © 2004 Richard Swanson. Photograph by Kurt Keller.



Richard Swanson, *Rambunctious*, painted aluminum, 149 x 156 x 96 inches,
© 2005 Richard Swanson. Photograph by Kurt Keller.

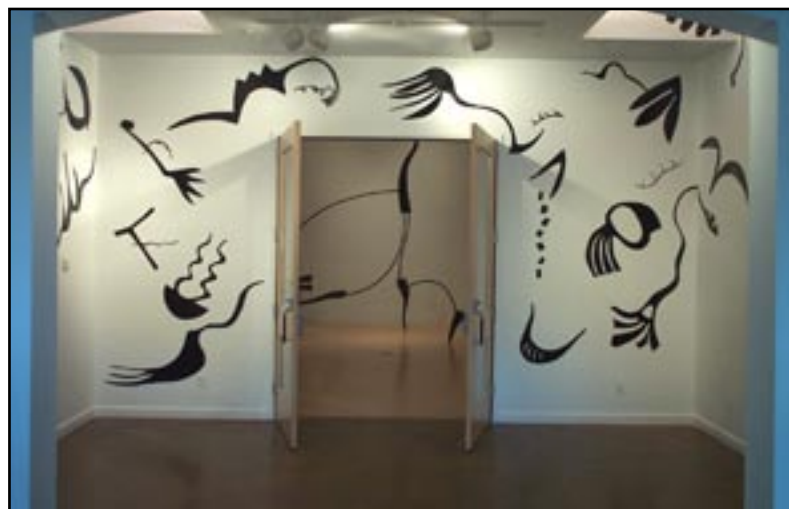
are established and then altered, replaced by new variations, visual riffs. Jazz. For over a decade, Richard has collaborated with dancers and choreographers. In these new works it is as if the pieces have become the dancers. Balance is so subtle and precarious that the viewer's movement among the works—the slightest nudge of the body, a change of weight on the gallery's wooden floor, a breeze from an open doorway—creates vibration that travels out along the lines of the work and, the farther out the vibrations travel, the more movement is magnified. There's the presence of music again, the accruing of visual and physical relationships into something unexpected and new.

In Richard's work there are also strong echoes of Joan Miro's surrealistic and spontaneous lines and shapes, of Stuart Davis's sculptural abstractions and innovations, and, importantly, Matisse's late paper cutouts which we know were also mimetic of dance and jazz improvisation. *I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself*, Claes Oldenburg said. In a fundamental way, Richard's new work is exactly that, a constructed space, a gathering of experience and possibility from life, from nature itself.

One of art's enduring mysteries—like nature's—is that it is always *apart from* us, yet somehow art retains the remarkable and ineffable power of drawing us into its separate world. Walking among these free-standing sculptural pieces and through the open doors to the adjacent gallery walls from which the *Jambalaya* cutouts extend toward us, we are invited into a new place, a place where, Alice in Wonderland-like, the two- and three-dimensional worlds shimmer and oscillate and dance, ultimately creating the sense of a new dimension, a dimension of the eye and the body made welcome by the delightful artifice of the art.



Potter and sculptor **Richard Swanson** has exhibited his work widely, including shows at the Plains Art Museum, Boise Art Museum, and the Eiteljorg Museum. His large-scale works have found permanent homes in many locations in Montana—including the Engineering and Physical Sciences Building at Montana State University, Rocky Mountain College, Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, and the Holter Museum—as well as at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. His figurative clay vessels have homes in such prestigious institutions as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs in Washington, D.C. His works can be seen at www.richard.swanson.com, www.ferringallery.com, and www.guild.com.



Richard Swanson, Jambalaya, one wall of whole-room installation, Holter Museum of Art, Helena, Montana, 2005, painted aluminum, © 2005 Richard Swanson.