

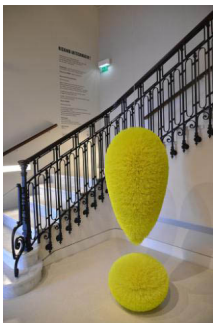
The exhibition is organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York in association with the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, and curated by Jennifer Gross, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for curatorial affairs at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

The NMNM's presentation is organized by Director Marie-Claude Beaud. Following the presentation of Richard Artschwager at Whitney Museum, New York, the exhibition travelled to the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and the Haus der Kunst, Munich.

Artschwager is a special creature and this retrospective exhibition makes that very clear. Brought up by a botanist father and an artist mother, he was taught from an early age to observe the world, to really look at it. He went from studying science to becoming an artist, but on the way, because life can sometimes decide for us, he became a baby photographer and cabinet-maker for a living. It was his wife who encouraged him to try his hand at art and this decision landed him in New York.

The first stop is the media room where there is a wonderful piece by one of Artschwager's dear friends, John Baldessari on display.

After viewing a film about Richard Artschwager, we were invited to join a guided visit by its curator, Jennifer Gross. She began by standing next to his yellow, life size *"Exclamation point"*.



This retrospective exhibition clearly shows that Artswager's number one goal in creating his work was 'pleasure'. He posed new questions and with every day spent in the studio, he found answers to them. The idea was to suggest new perspectives, allowing us to really look at the world, not take anything for granted and change the way we look at common objects by creating an unexpected place for them. We never cease to be surprised. He was very young in spirit and his work shows it. *Exclamation Point* is a very happy piece in its bright yellow, yet the surface is bristly... We are left to fill in the blanks.

There is an anecdote regarding a concert he attended in his youth in the company of his first wife, where she looked at him and said: “Shut up and listen!” In time, he took that idea and turned it into: “Shut up and look!” This is a central theme driving his work. He wanted to restore our viewing experience by creating ‘paintings we can touch and sculptures we can see’.

Continuing on through the exhibition we are shown some of his early formica pieces. This is the moment when he could no longer see the beauty in the furniture he was making. He discovered formica and began to build pieces that represent objects such as his "*Description of Table*" (Note that the title is not "Table") which exists in the space of a table while being only a suggestion of one. The same applies to his "

*Portrait II*"

which is a chest of drawers with a yellow mirror in which one cannot see oneself, with drawers that don't open. Again, it is a suggestion, existing in our pre-conceived notions of space. Later he created pianos for instance that were not playable and quite useless. With regard to these he made the analogy that if we think about something long enough, it becomes interesting... In the same way as if we look at something long enough.

One room is entirely devoted to his blps. They are mostly black (although they can also be white on black) elongated dots that are found in surprising places. His friends were instrumental in helping him place them all over the city, either in the form of stickers or spray-painted and, in time, some are even three-dimensional. These shapes, on a ceiling or a wall will define that space and make us aware of the wall, making us really look at it, and then the other wall and so on... We are prompted to observe the world differently, more attentively.

Much in the same way, his wonderful draftsmanship is used to lead our emotions. Because perspective is more difficult to control when using colour, 80% of his work is in black and white. This was also because he wanted to keep emotion out of the piece. He merely desired to create

the idea while allowing the viewer to experience the suggested emotion. This he was very successful at doing once he found Celotex, which is a construction material that has a very rough texture to it. In his *Destruction* paintings, a series of pictures depicting the demolition of a building (the Traymore Hotel), there is that moment of breathlessness as the texture suggests to us the breaking apart of the structure in space. Our emotional reaction allows us a very personal interaction with the work. It has somehow become ours because as Artswager once said: “  
*The art is what happens to the spectator by prior arrangement of the artist*”.





His series of a *room containing six objects: a door, window, table, basket, mirror and rug*, launched what would eventually become a body of work of almost one hundred pieces. He drew these items in a room from all sorts of different vantage points, again reminding us to adjust our perspective. This period is very playful as can be seen by the large door that is in the corner of the room.

This period, however, leads him into a direction where he comments on the world we have created for ourselves and how afflictive it can be, haunted by the mundane and domestic scenes such as in

*Lunch for Two*

, a piece that clearly represents fear of confrontation. The table and chairs are all attached with little space to sit and the surface is bristly. We ask ourselves if we really want to be invited to that lunch!

As we continue through the exhibition we are able to appreciate the development throughout

the artist's life. The impression we have is that the lines between our understanding of reality; our notions of space and dimensionality are blurred, and he does this meticulously. He draws us into his works even through the use of his frames. The splattered formica installations on the walls are filled with humour as our constant participation in the work is solicited.

This retrospective is exemplary of Artswager's words when he said: *"Art is thought experiencing itself"*.

**Beatrice Sybille Pockock** *February 19, 2014*