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**Artschwager's  
Sleight of Mind**

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# RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER'S Sleight of Mind

*Over the last 25 years, this enigmatic artist has produced an extraordinarily diverse body of work. Is the art world finally catching up with him?*

BY STEVEN HENRY MADOFF

Richard Artschwager is offering suggestions. You couldn't really call it answering the question. One-line answers, he says, give him claustrophobia. He likes his paradoxes near to bursting. The words "sometimes," "possibly," and "maybe" fall from his sentences like ripened fruit.

And so, when he is asked why he is so little known by the art world at large, he says that maybe it is the writing. Maybe it is all of those references to his "Dada-tooled furniture," his "Duchampian wit," "hybrid Surrealism," and "burlesqued Minimalism." Maybe it is this confounding heap of adjectives, which seem to work at cross-purposes, he says—because his work has certainly been out there long enough for people to judge. Since 1963 he has shown with Leo Castelli. He has had more than 50 one-man and 200 group shows internationally. And now, more than ever, his work seems to be all over town.

Mary Boone staged a mini-retrospective of his '60s furniture constructions in October 1986. That same month, at the big exhibition of "Neo-Geo" artists at Ileana Sonnabend's gallery, people started talking about the way the work of the much-discussed young artist Meyer Vaisman had *something to do with Artschwager*. The group shows mounted up. And this month brings the Big Bang, the Whitney Museum of American Art's 25-year survey of his paintings, sculpture, and drawings.

So why has this longtime provocateur, this Duchampian dean of Conceptual art, this supposed progenitor of the current generation been so shadowy a figure amid his peers? And why is it that Richard Artschwager is suddenly considered one of the most significant—and brilliant—artists in town?

The "A" train goes right to the corner of South Oxford Street in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. The Oxford Nursing Home is next door to Artschwager's place, a former funeral parlor that must have given the

old-time convalescents a reason to get philosophical. The artist, it turns out, is rather philosophical himself. A tall, gaunt, bespectacled man with thinning gray hair, he is taciturn and gracious, oblique and introspective. For nearly two months, we have met in the small basement office of his three-story white clapboard house as the leaves fall outside and then the rain and then the snow.

Upstairs, the household scene continues: the everyday hubbub of his daughter Clara, who is two years and eight months old; her mother, Molly O'Gorman, 38; a maid; and two studio assistants. Downstairs, this conviviality is a distant sound. A soft whistling comes from Artschwager's lips like a puncture's slow leak, and then, with a slight southwestern twang, he speaks.

"You have to remember," the artist says, "I spent half of my life as a manufacturer of furniture, as a petit-bourgeois businessman. . . . And then I had the fire in my workshop over on 25th Street in the winter of '58. I was thrown into heavy debt. I was *impaled* on the situation. A time you reach for gods and devils and try to figure out something new to do."

With his life a bust in his mid-30s, Artschwager recalls, he seemed to reach back to his past. But what set him on his course?

Richard Artschwager was born the day after Christmas, December 26, 1923, in Washington, D.C. His Prussian father, Ernst, was a plant pathologist and geneticist. His mother, Eugenia, of Russian-Jewish descent, studied painting at the Corcoran Gallery of Art and before that at the Munich Academy. She was a Sunday painter, doing portraits in the style of Oskar Kokoschka; bright, brushy canvases of family and friends.

Three years after Richard, the Artschwagers' daughter, Margarita, was born. Then, in 1933, Ernst Artschwager contracted tuberculosis, and the family packed their Model-A Ford and moved to the hot, dry vistas of Las Cruces, New



The artist in his studio. The ultimate subject of his work: celebration.

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Mexico. Theirs was a typical existence of a certain European milieu—intellectual, cultured, ethical. The children were brought up to contribute, and science seemed the obvious way to do it for the young Artschwager.

After an unremarkable career in public schools and the New Mexico Military Institute, Artschwager enrolled at Cornell, his father's alma mater, in 1941. Continuing in patriarchal footsteps, he majored in chemistry and minored in mathematics, planning his future as a plant biologist.

But in 1944, his plans were abruptly altered. He was drafted into the army, attained rank as a first lieutenant in intelligence operations, and served throughout the European theater. He stayed on through '46 to finish his tour of duty as a courier and then as a counterintelligence officer, passing among the Baroque plazas and opulent rental palaces of the Rathaus quarter and the Ringstrasse in postwar Vienna.

Through friends there he met Elfriede Wejmelka, a young clothes designer, and they married soon after. They stayed on past Artschwager's discharge until Elfriede's papers came through, traveling back together to New Mexico in March of '47. Artschwager was determined to finish his degree in chemistry. Yet one day, sitting in his parents' garden, his wife remarked that he didn't have the temperament of a scientist but of an artist. "The die was cast," he recalls. "It was an impulsive, instant recognition."

Back at Cornell for the summer and fall, he did complete his A.B. in science, yet his last college term included two art electives: painting and life drawing. Moving to New York that winter after graduation, he followed the advice of his former drawing instructor, who had once studied with the French geometric painter Amedée Ozenfant. Using G.I. Bill funds, he went down and enrolled at the expatriate's school in a pair of old carriage houses on 20th Street between Second and Third Avenues. But the experience was downbeat at the time. "I was going through culture shock being with a bunch of artists," Artschwager says. "I wasn't an Ozenfant groupie, and I was probably the only student that

he didn't invite to visit his studio."

In 1950 Artschwager borrowed money and bought an old Federal-style building in the Chelsea section of Manhattan on West 22nd Street. His sister and her husband, a doctoral student at Columbia named Arthur Kay, moved in, too. The place needed renovation, and the two husbands put together a woodworking shop in the basement. Artschwager was working a series of unconnected jobs through the early '50s—bank clerk, lathe operator, baby photographer (until he got fired for shooting too many bad negatives).

So what was this baby photographer without portfolio to do? Money was tight and he had no expectations of making a living as an artist. And then Kay's relatives hired them to make some furniture.

That was the start. Perhaps it would be best to say that the '50s were preparation for the move from personal history to art history. He made a great deal of furniture in those days. First small production work in fine woods—dressers and chests and tables in mahogany and walnut, teak and rosewood. After a while he was working with a crew, Arthur and Margarita having moved on to academic jobs in Arizona. And he started supplying Paul Secon's Pottery Barn, a home-furnishings retail outlet, with a quintessential '50s item: a boomerang-shape desk.

In 1954 Artschwager's daughter Eva was born. Two years later, his father passed on. His business, like the go-go economy of America in the postwar decade, was on the rise. In the year of his father's death, he met Warren Rubin. Rubin had seen the boomerang desk. He had his own retail business, with two stores at the time (now 32), called The Workbench. "I met Dick and it was an instant meeting of minds," Rubin says. "We had a wonderful time, and, you know, our deal was made on a handshake. We were together 24 years."

Yet not far into those years a decisive change occurred. The loft fire in '58 was merely the breaking point for a pressure that was building. Although Artschwager eventual-



Table with Pink Tablecloth, 1964, 25 1/4 by 44 by 44 inches; a 3-D box wrapped with pictures.

SATCHI COLETTION, LONDON

ly opened a new shop, it would never be the same. He began drawing again, going to studios to sketch from the model. "The furniture had lost its essential connection for me," he says. "Since I didn't know the people I was making the pieces for, all of those drawers and dressers became repeat work. They became versions of versions. I started seeing them more as designs, more as representations."

As Arschwager turned his interest increasingly toward art, the "furniture energy," as he puts it, "began to stagnate. I cannibalized the whole furniture system. The workshop was an arena where I was more likely to see the invisible art there. . . . Thinking about Duchamp's use of manufactured objects, you could say that I was making my own readymades and dragging them out of commercial use into art."

He saw that all of his furniture could be transformed into images. But to carry off the transformation, the viewer's reaction to the object would need to be delayed. The normal reaction to furniture as something *useful* would have to be arrested so that the viewer would see the piece as if it were a picture. And since, in a marvelous Dadaist gesture, he originally meant his furniture objects to be placed in people's homes just like their other furnishings, the work became an element of collage in which the room, the object, and the viewer were all part of the picture's field.

Collage was a key concept to Arschwager. He was particularly interested in Braque's paper cutouts done around 1914. There was a sympathetic image in them: Braque often used small swatches of paper rendered to appear like wood. They were simulations that Arschwager understood intuitively as precisely the device he needed to cause a delay between the normal wooden presence of the furniture and its artistic representation. After all that time working in the shop with beautiful planks of walnut, Arschwager comments, "The wood began to disappear, leaving behind its image."

There was a sleek man-made material that did just the same thing. Formica had been around the shop, and laughingly he called it "the horror of the age." Formica is a memory of wood. It can be laminated onto a three-dimensional object, but the Formica-covered surface is still a fine veneer of reproduction, still a picture. Formica allowed the artist to formulate what might be called the basic Arschwagerian paradox. "Sculpture is for the touch," he says. "Painting is for the eye. I wanted to make a sculpture for the eye and a painting for the touch."

In a notebook from the early '60s, he begins to feel his way through the puzzling, contrarian concept for the first time: "The table can be set next to [sic] or manipulated in some other fashion. The way it is arranged, however, it is more a sequence of four pictures (the sides) identified and also symmetrical on a center [sic] vertical axis. These pictures are placed in series, the end of the last joining the beginning of the first so they can be seen at any particular point. The 'look-

ing at' is always there as a potential."

In one of Arschwager's best-known pieces of the period, *Table with Pink Tablecloth* (1964), the potential is fulfilled. The laminates of Formica mimic wood and cloth and the shadowed space beneath the table. In a glance, its two-dimensional image is thrust into the realm of sculpture—a Minimalist box wrapped with pictures. The table, cloth, and shadow are, after all, a physical thing, a cube neatly sealed in fitted sheets of plastic. Yet the trompe-l'oeil darkness peeking out from that pink "fabric" is done well enough to slow you down. The eye flickers over the shapes, and the connection is instantaneous: you see that what he's done is exchange shadowy space for its representation, and then you see the table and the abstract cube, the illusion of space and the fact of solid matter at the same time. The double take is amusing, provocative, and absolutely deadpan.

Critics have approached the work with less humor, even with rude dismissiveness. In 1968 John Canaday, then chief art critic of *The New York Times*, gave the artist a real roasting: "Mr. Arschwager doesn't stand a chance. . . . If there's anything here that is pointful, ornamental, original, inventive, or interesting in any way, it escaped me." Other writers have been hardly more forgiving. Calling his pieces aggressive, hostile, and forbidding, they have been "frustrated by Arschwager's constant frustration of commonplace meaning," in the words of Whitney curator Richard Armstrong. And his work *is* frustrating. There is something claustrophobic about the sense of space sealed off beneath his table. His furniture pieces can be seen as emptied of usefulness and filled with precise, impassive volumes.

Yet the artist is heated in his reply to the charge, arguing that "there isn't any bittersweet concern about tables you can't sit at, chairs that are too tall. That cruelty isn't mine. The work is not for torment," he says, looking tormented, "but for imagery."

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As striking as this imagery must have been to its first viewers, its domestic subject matter was suddenly in vogue in the early '60s. There was a prickly point in those years when Artschwager's work seemed to brush up against Pop art even before the movement got established. Take the Oldenburg incident.

According to Artschwager (and Claes Oldenburg assents), the two met through dealer Richard Bellamy around 1962. Bellamy had given Oldenburg room at the Green Gallery in New York to construct a version of his installation "The Store." That year Oldenburg hired Artschwager's furniture shop to construct a piece called *Lingerie Counter*, done in black Formica with a mirror on top; '62 was also the year that Artschwager made his first pieces with Formica, among them *Triptych*, which used "mother-of-pearl" laminate in wood frames to represent a mirror. "I gave Oldenburg about a dozen sketches of chests of drawers," Artschwager recalls. "They were going to be hybrids of his approach and mine. This was in October of '62, and it was his suggestion."

The following year Oldenburg went out to Los Angeles and made what would be called "A Bedroom Ensemble." The work was considerably more manufactured in feeling, and he used Formica furniture in the piece. In January of '64 Oldenburg exhibited the ensemble at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. It came as a blow to Artschwager, who felt that Oldenburg had taken some of his thunder, and the two exchanged some harsh words. Needless to say, their collaboration never took place.

In the spring of '64, Artschwager showed for the first time at Castelli, and Ivan Karp, who was then the director of the gallery, thought he was doing the artist a favor when he linked him with Oldenburg by telling critic Brian O'Doherty of *The New York Times*, who repeated the assertion in print, that Artschwager had built some of the bedroom set, which was not the case. The whole thing was taking on the form of a Shakespearean comedy of errors.

The appearance of Oldenburg's bedroom ensemble just at the moment when Artschwager was establishing his Formica turf, combined with O'Doherty's misinformation, drove the two artists apart. "It's just unfortunate," Oldenburg says now, "that I crossed his track at that moment. I didn't regard Formica as an end in itself. I know for Richard it was a special material."

Of the '60s, Artschwager says, his work did of course share the zeitgeist. "It was the time of the rapture of materiality," he explains, "in place of the spiritual." All of

the vanguard artists of the day had taken their cues from the work of Johns and Rauschenberg, particularly a piece like Johns's bronzed beer cans of 1960. But while the Pop artists saw this movement as leave to reevaluate commercial culture and high art, Artschwager latched onto the use of mundane objects for entirely different purposes. It reflected his own situation: his relation to furniture making, which was becoming more and more abstract and which consequently began to focus on "the business of looking."

Leo Castelli recalls, "My first impression of Artschwager was incredibly good. His Formica work was grist for my mill. It had a Duchampian wit and an element of Minimalism that really comes before the Minimalists. Of course, Artschwager was not generally understood then. He was an outsider, very distant and often misinterpreted."

The future would be no different. How ironic it was when Artschwager's constructions, with their hard-edge forms and smooth industrial surfaces, were taken up again in the mid-'60s, this time under the auspices of Minimalism. Yet the resemblance was still misleading.

"Artschwager's work was definitely cold in a hot time," Richard Armstrong remarks. "It's *much* colder than Judd's. Even when they appear to be nice homey things, Artschwager's stuff is covered with these slightly repugnant plasticized photos of patterns and wood—they're Formica. They were physically unappealing when physicality was paramount. And while the Minimalists claimed their work was devoid of literary meaning, Artschwager's were *full* of meanings. He seemed to be in trouble," the Whitney curator concludes with a grin, "in every direction."



Building excitement: *High-Rise Apartment*, 1964, 63 by 48 by 4½ inches. On close inspection, the facade warps and wobbles.

Through the early '60s Artschwager appeared to be setting teeth on edge with considerable regularity. If he was out to make a sculpture for the eye, as he said in his primary paradox, he was equally fixed on creating a painting for the touch. And just as he discovered the material for his sculpture in his own front yard, so it was with his painting.

"In '61 I found this photo in a trash can around the corner from where I lived," Artschwager remembers. "It was a snapshot of people on the beach, you know, and what I saw I had there was a painting very much like a Paul Cadmus. I wanted to do it straight, free of sardonicism. But it wasn't resolved, I didn't finish it."

"So I did some drawings for a while. I started using Celotex, this pressed paper compound with a coarse surface, which I first saw at the Art Institute in Chicago in some pieces by Franz Kline. I was interested in Kline anyway, and

the Celotex seemed perfect because it had this roughness, like the look of pinhole photographs. You see, it replaced the human touch that the photo didn't have," Artschwager continues. "I wanted something that had the feel of drawing, the character of painting, and introduced the look of mechanical reproduction."

Painted in shades of gray, like the photographs he drew from, the work had a coolness that vied with that of his Formica pieces. They were about the business of looking, all right, but business was not exactly picking up. Donald Judd wrote of these gray paintings from photographs, "The idea is dull." At Castelli's the work was not selling, and, as the artist states summarily, "I was really dead in the water."

Bellamy helped out by buying a few of his works, but Artschwager had to keep food on various tables by continuing to manufacture them, along with the rest of his non-art furniture, for The Workbench. By the mid-'60s increasing pressures at home had become practically unbearable. "It was too much being a husband and father and worker and artist. Elfriede felt left out. In '66 I moved out and rented a loft with the painter Bob Stanley. Then I moved back home. And then in '67 I moved out again. It was bad."

Trouble seemed to be taunting Artschwager from every direction, yet his art, which continued to slip through the categorical nets of the critics, was entering its classic phase. It appears more than coincidental that this turbulent time in his life occurred at a moment when he began to refine a strategy for his art that he called "the truncation of the senses." And he explained his means succinctly: "Stasis, silence, and separation."

"First you chop sound away from the field of experience," he says, elaborating on his art-making process. "Next, you see that the image doesn't move. So it separates out. The picture becomes a disjunction. And the key to the sublime for me is this elimination of some of the senses to get a strengthening, a *burning* of the other senses. Something usual is left out so that the rest is heightened. And that's what I'm trying to do: give people beauty through abridgement."

"Office Scene," he says, referring to a painting from 1966, "gave me a feeling of old movie theaters, of empty ballrooms. Quiet. And what it's loaded with is the *absence* of 500 people." All of Artschwager's paintings have that eerie quality of something missing, while what's there buckles and shifts: his 1964 *High-Rise Apartment* looks stable enough and utterly still until you notice that the balconies and windows are doing funny things—warping and practically oozing down the building's facade.

Artschwager's subtle disjunctions were also an attack on the predominant philosophy of painting in the '60s. His play with warping surfaces denied the much-touted flatness of the picture plane, which was the gospel according to critic Clement Greenberg. Of course, he physically denied the principle that the canvas was a really flat thing by using

Celotex, with its whirls and crevices. Yet beyond this he denied something more fundamental.

"No art we've seen," he argues, "has been purged of illusion. In fact, an assault on illusion stinks of a fundamental misunderstanding of what it is to be in the world. Why the hell do paintings exist? To honor experience. And the retina itself is a picture plane fraught with picture matter, with objects and space—and space is a notion we work at all the time in going, coming, turning, entering, and so forth. It's all part of the fabric of seeing and knowing."

Artschwager's paintings explored an exhaustive series of spatial possibilities to slow the viewer's experience. There were the "Weaving" paintings begun in '65, which took the viewer down into the repetitive warp and woof of a swatch of pictured fabric. There was the funny trompe-l'oeil dent in the bare surface of *Upper Right Corner Hit* (1969), which showed a "high degree of flatness," the artist says, deadpan, "without making a perfect flatness." And then Artschwager made a literally disjunctive space in his paintings, breaking them up into panels and slightly overlapping the views so that the spectator looking at *Chandelier II* (1976) has to keep readjusting his point of view as the scene

gets weirdly, hypnotically fractured.

By the late '60s Artschwager's affiliations were spreading without deepening. First identified with Pop, he was included in two major exhibitions, "Primary Structures" at New York's Jewish Museum in 1966, which was the first in-depth survey of Minimalist art, and, in 1969, "Aspects of New Realism" at the Milwaukee Art Center, which showed the works of Photo-Realist painters—another category that Artschwager predated and



**No brushing required: five rubberized-hair objects from 1969. The strange, fuzzy material is meant to simulate blurred vision.**

whose shimmering, precise copies of urban settings had little to do with his ideas of abridgement and disjunction.

Though he shared affinities with each of these movements, his use of everyday subjects was typically his own. His motivation was and remains so simple, so "hopelessly Pollyanna," he remarks, that all of the complexity of his work is thrown into yet another light. "The subject," he begins one morning, "is that everything is precious. To look at something longer than is usual is to stop and identify it, to identify, I hope, what it truly is. Now, to identify something is to celebrate it, to make it come alive in a way that it's never seemed before. There's no enigma in my final intention. Celebration makes clear my motives: to savor the moment, to make the best of what we have."

Yet savoring the moment may have been a personal test for Artschwager, as his paintings and sculptures got shuffled from one art camp to the next, mostly leaving him off between stations. Still, true to his dictum, he chanced upon the good in his difficult situation. With his art not yet supporting him, his furniture business a steady and enervating distraction, and his marriage doomed, Artschwager found a new cause for celebration.

In November 1968 he went to the University of Wisconsin for a three-week junket as an artist-in-residence. There he met Catherine Kord, a 24-year-old graduate student and wife of a faculty art professor. Subsequently she dissolved her marriage and moved to New York right after she completed her master's degree in '69. The following year Elfriede left New York to live in Las Cruces, and their daughter, Eva, went out to attend New Mexico State.

"It was a time of energy," Artschwager recalls happily. "Cathy stirred me up, and it looked like I had to make a big decision. My work was beginning to sell a bit and the furniture shop either needed a big investment or it was gonna close down. I let it close. Responsibilities fell away. I could just be an artist. And in '70 Cathy and I bought a cheap place upstate in Charlotteville, New York. We married two years later. I didn't have a workshop from '70 to '75. I mostly drew and painted, and I read a lot—symbolic logic, Austen, Trollope, Jules Verne, popular histories, Foucault, and some Heidegger. For 15 years up there I lived peacefully like a species of winter vegetable," he says—"like a turnip."

Three projects in particular stand as landmarks of those years in the country: the marbleized Formica pieces, the "blp" series, and the wonderfully bizarre rubberized-hair objects.

"I was getting pretty far into the idea that what I was after *wasn't* one way of looking at things. So I started asking more questions. You see, before I wanted to get at the issue of recognizing the object as a three-dimensional picture. But with the work for the Castelli show in '76, I wanted the sculptures to be covered with a picture of abstraction."

Increasingly distorted in scale and covered with a swirling, marbly pattern, Artschwager's objects of the mid-'60s were playing harder with the idea of what it is to "picture" something. The Formica sheets plunked down on the surface of these constructions were, paradoxically, pictures of an abstract pattern that was mass-produced—plasticized photographs of abstraction, you might say. And since this particular species of abstraction was now just another palpable object in the world, didn't that mean that it wasn't really abstract at all? The answer to that question, which is obviously yes *and* no, fit Artschwager's purposes perfectly.

Yet the artist was only beginning to fire up his conceptual jets. He was looking at his paintings more closely, as if they were under a magnifying glass, and he was thinking about each separate mark as a minute object in the picture's field—just as he had envisioned his furniture objects as single elements placed in a home setting. Artschwager spent the winter of '67-'68 out at the University of California at Davis drawing landscapes and figures in a notebook, "trying," as he put it, "to understand the principles of painting a little better. I kept reducing my pencil strokes until I had a few generic marks, and I played around with them while I was planning for a show in the school's gallery. Finally I got to the point where I honed in on one mark in an ideal scale." What he had come up with was the "blp."

Why call it a blp? The artist explains that he was thinking



Almost Minimal: *Upper Right Corner Hit*, 1969, 23½ by 30 inches, shows "a high degree of flatness," the artist says, "without making a perfect flatness."

back to the Second World War. As an intelligence officer, he was used to looking at radar screens blinking with tiny blips across luminous compasses. He has talked about his "blp-matrix" as a "network of points in space . . . embedded in a dynamic landscape of scale and proportion." Yet when asked how he came upon this peculiar spelling, his analytic side gives way to characteristic whimsy: "Well, there's this character in the Pogo comic strip who spoke without vowels, and it just kind of hit me that the word would sound crisper without a letter—crisp like the image itself on the radar screen."

And when asked if any artistic sources played a role in the blp's creation, he adds: "There's the idea in Fauve painting that all the brightly colored strokes form a field that the eye sweeps across. That's pretty much related to the blips on the radar and the way I hope my blips define your location in a space filled with them. But what I was *really* thinking about," Artschwager says with a grin, "was picked up right away by Castelli. 'Ah,' he said, 'it's Kilroy! All the marks, like Kilroy Was Here.'"

One critic described the blp's shape as a "racetrack oval," and there's an aptness to the phrase. Artschwager's newest invention was yet another playful run at the question of how we see—and it was, in a sense, a gamble. The artist seemed to have veered drastically from his original idea of understanding the principles of painting. Yet Artschwager was simply being Artschwager. He couldn't resist turning painting into something for the touch again, only now it was on a more intensely scrutinized level. The blp was a hybrid form, taking some of the physicality of sculpture and combining it with the most primal aspect of painting—making a mark.

The series found an immediate model in a strange group of 3-D punctuation marks that Artschwager had done two years earlier. These were physical signs for what might be called literary notions of space: the way a sentence's ellipsis points stand for continuation, the period for a point of ending, the exclamation point for a sudden disjunction, and so forth. Yet for all the logical sources to be pieced together from the vantage of hindsight, the actual appearance of the



Artschwager with Molly O'Gorman and their daughter, Clara, in the living room of their three-story white clapboard house in Brooklyn—all part of the artist's idea "to savor the moment."

blps was unprecedented. Placed in galleries, in museum installations, and on building sites, they're among the earliest examples of site-specific Conceptual art—yet another hat that Artschwager could wear. So it came as no surprise that his indefatigable inventiveness would make him an even more elusive figure. And he wasn't done yet.

Artschwager had another idea in the back of his mind. He could use the blp to point out another aspect of perception, and do so with typical deadpan humor. The artist had come across a material made of rubberized hair, one of the stranger products of industrial imagination, and now he covered blp-shaped forms with it, intending to simulate a single aspect of looking that usually goes unnoticed.

"I wanted to make something that pays attention to the way things look on the periphery of sight, things that are blurred," Artschwager says. "So I put together those blps minus the one element of focus." And if, by the artist's definition, they were specimens of beauty through abridgement, they celebrated the essential beauty at the heart of Artschwager's work: the power of the human mind to perceive space, forms, volumes, surfaces, and patterns and to imagine their infinite universe of possibility.

There is more than a little truth to the statement that Artschwager's years upstate transformed him into an oversize winter turnip. For five years, his fast-moving, heat-seeking imagination seemed to lose its goal and slowly, languorously cool. It was a time, Artschwager implies, when to warm himself he drank. "Pretty much, I stayed to myself, since I'd never really hung out in the art world. Anyway," he concludes, "for a few years, from '70 to '75, I was pretty much asleep."

Yet it's a remarkably contradictory period in Artschwager's career. Recognition began to happen on a grander scale. He was visible in galleries and museums from New York to Los Angeles, from Canada to France, Italy to Switzerland to Sweden. Writers were hard at work, mostly shoving Artschwager into ill-fitting cubbyholes, but not a year went by without reviews and articles about him show-

ing up in the *Art Index*.

And then in 1975, for no apparent reason, he awoke. All the density of his speculative mind seemed to pour forth in a new project, an extensive suite of drawings plainly called "Basket Table Door Window Mirror Rug." The drawings were a diagram, in a sense: 53 variations on the possibilities twisting and replicating in Artschwager's hybrid universe. They made it clearer than ever before how closely Artschwager had considered the Surrealism of Magritte, who liked to change the stuff that things are made of—painting a dove of stone—and who also painted countless forms floating in space, just as the blps appear to be.

Artschwager's cleanly drawn little room was a theater, and the drama unfolded all of his ambitions about space, about reorienting the viewer's attention. Those six simple objects became the artist's summing up, his humble *excelsior* in ink on paper. Combined and recombined, they collapsed in on themselves or were wildly elongated. The series was a celebration in which his "rapture of materiality" has a life of its own, where his domestic objects exchange substances like so many costumes. "I like to think of my art as things for the home that are, well, not at home," the artist says one day. "That's my definition of Conceptual art—an art of weak relations. The thing has got to seem unstable in a stable setting if it's going to make you stop, reconsider, look." The drawing suite went one step further. It made the setting as wildly unstable as its furnishings.

After this, Artschwager seemed to go back on idle. The rest of the decade rolled along on the small charge left over from the drawings. His large construction in Formica and vacuum-metalized Plexiglas, called *Six Mirror Images*, repeated the subjects of the drawing suite, and he played it out from '75 through '79. The paintings he produced are rigorous, but again they repeat the ideas of his past.

When the first big survey of his work opened at Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 1979, titled with appropriate ambiguity "Richard Artschwager's Theme(s)," critic Roberta Smith complained, "Although the show's contents span 17 years, practically the artist's entire career, they look as if they could almost all have been made at any one time."

"What can I say?" Artschwager answers. "Those were quiet years. Cathy worked on a novel and I was just doing my thing. Still, I've got to say that what Roberta wrote goaded me. I don't think she's got a leg to stand on. Since 1980, I've done a lot of new work. I made some changes."

Yet Smith's comment did hit inadvertently on a cogent personal point: in a way, Artschwager hadn't changed at all. The restlessness filling his drawings, going over and over the same objects, recalled his old belief that there are no essences, only the constant flux of identities and relationships. The early '80s showed that what was true for his art held true for his life as well.



A marriage that culminated in disaster started in . . . .” Artschwager says quietly during our last meeting, the sentence trailing off. The artist’s relationship with Catherine Kord had hit on difficulty in the late ’70s, and the two fell away from each other. Still up in Charlotteville, the artist became reacquainted with Molly O’Gorman, a painter who had been married to Artschwager’s friend John Torreano. In 1984 Artschwager resettled with her in the three-story house on South Oxford Street, where their daughter, Clara, was born the following year.

In the meantime, Artschwager’s work was going through a rebirth. He was financially sound. He had three solo shows in 1981, for example; the one at Castelli offered works ranging from \$2,500 to \$32,000, and they were selling. (The prices have more than doubled now.) The artist began to make objects with new commitment, objects that were a new kind of hybrid involving yet a different sense of space. His formative furniture sculptures made the viewer stand away to see them as pictures, but the sculpture of the ’80s pulls the viewer into the kind of aggressive physical relationship implied in *Tower III* (*Confession*) of 1980 and *Book III* (*Laocoon*) of ’81. Of course, like the old work, they’re still for non-use. Yet the possibility of use, obscure and tantalizing, is mischievously there.

“*Tower III* is an invitation from myself, the ambassador of space, to sit or kneel,” Artschwager says, half joking. “It’s a confessional without the curtain, a phone booth without the glass. It’s a vehicle for private rendezvous without the need for privacy, since what I’m really inviting you to do is *think* about that kind of space and that kind of privacy. What I’m celebrating here is a sacred space transformed by this secular context.”

Celebration and cerebration seem to be one and the same for Artschwager, and new ideas are pouring from his adventurous mind as powerfully as they did 20 years ago. Particularly, there are the big constructions, which are true combinations of painting and sculpture. A work like *Door/Door II* (1984-85) doesn’t sit out in the middle of a gallery the way conventional sculpture does. Its huge bulk holds to the wall, its door-shaped cutouts harking back to collage. They flatten out the image, and they also hold that old allegiance—it seems almost nostalgic now—to Formica as a two-dimensional picture. Meanwhile, the eye takes in that hugely painted wood grain, which “makes the object,” according to Artschwager, “seem more intimately near without threatening the viewer’s space, which is the sweet way illusion works in painting.”

“It’s fantastic, isn’t it?” Leo Castelli says. “You know, there were long periods when Richard needed to be pushed. But now he is doing some of his most lively work. And the new generation—Jeff Koons, Peter Halley, Meyer Vaisman—maybe understands him better than any group in the

past. It’s marvelous to see what an original source they have in Richard and how in turn they’ve made such an incredibly clear context for his art.”

Vaisman agrees. In fact, when I arrive at his studio he is unwrapping a new purchase—one of Artschwager’s vintage rubberized-hair blps. “I find the work totally loaded,” the 26-year-old artist begins. “He’s a bizarre hybrid of so many art movements. But what he’s done is apply his obsessions to the world, you know, to world objects instead of just art objects. All of the art having to do with furniture—by myself, Koons, Haim Steinbach, Ashley Bickerton, John Armleder—it definitely touches on Artschwager. He’s become like a classical artist, and he’s turned Formica into a classical material for us.

“In this least judgmental of times, when all kinds of styles and strategies are being mixed together, Artschwager is remarkably attractive because his work is *so* unjudgmental. For years,” Vaisman says, looking up at that strange, thought-absorbing blp on the wall, “A.’s work has been floating through the art world, offering possibilities.”



*Three Dinners*, 1984-85, 54 by 60 inches, is one of an ongoing series of dinner paintings using this “fly’s-eye view.”

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Artschwager is looking on his new role as a grand old man with his usual distance. “I have to look into what those guys are doing, study up on it. I suppose if I want to know myself, I have to look at their work to see my stuff’s reflections. Of course, on the other hand, I don’t want to think of myself as history because I don’t consider that

I’ve come to an endpoint—the word ‘retrospective’ gives me the creeps. Mostly, I don’t want to get jaded. I just want to stick to what I’m doing.”

We have climbed the stairs to his studio. There is a painting he wants to show me, one of the recent series using color for practically the first time since his student days. He looks out the window when we enter the studio, saying with a smile, “This is about as high up as I’m gonna get,” and then he turns to the painting on the wall.

It’s a picture of a table with two softly drawn place settings. The scene is all in gray but for the plates themselves, done in a golden yellow. They give off a warmth amid their stark surroundings, a sense of welcome strangely enhanced by the odd viewpoint: the viewer hovers over the meal like a spiritual guest.

“The perspective for these things comes out of the six-object drawings,” the artist says. “I get you up with this fly’s-eye view to transpose the scale so you’ve got to hold onto your hat and take a good hard look. You’re way up in the air. But it’s not just about scale,” Artschwager muses. “It’s about human communion, a proposal of that communion. Well, isn’t that what it’s all. . . .” He pauses, goes over to a chair, and knocks on wood—*real* wood, but he doesn’t finish the sentence. Instead he says, “Come on. Let’s go downstairs.” ■