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Part of the Furniture? Richard Artschwager's work is seriously undervalued.

by Meredith Kirk
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Critically appreciated yet commercially undervalued, “people have never known what to do with Richard Artschwager”, says Gary Garrels, senior curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA. “He never really fitted in to Minimalism, and he never really fitted in to Pop. Artschwager was a figure in the cracks, working between the lines.”

Artschwager was born in Washington DC in 1923 to a Prussian father and Ukrainian-Jewish mother but didn't start making art until he was 37, by which point he'd already led an extraordinary life. A mathematics and chemistry major at Cornell University in the early 1940s,

Artschwager interrupted his studies to join the army and fought in the Battle of the Bulge before being recruited as an intelligence officer in Vienna. In 1947 he returned to New York with his new wife, Elfriede Wejmelka, completed his degree, then had a string of diverse jobs: baby photographer, bank clerk and furniture designer. Always drawn toward the fine arts, Artschwager began his artistic practice in earnest in 1960 after he was commissioned by the Catholic Church to design and make portable altars for use on ships.

Despite the late start, Artschwager experienced almost instant success. Leo Castelli's gallery director Ivan Karp swiftly became one of the artist's most loyal supporters, bringing him into the legendary dealer's stable. Artschwager was initially cast as a Pop artist, and was included in a group show at the gallery in 1964 with artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol.

The following year Castelli staged a solo exhibition of Artschwager's Formica sculptures. Then, in 1966, the artist was included in the legendary exhibition “Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors” organized by Kynaston McShine at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Artschwager might seem like a quirky inclusion in Primary Structures—an exhibition credited with establishing Minimalism as a movement. Both works by Artschwager included in the show, *Table with Pink Tablecloth* (1964) and *Rocker* (1964) were representational in that they looked like the objects they depicted: a table and a rocking chair. Artschwager doesn't fit into classic Minimalism as we now think of it—conceptual, non-representational work that conforms to a strict set of codes exemplified by artists such as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt.





Yet the show was more polyglot than we perhaps remember it, including work by other artists whose practice now seems to stand apart from Minimalism, such as Judy Chicago and Robert Morris. "Richard's whole thing was creating work that was a hybrid of everything," says Bob Monk, director of Gagosian Gallery Madison Avenue. "The guy was an absolute polymath."

Artschwager's sculptures, such as *Table with Pink Tablecloth* are Pop in their graphic immediacy but have the structural simplicity of Minimalism. His paintings, often based on photographs found in newspapers, similarly defy strict categorization. Hand-painted in grisaille tones on

rough-textured Celotex panels (normally used in buildings for fireproofing and acoustic baffling) and often presented in frames constructed by the artist, these paintings playfully confront and challenge traditionally held distinctions between painting and sculpture. As the artist himself put it: "Sculpture is for the touch, painting is for the eye. I wanted to make a sculpture for the eye and a painting for the touch."

Artschwager has long received critical attention. Major examples of his work reside in important international museum collections including those of SFMOMA; the Art Institute of Chicago; MoMA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Tate; the Pompidou Center; and the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, to name a few.

"His gallery shows have always been successful, ever since the Castelli days," Monk says. "When you see a European collection that has major works by Rauschenberg, Warhol, Johns, and Lichtenstein, you're almost guaranteed to see an Artschwager too. He never fell out of favor throughout his entire artistic career—which is rare."

Artists also adore Artschwager. Collectors of his work include Ed Ruscha, John Baldessari and Albert Oehlen. Today, "young artists worship at the altar of Artschwager", says Monk. Jennifer Gross, curator of the artist's 2012-13 retrospective at the Whitney Museum agrees: "It's remarkable how his work resonates in studios today. It's crit season at art schools and Richard's name keeps coming up," she says. "He was prophetic in a way about how photography as a medium was going to influence how we experience the world. The questions he asked have become the most important questions for art making today, and his work remains of the moment because of that."

Nonetheless, Garrels adds: "It wasn't like Artschwager was waiting on the sidelines for career recognition. But he was never a star or a household name. The work was a little too complicated to lend itself to that." This ambiguity is one reason why Artschwager's market remains undervalued. Only three works have broken the \$1m barrier at auction. The record, \$1.27m for a 1974 Celotex painting, *Interior with Sideboard 1*, at Christie's in 2007, is not representative of the average performance of his works at auction. Over the past ten years 61 works by Artschwager have been sold at Sotheby's and Christie's for an average of \$193,899.

Major works simply haven't been offered at auction, which explains some of the discrepancy. "With very few exceptions, none of the works at auction would cause you to jump up and say 'this is so exciting,'" Monk says. Many of the best examples of Artschwager's work are already in private collections or museums. The kind of work that might galvanize the market simply hasn't come to auction.

Additionally, there is no catalogue raisonné for Artschwager, who died



in 2013. Prospective buyers don't therefore know how to place works within the scope of the artist's output and how common or rare specific works might be.

Moreover, supply is limited. There isn't a hidden trove of Celotex paintings from the 1960s and 1970s—which are considered the most desirable examples of his work—waiting to be discovered. The artist's estate is very limited, comprising of a small number of later works of relatively low value. It is difficult to envision an opportunity for major market movement given the problems with supply.

Artschwager might yet become a household name. Later this year, SFMOMA will stage a joint installation of Artschwager works from the Doris and Donald Fisher Collection with examples from the museum's permanent collection. A large gallery will be dedicated entirely to Artschwager, showcasing paintings and sculptures from 1962 to the 1990s. "When we bring together works from the museum with those from the Fisher collection there's always an incredible synergy, and that's definitely the case with Artschwager," says Garrels. "He deserves much wider, broader recognition. When you see a group of works together, the universe of Richard Artschwager comes alive. They speak to each other. I think our visitors will find it a great and fresh surprise."

This exhibition aims to reintroduce the art world to Artschwager's work. Whether the increased institutional focus on his work will draw out great examples of his art which are currently in private collections remains to be seen. If so, the market might yet make a leap and prices might more accurately reflect the importance of the artist.

Images:

1. Richard Artschwager. Photography by Ann Artschwager. Courtesy of Gagolian
2. Primary Structures Exhibition Installation April-June 1966. Photo credit: The Jewish Museum, New York/Art Resource, N.Y. © annetrutt.org/Bridgeman Images © 2017 Richard Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
3. Richard Artschwager, Table with Pink Tablecloth (1964). Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago, I.L., USA/Bridgeman Images © 2017 Richard Artschwager/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
4. Richard Artschwager, Interior with sideboard I, (1974) Acrylic on celotex 49 5/8 x 59 7/8 inches / 126 x 152.1 cm (unframed) © 2017 Richard Artschwager / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photography by Rob McKeever, courtesy of Gagolian.