

Yau, John. "In the Desert with Richard Artschwager," *Hyperallergic*, 23 December 2012.

HYPERALLERGIC

In the Desert with Richard Artschwager

John Yau



Richard Artschwager, "Bushes in Orange Field" (2011), pastel on orange paper (all images courtesy David Nolan unless otherwise noted)

"In my beginning is my end." The first line of T. S. Eliot's poem "East Coker" — the second of his *Four Quartets* — came unexpectedly to mind when I returned for a last look at Richard Artschwager's *The Desert*, a selection of pastels along with two paintings, at David Nolan Gallery. Artschwager's mischievousness seems to have slipped into my thinking because I misremembered the line as: "In my end is my beginning." Did I transpose the words because the artist is nearly ninety, and he began working on landscapes in color around 2007, when he was in his mid-eighties? The subject matter of many of the drawings is beginnings and endings as they are played out through the filters of the artist's memory and imagination.

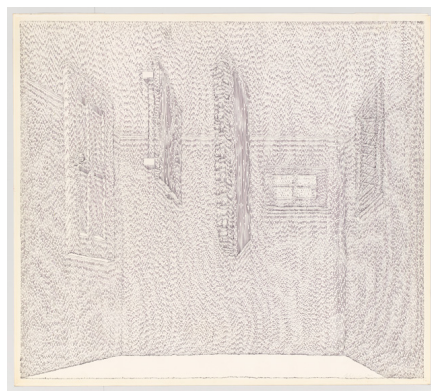
Just when we thought that we knew all there was to know about Artschwager, a late bloomer who long ago was tagged as idiosyncratic, he springs another surprise on us. He does drawings of a desert landscape where a mysterious glow — made of the pastel's colored dust or the untouched colored paper — often lies beyond the horizon. As the curator Jennifer Gross has underscored in her catalog essay "Absolutely Original" for the retrospective she organized at the Whitney Museum of American Art: "This late assertion of color has been a real game-changer for Artschwager."

Artschwager was born in Washington D.C. in 1923. In 1935, his family moved to New Mexico, because of his father's tuberculosis, traveling there by car. Around 70 years later, in 2007,

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Artschwager began drawing landscapes in color, using oil pastel, charcoal, and graphite. Drawing has long been central to his practice, and he is one of the few contemporary artists whose drawings constitute a distinct, self-contained body of work within his far ranging oeuvre of paintings, sculptures, and various hybrid combinations. As he wrote in a notebook in the early 1960s: "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." Knowing this about his intentions, we might inquire of the artist, what is a drawing for?

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Richard Artschwager, "Door, Mirror, Table, Basket, Rug, Window D" (1975), pen and black ink and graphite pencil on board, sheet (irregular): 26 3/4 x 30 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Burroughs; Wellcome Purchase Fund 84.1. (© Richard Artschwager, digital image © and courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art)

According to Gross:

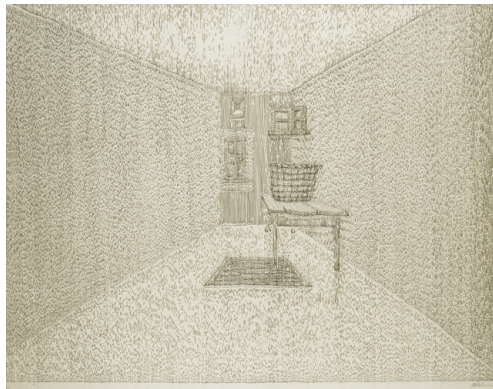
In the mid 1970s he gave up his workshop studio space and returned to a concentration on the familiar and rewarding practice of drawing. Now, within his own working notebooks, he discovered the six subjects that would become his own imaginative obsession; until 1980, the principal drawn and printed protagonists in Artschwager's pictorial/spatial realm would be "Door," "Window," "Table," "Basket," "Mirror" and "Rug."

This is how Artschwager described the moment of revelation:

I flipped to a drawing of an interior, a room I had once occupied, and made a list of the six objects that were in it. I decided to take this as an instruction to make one drawing, then another, and another, and so on. The instruction endured and I "played" those six objects like I play the piano — I guess you could say that it was some kind of fugal exercise.

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I first wrote about these drawings in 1985 (*Drawing XI*, no. 5, January 1985), and, though I have written about them a number of times since then, I don't feel I have exhausted them. This was made clear to me when I saw a drawing at the Whitney Museum exhibition that I hadn't seen before. Done in ink, "Door, Mirror, Table, Basket, Rug, Window D" (1975) is made of vertical rows of short lines and dots — Morse code stood on its head. The drawing demanded the artist's constant concentration as he painstakingly made one vertical row of lines after another, ostensibly moving slowly across the paper until the subject matter appeared. The way "Door, Mirror, Table, Basket, Rug, Window D" hovers so precisely between coalescence and dissipation is both breathtaking and a bit maddening. I find this and the drawing "Door Window Table Basket Mirror Rug #10" (1974) riveting — tours de force, really — and have sought them out each time I have gone to the exhibition.



Richard Artschwager, "Door Window Table Basket Mirror Rug #10" (1974), graphite and ink on paper, 22 3/4 x 31 1/4 inches

It's as if Georges Seurat and Vincent Van Gogh — the two artists who did the most to reinvent drawing in the latter part of the 19th century — meet in these and a few other drawings that Artschwager did in the mid-1970s. Artschwager has used short lines (Van Gogh) to atomize the forms, and then transform them into particles (Seurat), which are on the brink of both emerging into solid presences and submerging into even tinier units. It is a world in a state of change, birth and destruction. I am struck by how much Artschwager's drawing recalls the drawings of Seurat and Van Gogh without being stylistically nostalgic or derivative. He has absorbed and converted their innovations into something all his own.

At the same time, the arrangement in "Door, Mirror, Table, Basket, Rug, Window D" of the door, table, mirror, and rug as four slanting planes hanging from the ceiling suggest that the artist has intentionally suspended gravity. Instead of being static, the lines seem to be ascending and descending, swelling and thinning. At best, the state of equilibrium the artist achieves in the

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drawing is temporary, a necessary fiction, as Wallace Stevens would say. Existing between form and dissipation, as the ordinary things of domestic life do (both in life and in this drawing), I sense Artschwager's recognition of the inevitable, even as he celebrates the minute particulars of ordinary and familiar matter.

Artschwager keeps the same linear structure for each of the six domestic objects, even as he stretches, bends, stacks, and folds them. They are like pieces of a malleable jigsaw puzzle, which the artist can put together, collide or rearrange. Each thing is adaptable and indestructible, a testimony to its persistence. Restricting himself to these six things, Artschwager introduced all kinds of perspectives, including bird's eye views and the underside of the table as it stretches into the distance — it is as if you are on the ceiling or crawling on the floor.

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The connection between Artschwager and Seurat goes deeper than "Door, Mirror, Table, Basket, Rug, Window D" and "Door Window Table Basket Mirror Rug #10." Both artists are particularly focused on the interaction of medium and surface. Seurat drew with conté crayon on a French handmade paper called Michallet, whose textured grid he incorporated into the drawing. He used various techniques to achieve a wide range of subtle effects. In his smaller studies for his large paintings, he scored the surface of the wood panels by cutting grooves against the grain, anticipating Artschwager's use of Celotex in the early '60s to paint on. In the colored panoramic views that Artschwager began drawing around 2006, he applied pastel to handmade paper containing bagasse, the fibrous matter that remains after sugarcane stalks have been crushed to extract their juice. This paper, which is made for the artist by Kenneth Polinskie, comes in various stages of roughness.

In contrast to Seurat, who incorporated the paper's textured grid into the drawing, Artschwager works on highly uneven, resistant surfaces that make mastery of any kind all but impossible. His interest in obstacles seems to have increased incrementally since he first painted on the rough and swirled surfaces of Celotex in the early 1960s. One could say that as the artist approached his own dissipation he has made it more difficult to get an instantly comprehensible image. In paintings such as "Arizona" (2002) and "Self-Portrait" (2003), the dance between the disrupting physical surface and the broken, nearly incoherent image borders on bedlam. Pandemonium has started invading the world and it is only a matter of time before it triumphs.

Both Seurat and Artschwager's formal interest in the interaction between materials and surfaces belies a preoccupation with seeing that does not stop at surfaces, does not align itself with the

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minimalist credo as summed up by Frank Stella: What you see is what you see. Seurat and Artschwager are interested in light and shadow, form and atomization, a world under constant pressure and enduring relentless change. Slowing down time, as one can do in a work of art, is different from trying to make work that is timeless. In different ways, both artists were out of sync with their contemporaries because the surface look of something — whether the image's source was a group of people relaxing in a park or newspaper photographs of the demolition of the Traymore Hotel in 1972 — wasn't enough. Seurat's approach was guided by his study of optics, while Artschwager was informed by his study of biology. They wanted to be scientific and thorough.

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Richard Artschwager, "Six Objects" (1997), charcoal and oil pastel on photocopy, 8 1/2 x 11 inches

In 1997, Artschwager gave his dealer David Nolan "Six Objects" (1997), a drawing over a photocopy, saying cryptically that it showed where he was going. The drawing is largely gray. A room has been divided in half by a vertical band edged with a black line on both sides. On the left side we see four things in a room: door, mirror, table, and rug. The basket and window are missing. On the right side, on the far wall, we see a window-like structure in which color is seen in each of its four rectangles. It took Artschwager nearly a decade before he was able to work completely in color. It seems that he knew that he wanted to leave the room and get into the landscape, which for him was limitless.

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I started out with a misremembered line by Eliot, but, as I kept writing and thinking about the arc of Artschwager's unpredictable career, a line from Basho came to mind: "A lifetime adrift in a boat or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home." Basho's view of life seemed to be echoed in Artschwager's art, his unlikely changes and, as

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he states, his willingness to be instructed by the things of everyday life — rungs, tables, doors, and mirrors, for example.



Richard Artschwager, "Landscape with Leg" (2010), pastel on paper

In the colored, panoramic drawings, that Artschwager started when he was in his early eighties, he depicts an expansive desert landscape that recalls his childhood on the mesas near Las Cruces, New Mexico. In these drawings the artist might overcome gravity, as he does in the exhilarating oil pastel, "In the Driver's Seat" (2008), where a nude figure, in a seated position, floats in the air, with his legs extending through the blue steering wheel he is holding in his hands. Elsewhere, the road stretches toward the horizon or, in some cases, comes to halt in the middle of the desert. In one drawing, at once comic and unsettling, the road extends up from the bottom of the drawing, but stops before reaching the horizon. Beside the road, an oversized naked leg and foot rises up from the ground. These are drawings from the artist's imagination, visions of the possible and impossible meeting on a piece of paper.

At the same time, Artschwager — who has for so long worked on resistant surfaces — will do the opposite: he will incorporate the color of the paper into the drawing. In a drawing done on blue paper he has drawn a horizon line in red and orange that spans the paper's width, slightly above the middle, suggesting a highway in the far distance. Above this line the artist has added a few wisps of slightly paler blue, suggesting a far-off mountain range. Are we looking at a mirage or at insubstantial trails of colored dust? The beauty of this drawing isn't about how much detail he put in — as is the case with the views we see in "Triptych V" (1972) and "Interior (North)" (1973) — but how much he left out. We are looking at something that seems to be disappearing right before us, and the effect is both mesmerizing and breathtaking.

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Richard Artschwager, "Horizon" (2011), pastel on blue paper

In paring his work down to essentials, as he done in a number of drawings, Artschwager enters that late stage of making that we associate with Willem de Kooning and Ludwig van Beethoven, a state of triumph and acceptance. There are differences, of course, but where they are similar has something to do with belief. In another drawing, for example, the paper, with its the straw-like impediments in the surface — is left bare. The sky is a material full of earthy stuff, not a place of transcendence.

As Gross writes in her essay, "In the Driver's Seat' shows a man liberated from gravity, steering himself out into the future." There is a fearlessness and joy to the panoramic drawings that I find inspiring. I am reminded of de Kooning's late paintings, where the pure joy of their making is evident in the fluid brushstrokes and ribbons of paint. The richly colored views of Artschwager's late pastels are also haunting and beautiful — they reveal visions even as they acknowledge that materiality is inescapable. We are both transported and brought home.

Richard Artschwager: *The Desert is on view at David Nolan Gallery (527 West 29th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 22.*

Richard Artschwager! *is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art through February 3, 2013.*