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Richard Artschwager, "Abstraction," 2004, acrylic and pastel on fiber panel on soundboard with artist's frame, 67 x 49 1/2 in. Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.

Texture as Sculpture

Artschwager weaves media with feeling

By Valerie Gladstone

When artists enjoy long lives, their fans reap tremendous advantages. This thought came to mind when looking over Richard Artschwager's new works at David Nolan Gallery. Born in 1923, he has never fit into any category for very long, passing through styles that superficially resembled pop, minimal and conceptual, all the while confounding critics who have tried to pigeonhole him.

A painter, sculptor, photographer and carpenter—he even made altars for ships in 1960—Artschwager's consistent concern seems only to be investigating the illusions of perception. Though he did employ utilitarian objects and showed himself ingenious with geometric forms, they always served less of an immediate purpose than to comment on themselves. Full of ideas, yes, but not nearly as cool as most conceptualists.

In some recent works here he returns to the region of his childhood, Las Cruces, N.M., with atmospheric landscapes that capture the openness and rawness of that part of the country. "Landscape with Rosettes" shows a yellow sun or moon hanging in the sky over the rust-brown earth, its surface dotted with green shapes arranged in an irregular formation. The circular arrangements of leaves seem out of place—growth from a richer, wetter climate.

Two yellow lines cut across a square of brown earth in the middle of overgrown vegetation in "Landscape with Median." The sky fades to blue-green in the distance. Because the lines—the median—go nowhere and serve no purpose, stopping almost as soon as they start, they give the impression of a dead end or of a futile human intervention into the wild.

In older works from the '70s, Artschwager uses charcoal pencil and pastel when drawing on ivory laid Strathmore paper or paper handmade from crushed sugarcane pulp. By employing these textured surfaces, he gets the sculptural effect that he always seems to be after. Fittingly titled "Weave," the drawings of crisscrossing gray and black lines look like window frames or even the bars of a cage. They are reminiscent of Franz Kline's black-and-white abstractions and are endowed with the same fierce, insistent angularity.

To give a sense of his range, the gallery also includes "Arch," a silver-painted wooden sculpture from 2007, a dynamic totem. A particular favorite, "Abstraction," painted in 2004, looks like a Cézanne landscape with its geometry, the green and blue bands of color going off to the horizon. A maze as well, the work has the depth and two-dimensionality that Artschwager strives for. How wonderful that he never stopped at any of his dynamic stages, allowing us to see where they would eventually take him.

Richard Artschwager

Through Dec. 3, David Nolan Gallery, 527 W. 29th St., 212-925-6190, www.davidnolangallery.com.