



Richard Artschwager, *Untitled (Blp)*, 1969. Rubberized hair, 2 ½ x 15 ¾ x 11 inches.
© Richard Artschwager. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Richard Artschwager was born in 1923 in Washington, D.C., and he currently lives and works in Hudson, New York. He first studied chemistry, biology, and mathematics at Cornell University. In the early 1950s, he became involved in cabinet-making, producing simple pieces of furniture. His work has been the subject of many important surveys, including those at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin; and Kunstmuseum Winterthur. His work is included in many museum collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; and Fondation Cartier, Paris. The Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven is currently preparing a retrospective exhibition.

Cover image:

Richard Artschwager, *Satyr*, 2001. Rubberized hair and masonite, 57 x 32 x 2 ½ inches. © Richard Artschwager. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

Richard Artschwager: Hair is curated by Anthony Huberman, Guest Curator, and organized by the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

Major support for the Contemporary's exhibitions program is provided by Jeanne and Rex Sinquefield; Whitaker Foundation; William E. Weiss Foundation; Nancy Reynolds and Dwyer Brown; and members of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis. General operating support is provided by Whitaker Foundation; Missouri Arts Council, a state agency; Missouri Cultural Trust; Regional Arts Commission; Bank of America Charitable Foundation; Wells Fargo Advisors; Arts and Education Council; and members of the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.

Special thanks to Glazer's Midwest, Midwest Valet, and Chase Park Plaza Hotel.



RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER: HAIR

SEPTEMBER 10, 2010 – JANUARY 2, 2011



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RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER: HAIR

With an artistic career that spans almost fifty years, Richard Artschwager has established himself as one of the most widely acclaimed figures in the history of post-war American art. After working as a cabinet-maker in the early 1950s, Artschwager went on to develop a wide-ranging body of work that merges the machine- with the handmade, including sculpture, painting, prints, photography, installation, drawing, and a prodigious suite of furniture pieces. A true maverick who consistently eludes trends, Artschwager has constructed a powerful legacy that continues to resonate in the work of younger generations of artists.

Over the past four decades, Artschwager's work has been variously described as Pop Art, for its derivation from utilitarian objects and incorporation of commercial and industrial materials; as Minimal Art, for its geometric forms and solid presence; and as Conceptual Art, for its cool and cerebral detachment. But none of these classifications adequately defines the aims of an artist who specializes in the relationship between perception and deception.

This exhibition at the Contemporary focuses on a material Artschwager has used throughout his career: rubberized horsehair. These unusual works depart from the crisp lines and sharp forms of his better-known Formica furniture works—blurring the clarity of sculptural form and throwing the object out of focus. As the artist once put it, "Hair is peculiar. It's foreign to gravity yet at the same time it has stability. You can cut it and it has built-in contrary qualities, which are structure and chaos."

A material found in upholstery, rubberized horsehair is usually hidden from view underneath the soft edges of sofas and chairs. In these works, Artschwager reverses the relationship between an object and its raw materials, asking its inner-body to become its own surface. As sculptures, these hair works playfully contradict themselves: their finished display involves the act of turning their backs to the viewer, as if they preferred to conceal their faces. With forms that manage to be both recognizable and nameless at the same time, Artschwager complicates our sense of perception, rendering the accessible inaccessible.

Installed in the Contemporary's central main gallery, silhouettes of life-size human figures seem to dance and float weightlessly on the wall. To make these organic forms, Artschwager often begins with small scribbles in his notebook. When enlarged to life-size, the drawings maintain their sketch-like quality, while the horsehair amplifies what the artist has called "perfect imprecision." Artschwager has long been interested in what he calls object-pictures, combining the flatness of an image with the tactility of an object, and the rubberized horsehair inherently connects—and confuses—looking with touching. With titles that reinforce their anthropomorphism—*Falling Woman*, *Sitting Woman*, *Kneeling Woman*, and *Climbing Boy* (all from 1999)—these wall sculptures climb, dive, and rejoice as living characters, and while they clearly depict figures, their material keep the images faceless and out of reach.

Also included in the exhibition are images that have made up Artschwager's iconography for over forty years: a hair-covered *Untitled (Blp)* from 1969—a shape the artist has called his "instrument for useless looking;" hair-covered furniture sculptures, such as *Drawing of Table* (1984-85), *High-Backed Chair* (1988), and

Double Dinner (1998); exclamation marks; a corner piece; and a portrait painting, which, while not made with hair, involves Celotex, a material the artist also uses to blur the static image.

In contrast to a contemporary art conversation weighed down by irony, strategy, and cool self-reflexivity, Artschwager's exhibition at the Contemporary foregrounds a sincere celebration of the act of making and looking at objects and pictures.



Richard Artschwager, *High Backed Chair*, 1988. Rubberized hair on painted wood, 64 3/8 x 37 x 40 1/2 inches. Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale on Hudson, New York. Photo by Chris Kendall.