

MODERN PAINTERS

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THE 100 BEST FALL SHOWS

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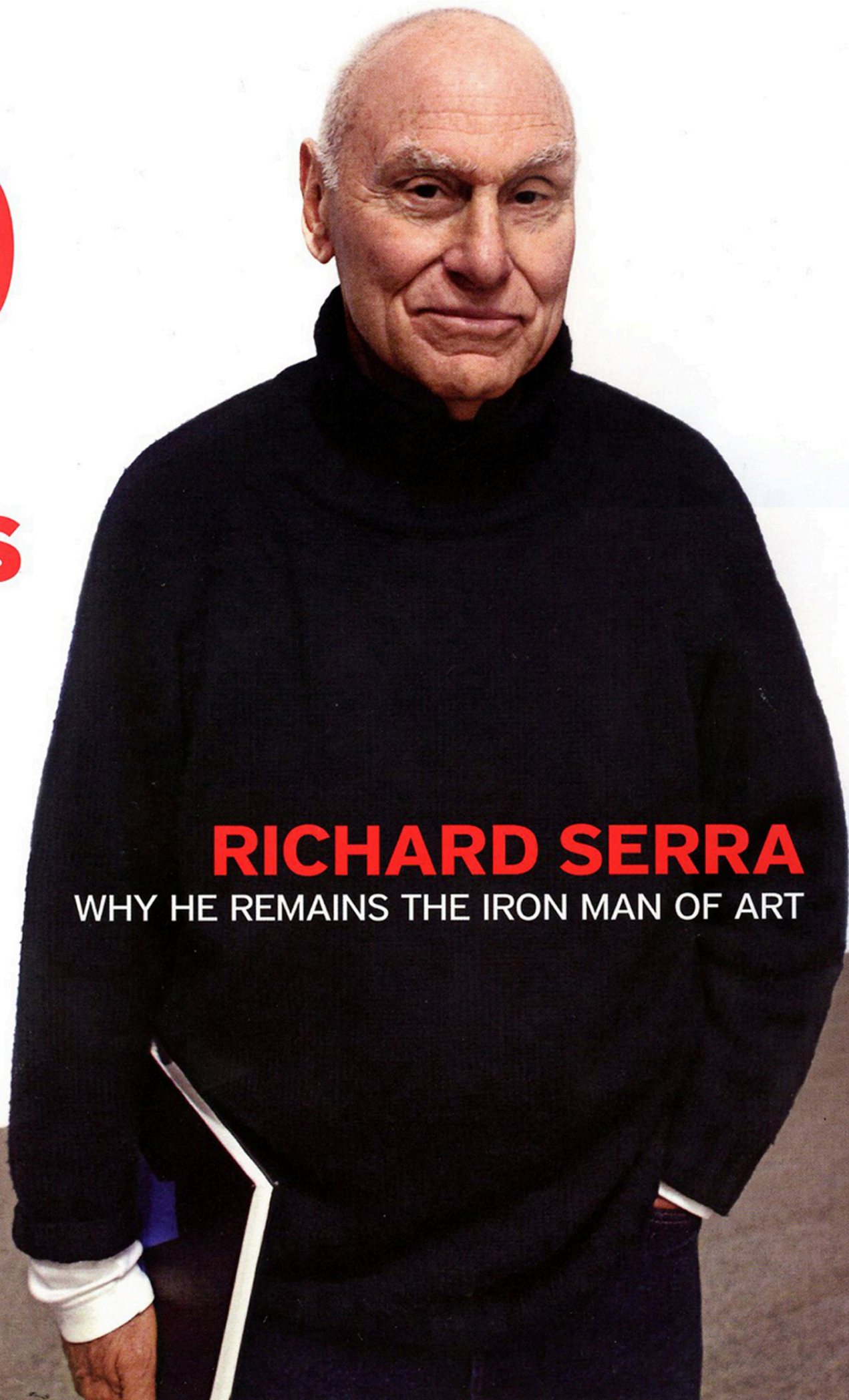
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WHY HE REMAINS THE IRON MAN OF ART





PAINTING THE TRACES

KOEN VAN DEN BROEK FINALLY
GETS HIS DEBUT IN AMERICA.

by Meghan Dailey

KOEN VAN DEN BROEK. OPPOSITE: LAUREN LANCASTER



ABOVE:
No Service, 2011. Oil on canvas,
105 x 157½ in.

RIGHT:
Koen van den Broek at Friedman
Benda Gallery in New York.

"PEOPLE IN BELGIUM ALWAYS ASK ME, 'Is your own country not good enough?' They wonder why I always have to go so far," says Koen van den Broek. "I need the distance." Since the late 1990s, the 38-year-old painter, who lives near Antwerp, has behaved a lot like a tourist, making road trips across the U.S. and taking countless photographs of the scenery he passes through. The locations he records are hardly the stuff of picture postcards or even vacation snapshots—unless you consider the red-painted curb of a no-parking zone in Burbank a cultural attraction. The purpose of these images, mostly Polaroids, is to serve as aides-mémoire that Van den Broek refers to when making his semiabstract paintings. The finished compositions are typically built up from simplified elements—lines and flattened planes of color—a process that results in fluid edges between the abstract and real, and in images that often look nothing like the photos from which they are derived. The paintings depict unpeopled infrastructure and landscapes: crisscrossing freeway bridges, the S-curve of a suburban street, an endless length of sun-baked highway. This is America viewed from the car.

California has been a favorite and frequent destination for Van den Broek—he briefly lived in L.A.—and, unsurprisingly, roadways and their boundaries are recurring motifs. His gaze is often grounded, literally, as he picks out what lies underfoot: the cracked geometry of a sidewalk, sloping gutters, and especially curbs. In San Francisco, the first American city he visited, he was drawn to the red-, blue-, yellow-, and green-painted concrete borders. He admired the way "each color designated something" and appreciated how their rectangular shapes suggested John McCracken's plank sculptures. "You get a lot of information just from the fragment."

Structures, whether in parts or whole, have long fascinated him. He started out studying engineering and architecture. After two years he switched subjects, enrolling at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, but he has never stopped reflecting on the constructed realm. "When you think about it, the first architectural thing built was a road," he says. "The first thing to do is to get from point A to point B." He likes what he calls "in-between spaces"—a gutter, for instance—that you pass over when moving from here to there: "It's like a breathing space." Maybe there's more to see in those margins,



"I'm not interested in painting human flesh but rather what people leave behind. Nonplaces."

with their lingering suggestion of a person rather than a physical presence. "I'm not interested in painting human flesh but rather in the traces, what people leave behind. Nonplaces."

Van den Broek tells me this a few weeks before he is to travel to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn—not exactly a nonplace. He will work there for the two months leading up to his September exhibition at the Friedman Benda gallery, his first U.S. solo outing. (He shows with Figge von Rosen Galerie, in Cologne; Greta Meert Gallery, in Brussels; and White Cube, in London.) He has no preconceived ideas about the kind of work he wants to make but plans to shoot a lot of photographs.



Those pictures may end up inspiring paintings long after he's left New York; while he was living in L.A., all the paintings he made were based on photographs he'd previously taken of the Louvre. If the final direction for his September exhibition is unclear, he is feeling confident about the direction of his work in general, some of which has gotten more abstract and a bit less reliant on descriptive titles to ground each painting in a specific reality. He has also increased the scale. The Friedman Benda show centers on a group of seven monumental canvases—8¾ by 13 feet each—the largest he has made so far. His depiction of Death Valley in this format—one of several he has made in different sizes—titled *No Service*, reads like a billboard or an image on a drive-in movie screen.

In fact, there's something cinematic about the framing of some of his photographs. He's even thought about exhibiting the shots themselves but decided that the process of translating them to canvas was crucial. "I get a kind of reduced feeling in my paintings that I can never reach in my photos," he explains, adding that the latter are more like sketches. He was initially reluctant to use photographs because so many painters were relying on them. Van den Broek doesn't mention names, but it's hard not to think of Luc Tuymans, another Belgian painter who employs photographic sources, although to more political ends, and Gerhard Richter, as well as artists of Van den Broek's generation like Wilhelm Sasnal and Eberhard Havekost. Ultimately, however, he found he needed new material and turned to photography. "I was looking for a way to get information," he says. "The Old Masters had archives too—sketches, studio material—that they always used to make a bigger painting." Lacking such a resource, he created one. "It's very important that I am the person behind the camera," he adds. "I'm not using a picture from the newspaper or the television. For me that doesn't work."

If his photos are tangible points of departure, then art history is a conceptual one. In particular he regards Henri Matisse as a foundational figure, noting that the French painter is cited as inspiration by a number of contemporary artists he admires, including John Baldessari, with whom he has collaborated. Particularly important for Van den Broek is Matisse's *French Window at Collioure*, 1914, one of his most abstract works. Vertical bands of blue, black, gray, and green compose a nighttime view that connects interior with exterior. "With a few colors and a few lines, he managed to create something. He was painting the sea at night, and what you get when you paint that is a black square," says Van den Broek, whose own intention is always to show us how we see rather than what we see. "It's a matter of perception, and how you transform it to painting." **MP**

FROM TOP:
Modernism, 2011. Oil on canvas,
105 x 157½ in.

Hollywood Boulevard, 2011. Oil
on canvas, 157½ x 105 in.