



Photo by Dirk Reinartz

Heavy metal: A pair of pieces from *Torqued Ellipses*, a groundbreaking series of steel sculptures designed by Richard Serra and fabricated at Sparrows Point in 1996. "They were made from A588 material—a Bethlehem grade of steel that can rust and form a protective coating," says former steelworker Fred Buckel. "We set them out at the end of one of the piers so that they could age uniformly."

past & present

Museum of Industry

The artist Richard Serra arrived at the shipyard facility of Bethlehem Steel's Sparrows Point steel mill just over ten years ago with an unusual proposition. He had designed a series of new sculptures—massive pieces that would approximate the scale of buildings, each to be rolled from enormous sheets of steel. It was not immediately clear how to build them. But at Sparrows Point, Serra found both a crew of steelworkers willing to tackle the project and a unique steel shop—the only facility in North America with the capability to form the sixteen-foot plates he required.

"It was a long process," Fred Buckel says. An industrial products manager at Sparrows Point from 1973 to 1999, Buckel was Serra's main contact at the mill as the pieces were being built. "And as this was going on, it was announced that the shipyard was going to be sold."

Serra's brief artistic collaboration with the Baltimore steel industry marked critical turning points for both protagonists. The pieces Serra fabricated at Sparrows Point, exhibited in a 1997 series called *Torqued Ellipses* (three were made in Baltimore, the fourth in Germany), signaled a career-making departure for the artist, now among the most celebrated sculptors in the world.

When the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City collected thirty of his works—more than a hundred tons of steel—for a forty-year Serra retrospective this summer, the exhibition was inundated with crowds and touted as an international artistic event.

Sparrows Point has fared less well. Repeatedly downsized through a series of ownership changes, the mill—once the largest the world—is now a shadow of its former self. Bethlehem Steel sold off its Baltimore shipyard in 1996, then filed for bankruptcy in 2001. While Serra was drawing crowds at MoMA this summer, a multinational firm led by Chicago-based Esmark Inc. announced its intention to buy Sparrows Point's steelmaking facility from its current owners, ArcelorMittal SA. It will be the fourth time that Sparrows Point has changed hands in as many years.

As Buckel recalls, it was the industry's downturn that brought the sculptor to town in the first place. "When I went to work there in '73, we had 3,300 people working there, building supertankers," he says. "With that many people going around, they never would have put up with the interruption to do these sculptures." But in the 1990s, things were different, and the Point's idle shipbuilders needed the commission. "At that point in time, Serra's project was keeping three or four key people from getting laid off," Buckel says.

Serra's career has been defined by his obsession with the physical act of transforming materials. In

early works, he experimented with vulcanized rubber and molten lead, but since the 1960s he has concentrated on steel. Serra was no stranger to the steel mill when he arrived at Sparrows Point: He'd paid his way through college by laboring in a mill. But now he proposed bending enormous plates of Cor-Ten steel as if they were metal ribbon, a radical recontextualization of this industrial material. The resulting artworks would not only yield a new way of experiencing steel but also create a new array of spaces within the concave recesses of the curved forms: A viewer could walk around and into the pieces.

The Sparrows Point crew accomplished this feat with a Hugh Smith roll press, a huge 1930s-vintage piece of Scottish shipbuilding equipment. "If we didn't have that machine, we couldn't have done this," recalls Buckel. "The hard part was trying to get the geometry. The first plate we did, we broke it in half—the plate literally shattered from us trying to bend it. If you look very closely you'll see the area where we cracked the steel and had to weld it up. There were little gouges where we had to put butt-straps to hold the plates together while we welded them back together."

I recently visited the Sparrows Point ellipses at the Dia:Beacon museum in Beacon, New York, where they are now permanently installed. The trip always takes on the feeling of a pilgrimage, in part because of Beacon's bucolic location two hours north of New York City, and in part because of the quiet, almost sacred, experience of wandering through the museum itself. Even knowing exactly how they were made, it's difficult to imagine these pure, minimal sculptures rolling off the steel press at Sparrows Point like the hulls of the Liberty Ships built at the same facility decades before. (Interestingly, Serra's largest sculptures have often lent themselves to nautical interpretations: their rusting materiality, their ability to seem buoyant despite their enormous tonnage, and the way they simulate the experience of being inside the hull of a ship.)

Yet, the more I considered their roots, the more I saw the works as not so foreign to broader occurrences in Baltimore. Like so many other recent examples of adaptive reuse, *Torqued Ellipses* is the product of a local culture deeply affected by its industrial heritage. In a city where nostalgia is often a primary generator of urban form, the shipyard that builds high art isn't so different from the art gallery in the train station, the condos in the grain elevator, or the ballpark constructed around the old warehouse.

Sparrows Point's transformation isn't quite complete yet. The steel mill was recently sold to be just that—a steel mill. But Richard Serra is unlikely to return. Like so many other parts of the city's manufacturing past, the job of fabricating his pieces has been outsourced. The sculptor now takes his work overseas and contracts exclusively with a German mill. The shipyard's roll press, Buckel says, has been idle for the last seven years.

—Eric Leshinsky