Ever since our mind learned to fly out of our bodies, we have been moving rapidly from the accessible to the inaccessible, and back, rapidly, most likely because the accessible and inaccessible have been trading places very fast. Maybe the mind is actually staying right where it is. ... I have been busy celebrating passage from the accessible to the inaccessible.

—RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER (1986)

There is no doubt that Richard Artschwager was a confluent artist. Although his materials and images were derived from diverse sources, they always managed to come together, to find a synthesis that spelled the name Artschwager. In his case, diversity did not mean the absence of a recognizable style. Rather, his style was present in his work through his careful attention to diversity. While this may sound paradoxical, it is not at all contradictory. Over time the Artschwager style persisted, and gained a certain prestige and momentum. His intuitive response to what he saw as the raw material for his work became more evident during the course of his career, whether in painting or sculpture (or, for that matter, designing elevators).¹ For him, making a work of art was about clarifying one’s purpose as an artist, not simply defining one’s intentions through a conceptual strategy. While Artschwager’s work would develop over days or weeks, sometimes over months or years, its formal reception on completion might suggest an exaggeration of something irrational or absurd, an ironic displacement of sorts.² It would be as if the table, the chair, or the piano—or, for that matter, the “blp” or exclamation point—were there simply to express an exquisite form of banality. While this may have been true, the objects were
also Artschwager’s favorite decoys. They attracted the eye and provoked viewers to get involved, to ponder what they were seeing in a fresh way.

Like the poems of William Carlos Williams, Artschwager’s art taps into a kind of intuition that lies just beneath the surface of our everyday sensory awareness. Suddenly the most common, incidental, or obscurant objects are rediscovered—seen anew—in the course of our diurnal routine. With Artschwager, these discoveries took on a particular significance, and our ability to engage with them over time may reflect the manner in which the artist also perceived them, ultimately as an extension of his personal reality. Although we recognize an Artschwager as blissfully nonfunctional, its place within his formal lexicon appears irrevocable, if not occasionally irretrievable.

Such is the case with his variations on the inscrutable Running Man—his final series of works and the subject of this exhibition—which continues to remain in motion within a hermetically sealed, yet perfectly unspoiled, visual language.

Artschwager’s idea for Running Man appears to have come from a variety of sources, including ideas previously noted in recently published histories of art (of which there are many). He was a poignant and conscientious artist, maybe in reverse order. Put another way, he was someone who looked at objects as sources for the transmission of feeling. Perhaps it was a matter of what he had seen that day—or, for that matter, any other day. For Artschwager, the process of seeing things, no matter at what time or place, instantly registered the purpose of being actively engaged in the everyday world. The buildings he observed, the people he met, whether formally or informally, in galleries, stores, or on street corners, people seated or standing, running or crouching in various environments, could all be read as extraordinary—in some ways, as extraordinary as the landscapes on which he gazed, including the majestic mesas, mountain peaks, and buttes of the Southwest, where he was raised. In addition, Artschwager had a strong attraction to the images found indeterminately in books, journals, and newspapers: print images of world leaders, sailors, terrorists, models, anonymous people, and groups of people that he would later put together in his paintings in ways unlikely to be found in the mainstream media.

These quotidian objects and found photographs constituted but a few of the visual themes that occupied Artschwager. They formed the basis of a constantly shifting archive that he fastidiously translated, collaged, and synthesized into paintings. His working process evolved as an incalculable repository of information, informally collected—an ongoing, perpetually shifting lexical portrait of the artist perpetually at work. Artschwager was a truly original artist to the extent that he welcomed the influence of subject matter often ignored or rejected by his colleagues. By “original” I refer to his remarkable manner of contextualizing images often disregarded as unsuitable for either painting or sculpture. In terms of painting, this might include such subjects as the aftermath of a disastrous accident, as in Train Wreck (1968, fig. 2), or pornography, as in the absurdly posed porno quartet in Triptych IV (1968). It would also include the infamous Atlantic City devolution, as witnessed in
fig. 2
Train Wreck, 1968
Acrylic on Celotex in artist’s frame
46 1/2 × 42 3/4 inches (118.1 × 108.6 cm)
Collection of Thomas H. Lee
and Ann Tenenbaum
fig. 3
Destruction IV, 1972
Acrylic on Celotex in artist’s frame
40 × 48 inches (101.6 × 121.9 cm)
Destruction I–VI (1972, fig. 3) and, in a more recent work, the sinking battleship at Pearl Harbor, in Arizona (2002). It is unlikely that any of these paintings—despite their diversity and grayish tonalities—would be easily forgotten by their viewers. It is true that artists working today have regenerated a more sensational approach to related subjects, but they rarely work from the kind of neutral distance found in the paintings of Artschwager. There is little doubt that the rapid speed of the Internet has played a role in this recent trend. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Artschwager was deeply engaged with this subject matter, such images were truly radical in the context of painting.

Artschwager wanted the experience of seeing to become a phenomenological one, close to the perception of the real, not in the literal sense, but as a metonym of reality. He wanted his work to speak with the voice of authenticity. He accepted solitude, to a degree, but also enjoyed the company of friends from all avenues of life. Artschwager could never be pushed or coerced into taking a position that offended his cognitive order of things or his grasp of the sensory and ethical values he believed to be indigenous to art. In this sense, he was an artist par excellence, an artist who spoke from the mind and heart, and who ultimately came to terms with the vastness of the world around him. Above all, he was an artist consummately involved in the process of making his own kind of art. His work was as classical as it was conceptual, as romantic as it was Pop, both purposely defiant and ambiguously conservative. He wanted to transmit visual and poetic complexities not only to colleagues but to anyone willing to express a thoughtful response to his work.

Artschwager always viewed his work—his paintings, in particular—less in terms of whether they tell the right or wrong story than in how “deadpan” they might appear. His approach was not to offer a point of view; rather, it was to directly state the fact of the image itself. This suggests that the image that exists in an Artschwager painting may, in effect, be more plausible than the actual event from which the image was appropriated. Whether the incident represented in an image is true is a different question from whether a painting is able to convey its own truth.* Artschwager’s paintings are largely about relinquishing any consensus affiliated with the meaning of an image. Even if the image carries symbolic value, this is less important than how accurately the painting conveys the force of emotional ambiguity. Over time, the work of art will tell its own story, just as the human condition will continue its own historical narrative apart from what the media proclaim.

A question that often comes to the foreground when looking at an Artschwager painting is whether “media news” has any reality in terms of the actual history. Given the means by which Artschwager represents an image clipped from a newspaper, such as the image in Running Man, his work seems to question whether an image that appears in the media takes its own course, apart from other realities in the art world that contextualize it. Herein lies another irony. The overriding position taken by most major fine-art museums is that works of art should represent their time period rather
than speculate as to what might be perceived as morally justified. For example, Artschwager painted several portraits based on images from the print media, including images of himself, in which he seemingly tried to avoid a clear bias. He consciously suspended ethical judgments. Rather than painting Osama bin Laden as a terrorist, he wanted to paint Osama as Osama (fig. 4). In the same way, he wanted to paint George W. Bush as George W. Bush (fig. 5). In keeping with this approach, aesthetic embellishments were given less emphasis; he was one of the first artists to consider working with non-art materials. Early on, he chose Formica over bronze, for example, and Celotex instead of traditional high-cost linen canvas. His shift in 1963 from painting on canvas to Celotex panels was important in terms of giving his imagery a distancing effect that further induced ambiguity. When he used this manufactured fiberboard material, generally considered outside the craft of traditional painting, his paintings suggested a distinct sense of removal somewhere between art and everyday life.

Later the horsehair, rubberized hair, Formica, and plastics of various kinds would distance the narration of his subject matter even further. Whatever the news, whether new or old, it did not matter. In his paintings, time is suspended. The Running Man no longer runs. On the other hand, he never did run. The illusion produced by the image was transfixed in time. Again, Artschwager’s work is less historically focused than suspended in history. In this way he was able to capture the thing itself. The Running Man is essentially the Running Man (without running). It is the material presence of the thing itself, not the narrative being told. Artschwager knew how to play it both ways. For him, the game of appropriation was possible without losing connoisseurship. He stood in the middle of the road.

The Running Man did not begin as a series but as an observation. During the winter of late 1989 a cold spell descended on the Northeast; the temperature dropped severely for several days. Attention was given to this in the Boston Globe, where a photograph appeared of a single man running with his dog across a snowy, fog-shrouded terrain at Brookline Reservoir Park (fig. 6). The date of the newspaper was December 31, 1989, less than a week after the artist’s sixty-sixth birthday (December 26). Artschwager was drawn to the image and clipped it out of the paper. Later he used the profiled figure of the man in a large, cutout grid drawing mounted on board (p. 4). The first Running Man paintings were done in 1991. One was made with acrylic paint on Fiberglas, then mounted on Formica over wood and placed in a black painted frame. Given that the artist’s supply of Celotex was running low and it was no longer being manufactured, it is conceivable that Artschwager employed cast Fiberglas as a surrogate for Celotex. The painting shows the male figure running to the right, retraced in two outer contours and modeled in the artist’s well-known textural gray tones. The same figure, shown differently, appears in a second painting done the same
year (1991). Again the figure runs to the right but without the external contours. In contrast to acrylic on Fiberglas, the second version employs painted Formica on Celotex. One of the key differences between the Celotex version and the earlier Fiberglas painting is the expressive quality that the repeated contours give to the figure in the first work. It is as if the man running in the park needs an extra covering or shield from the cold, which indirectly gives the painting a certain metaphorical quality, as though Running Man were confronting his existential reality as part of the human condition. In yet another version painted five years later (dated 1996, fig. 7) titled Study for Running Man, currently at the Fogg Museum at Harvard, we find a more detailed figure, again running to the right, in a landscape with a rather imposing
fig. 6
tree present in the lower right foreground. This version of Running Man also has the familiar textured gray tones found in the earlier 1991 painting, but without the added contours.

The recent Running Man paintings (2013) were done in various sizes and a variety of materials, colors, and compositional designs. They are remarkable not only because of the relatively brief time span in which Artschwager painted them, but also because of their poignancy as a metaphor in reference to existence and mortality. Artschwager was in a secure place at the end of his life. His major traveling retrospective had opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art in October 2012, shortly after an important exhibition of his piano works at the Gagosian Gallery in Rome. Months after the artist’s passing, I learned from Ann Artschwager, his widow, that before his death he had returned to the theme of the Running Man. For some reason, I could not avoid thinking of Budd Schulberg’s novel What Makes Sammy Run? (1941), a
fig. 8
Falling Man III, 2001
Rubberized hair and
acrylic on Masonite
72 × 28 inches (182.9 × 71.1 cm)
popular American-dream story about an office boy from the slums of New York who successfully works his way through the system to become a major Hollywood film executive. It occurred to me that the word “running” carries with it numerous, often conflicting connotations. It includes everything from running in a marathon to “running” an errand, from running for public office to “running scared,” as the adage goes. In reaction to the Artschwager paintings, my first response was to reconcile the metaphor of the Running Man with the artist, who had always impressed me as a runner, moving from one direction to another, from sculpture to painting, also perhaps as an existential runner.

On arriving in New York in the mid-1970s, I recall seeing shows of Richard Artschwager’s work at the Leo Castelli Gallery: the stops and starts, the periods and exclamation points, the blps in various sizes, proportions, and materials, placed here and there and everywhere, happily photographed at various sites in European cities and around New York. This past summer, at the 55th Venice Biennale, I saw for the first time an early videotape of the artist being interviewed (at length) on French television at the landmark 1969 exhibition When Attitudes Become Form held at the Kunsthalle Bern in Switzerland, curated by another famous runner, Harald Szeemann. Even at that time, it was clear that Artschwager, then well into his forties, had been a runner for some time. During the televised press conference, he held forth brilliantly as he moved from one comment to the next in rapid succession, his mind racing like wildfire. The translator worked hard to keep up once she recognized the importance of what Artschwager had to say about the new “idea art” then currently on display. He was a runner then, and he continued that way for the remainder of his life, producing a major series of groundbreaking paintings during the final two months of his life.

Structurally speaking, Artschwager’s life and work were closely involved with philosophy and music. This is evident both in the manner in which he spoke and in his own love of music; he would play the piano frequently, whenever there were guests at the house and whenever he needed relaxation during his working day. In both philosophy and music, precision is required. It is essential. And this is a quality that persisted in the artist’s work throughout his career. He set high standards and realized them accordingly. The artist’s manner of work applied as much to his concept as to his material and technical processes. It ran through every aspect of his work. In all cases, the precision of the execution was paramount—as integral as it would be for a musician or philosopher. It has been pointed out, for example, that the theme of Running Man can be read not only in the context of other related works but also in the context of its own system, as Artschwager worked with variations on a theme. The development of variations on a theme or permutations of a concept may be noted in the work of the composer Arnold Schoenberg and in the propositions found in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922), both from the early twentieth century. Artschwager made at least three versions of his Falling Man between
1998 and 2001 (fig. 8), and two versions of Crouching Man, in 1998 and 2002 (fig. 9). He made other (but fewer) similar works involving expressive physical movements relating to the female form. In contrast to Running Man, all of these variations are sculpted forms that employ synthetic rubber hair or horsehair, and they are not primarily the subjects of paintings. In addition, there is one version of Running Man (fig. 1) made with synthetic hair that was shown among other Artschwager works in his exhibition at the Domaine de Kerguéhennec in Brittany in 2003.

What I find paradoxical yet consistent in Artschwager’s work is his objectivity as he proceeded to transform images that, at their origin, may have carried entirely different meanings. The reason for choosing an image of a man running to escape the wintry cold may have had meaning beyond the artist’s conscious recollection. Prior to that, the photographer for the Boston Globe undoubtedly attributed his own meaning to the photo, while the picture editor may have her own rationale for different reasons. In any case, Artschwager would finally be the one to project the image into a form that could reveal another sphere of possible meanings by virtue of his imagination, and the fact that he found the image within days after his birthday. It was this kind of intuition, repeated time and again, that virtually defined his role as an artist. For Artschwager, liberation came through his decision to alter the context of an image in whatever way he felt appropriate.

It is only appropriate, then, that his sculpture titled Monument (2010, p. 65) also be included in this exhibition. One can find numerous antecedents in his use of geometry and in his popular style of construction, using laminate on wood. Still, it reads as an act of defiance by the artist, as if he planned it that way, as if he understood that the hallowed darkness is not merely a built structure but an internal absence. From an East Indian perspective, darkness exists in the fertile soil as it does in the living soul. This is where new ideas are given light and old ideas of value are regained. In the sacred Bhagavad Gita, darkness is the source from which all of life continues to emerge. It is the source of art as well, the place where artists may discover and recover the power to transform ordinary ideas and materials and give them spirit and meaning. Here the artist finds the way to create and expand the horizons of our human potential, to obtain the power to kick through the shit and push the imagination to startling new limits beyond what has been seen or done before. Moreover, there are ironic, heartbreaking, and deeply intimate aspects to this effort that accompany the fierce ambition and illimitable desire for excellence and recognition. None of this was ever foreign or unknown to the artist Richard Artschwager. Working outside the trends, he managed to hold his own all the way through. The Running Man completed the course in superb form.
fig. 9
Crouching Man II, 2002
Rubberized hair and acrylic on Masonite
74 × 46 inches (188 × 116.8 cm)
NOTES


1. Artschwager was commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2012 to design four elevators for its new facility in the former meat-market district in Manhattan, projected to open in 2016. He chose to use a recurrent theme in his work, making use of six elements: a door, a window, a table, a basket, a mirror, and a rug. Before his death, he managed to arrive at a model for the project, titled Six in Four, in which the six furnishings were included in the four elevators. This was not Artschwager’s first elevator commission. Previously he had created elevator installations for various exhibitions, beginning with one at the Hayden Gallery at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1981). The Hayden Gallery elevator was shown as part of the Whitney Museum’s 1988 retrospective, Richard Artschwager, and was eventually purchased by the Ludwig Museum in Cologne in 2005.

2. An interesting example of a long-term work by Artschwager, Green Closure (2003) was based on a newprint photograph he clipped in 1963 and used for another painting. Forty years later he decided to return to the theme by changing a female figure in the image, seated at the end of the table, from a clothed figure to a nude. See Bonnie Clearwater, Richard Artschwager (North Miami: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), pp. 44–45.


5. The circumstances of Artschwager’s discovery of the newprint image in the Boston Globe were relayed to the author in a phone conversation in October 2013.


8. When Attitudes Become Form (Live in Your Head), Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, March 22–April 27, 1969, curated by Harald Szeemann. Reconstruction curated by Germano Celant (in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and Thomas Demand) at Fondazione Prada, Venice, on the occasion of the 55th Venice Biennale, June 1–Nov. 24, 2013.
Richard Artschwager at his exhibition
Gegenwärtig aber ungenau,
BOX Georg Kargl, Vienna, 2005