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Curator meets artist: Picking pieces for Richard Rezac's solo show



Sculptor Richard Rezac talks in his Chicago studio with Renaissance Society director Solveig Ovstebo in January as they discuss which pieces will go into Rezac's solo show. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

By **Steve Johnson**
Chicago Tribune

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When you walk through Richard Rezac's new exhibition, "Address," it seems to make perfect sense. In the white-walled, window-interrupted, vaulted-ceiling room that is the Renaissance Society's main gallery, 20 meticulous objects shaped by the longtime Chicagoan jut out from the walls, drop from the ceiling, rest on the floor.

They don't dominate the space. Most of these are bookshelf speakers rather than hulking sound towers. But they draw you into their individual orbits, their sound fields, with craftsmanship as exquisite as the composition can be subtly playful.

In Rezac's elegant but slightly off-kilter forms, cherry wood looks like plastic, bronze looks like pine, a stone resembles a bell (but the "stone" is actually bronze). They are abstractions that suggest something real without giving the ambition away. The untitled work hovering overhead, in soft red painted wood and cast aluminum, seems to imagine a 1950s diner sign around what may be a hint of an airplane wing. You want to remember eating there.

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“Address” features mostly new work from the artist, who’s been teaching at the School of the Art Institute since 1985. He says the city’s architecture, and its tradition of thinking and talking about architecture, have been profoundly influential to his work.

Rezac, 66, works deliberately, and, just as “Address” seems to be logical and planned-out, putting these pieces into this show was also the result of a careful process. A few months back, we joined Rezac and curator Solveig Ovstebo, executive director of the Ren, at the artist’s Wicker Park studio for a peek into how “Address” came together.

About two years ago, Ovstebo recalled, she asked to visit Rezac in the studio, which occupies the space behind a former dairy store in the now gentrified neighborhood.

“Many times I get this question, how do you pick artists?” she said. “To be honest with you, it’s all about a gut feeling. It’s a very organic thing. I look, I read, I visit, I talk. I try to be open to see as much art, as many artists, as I possibly can. I got very curious about Richard’s work very early. I followed him. And then I decided that now it’s time for me to ask if I can come and visit him in the studio.”

From that visit, she invited him to do a show.

“I was very honored,” Rezac said. “It’s really one of the significant, long-standing institutions here. It has a modesty when you compare it to the [MCA](#) or the Art Institute.” But “the litany of artists” who have shown there, he said, is not modest at all.

Not only was he being invited to exhibit within the Renaissance Society’s unusual space, on the fourth floor of an otherwise humdrum academic building, but the exhibition would come with a catalogue.

Rezac’s work is in major museum collections, including the Art Institute, the MCA and the Detroit Institute of Arts. He has won major awards and grants throughout his career: prizes and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the [Yale University](#) Art Gallery, among others.

But in decades of exhibiting, “I’ve never had a book made from my work,” he said. “I’ve had fairly thin pamphlet catalogues. This will be substantial for me. It captures not only the substance of the exhibition through illustration but in this case there’ll be four writers with different points of view

“It does establish, I guess for the future, some sort of notion of existence — you know, of what this work is being interpreted as meaning. ... It’s very meaningful.”

Ovstebo said what drew her to Rezac’s work includes “the way he works with form. He’s a formal artist. It’s very distinct.

“There are things that make you go back in time and look at art history, but then it takes a tweak. It’s right at that point where that tweak happens that feels relevant and fresh. And Richard has done his thing. He’s been so uncompromising in the way he works. That’s very special.”

Plus, she said, “these sculptures are just really fascinating, beautiful, hard — all those things that intrigue me as a curator.”

Ovstebo showed pages of notes she had brought with her, questions to ask, thoughts to share. And this, remember, was not an initial meeting but one of the final ones before installation, almost at the end of the multiyear process.

Rezac, for his part, said he had found Ovstebo "incredibly generous" to work with, in keeping with the Ren's tradition of opening its space to the artist.

"It's been quite ideal, really. There's been no self-consciousness or reservation," he said. "They identify an artist they feel Chicago should experience and then they trust: If an artist is to be given this platform, they're going to present work that is significant to them."

Most of the sculptures are modestly sized. For a more physically imposing Rezac work, another new piece, the monumental, sherbet-colored sort of trellis named "Glen Elder," after the Kansas town where his grandparents had a farm, has been on view since mid-March outside the Arts Club. (On Saturday, the artist will lead a two-part tour of "Address" and then a visit to "Glen Elder," from noon to 2:30 p.m., including a bus ride between the locations and a glass of wine at the club at the end; register for the free event (limited tickets) through www.renaissancesociety.org.)

But the work for the Ren show was chosen or made specifically to fit that unusual Ren space, which Rezac points out is so different from the typical white box inside a historic museum building.

While "the linoleum floor is a bit institutional," he said, "the faceting in that space is very complex, but the light is just clear and magnanimous."

He wanted to break it up with walls as little as possible. He built one of his own, out of steel legs and a painted-wood screen, and then mounted a "pivotal" 2007 cherry wood work on it. "It's something like a fence, a screen, a partition, a room divider," he said. "It's delicate, free-standing. It's decorative, with stenciling. And so it begins to address that question of how and in what way do I install wall sculptures in the Ren space."

He walked over to another new piece, one he made with the gallery space in mind, and his explanation suggested the exacting, often architectural nature of his process, which begins with drawings that are "largely abstract and improvisational," according to the guide to the exhibition.

"This bronze with the kind of green lining around it will be on an angled wall leaning out in one of the bay window areas," Rezac said. "There'll be no direct artificial light on it, but rather it will be bathed in light by two windows. In light of that, certain detailed decisions about burnishing the bronze rather than leaving it rustic were critical. It would be absurd to put up a dry, firescale object. It would just be a dark shape."

"But if the bronze is polished, honey-colored, and given the kind of ribbing that's there, the perceptual complication of, you know, 'what is the depth,' 'is it a reflection or a shadow,' those kind of factors will come into play."

His is a handmade practice. "So much is available that comes close to the kinds of forms that I make," he said. "Yes, I can get to Home Depot and find dimensional dowels, but they're never quite the right size and they're usually lousy wood. So this is all made. I turned all this on a lathe. The horizontals, I shape by hand — cut with a table saw and then shaped with scrapers."

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The seeming stained glass in his new work, "Quimby," he actually created, too, with a kind of translucent enamel. That piece, he said, refers back to the first house he lived in, a small Victorian with stained glass, after finishing art school in Portland, Oregon.

His tendency to work on a smaller scale, he said, "I can credit to doing things by hand with simple tools. But drawing: regular sheets of paper and the kind of clarity that a line with a ruler gives. And when it gets too far beyond that, that clear silhouette doesn't have much impact or meaning."

Ovstebo jumped in. "I knew when I met Richard I wouldn't get Anish Kapoor-like sculptures, that's not what you do," she told the artist. "Not all shows, because it's a big show, need the big work. It's really important to just be true to what the artist does."

"Right," said Rezac. "Yeah, by my count now, there are 20 works in the show, which is a lot. And I guess when we first spoke, 1½ or two years ago, I thought maybe 15 would be the number."

"You got inspired, didn't you?" said Ovstebo. "I became really happy when Richard would say, 'Well I tested out this thing,' and you know, 'I haven't done that thing before.' Because that's really what this is all for. That we are able to give artists the freedom we have as an institution."

"Right," Rezac said, "and two years is extraordinary. It fit exactly what I needed. I haven't been rushed. I don't want to be rushed. So it has allowed me to think and rethink."

"Address"

When: Through June 17

Where: The Renaissance Society, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Cobb Hall, 4th floor