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Museum pieces

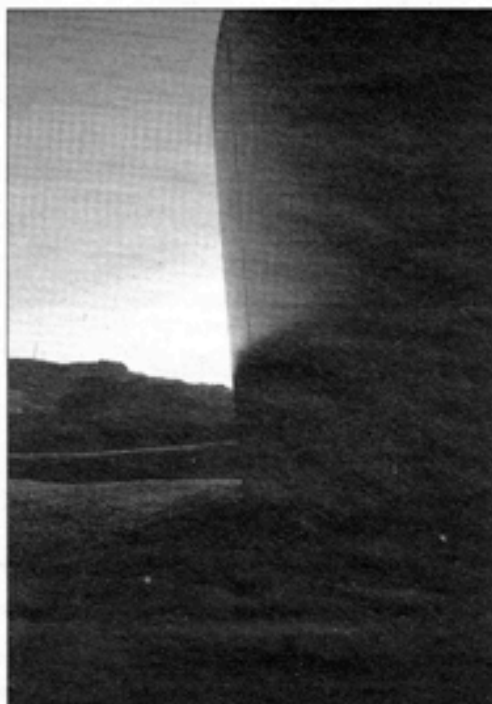
Richard Serra and Donald Judd at the MFA

film
culture
by Gerald Peary

Welcome to Boston, Alberta Chu. This documentary filmmaker relocated from LA last year, and her newly completed *Seeing the Landscape: Richard Serra's Tuhirangi Contour*, one cool making-of-an-art-piece movie, screens January 29 and 31 at the MFA, with the filmmaker present on both occasions. This is a fascinating look at a major American artist, Richard Serra, who has created site-specific environmental works all over the world. His task here is to make something great and wonderful, of beauty and monumental scale, that will meld with the rolling hills and the verdant land of the Farm, a privately owned sculpture park deep in agrarian New Zealand. The Farm's owner is at the center of the tale: Alan Gibbs, a New Zealand zillionaire business mogul who has the macho charisma to run a sports empire and the thick neck of a George Steinbrenner or a Donald Trump. Who can help wondering (the financial arrangements are off-limits for this documentary) what Serra was paid to travel to New Zealand multiple times over five years to be there for the design and construction of his artwork. Manny Ramirez bucks?

After pacing the land countless times, Serra decided on something that would be consistent with the curvy lines of the landscape: a huge winding wall across the terrain, 875 feet long, 20 feet high. To me, it's reminiscent of Christo's *Running Fence*, a temporary curtain

that in the 1970s stretched miles across rural California. But Serra's wall — the "Tuhirangi



SERRA'S "TUHIRANGI CONTOUR" is a 20-foot-high, 875-foot-long steel curtain.

Contour" — would be permanent. It would have to be made, he said, of steel.

"Richard and I have a nice combative relationship. We both have big egos," Gibbs tells the camera. Off camera, employee and employer battle furiously about the material for the wall; Gibbs wants something cheaper, lighter, more manageable. A stubborn Serra prevails, and after a global search, a shop is located in Germany where mammoth steel plates can be constructed and sent by New Zealand by ship. Trip one: the ship's captain stacks the plates 20 high, and they tumble over and break. A whole year is lost rebuilding them. At last, 650 tons of steel are dumped in Kaipara, New Zealand, to be lifted high, thrust 30 feet into the ground into a concrete foundation, and joined to form a wall. Filmmaker Chu used time-lapse photography to bring us the months and months of building in a few sublime seconds. *Voilà!* It's up! The wall rusts into a beautiful auburn, and sheep graze happily below it. "I think it's magic," says Gibbs, a satisfied customer.

More art documentaries will be shown at the MFA in February. Veteran San Francisco filmmaker Christopher Felper will make a first-time visit for a small retrospective. He's well known for *The Coney Island of Lawrence Ferlinghetti* (February

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