

Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

Methinks it is like a weasel.

It is backed like a weasel.

Or like a whale?

Very like a whale.

(Hamlet Act 3 Scene 2)



Very Like a Whale The Sculpture of Richard Deacon

Much of Richard Deacon's sculpture has Hamlet's wayward territory as its subject. Deacon's attention to the moments of transition, to the shape-shifting of clouds, the flux of ideas, the changing intonations of speech or song, continues to make his sculpture particularly difficult to describe. It is the problem of suggestiveness, the strength that we hear implicit in Hamlet's insistent voice: describe that cloud, mark it, map it, capture it. Find a way of holding that cloud, transitory and inchoate as it is. Present it in another way: name it, unname it, rename it.

There does not seem to be a critical language that is appropriately responsive to this tide of images. How can one do justice to the accumulative, meandering, vestigial, ancillary, accretive, dream-like experience of standing in front of Deacon's sculpture, or walking round it? How can you plot the way in which images ebb and flow and ideas precede each other, recede from each other? How can you connect the tension between the planned, coherent, judicial, measured side of Deacon's work with the metaphorical slide into other forms, the suggestiveness to other states and forms that is so present?

Perhaps we should end up with simple lists, make a long, sinuous line of transitive verbs, as the young Richard Serra did in a notebook in 1967:

to roll
to crease
to fold
to store
to bend
to shorten
to twist
to twine
to dapple
to dapple
to crumple
to shave
to tear
to chip
to split
to cut...¹

Deacon's attitude is subtly but significantly different. His array of transitive verbs is more extensive, (we might add to glue to rivet to fire to melt) but it is in the specificity of his attitudes to material that he is so very particular.

For the last few years Deacon has been working with great intensity with clay. His well-known catholicity with materials (resins, laminated woods, leather, carpet, metals, linoleum, glass), now includes a substantial body of ceramic work. These new sculptures have been shown in exhibitions in Germany and in London. For his exhibition at Tate St Ives he has made a vast and complex installation piece *Gap 1-8* (2004), and two huge singular forms, *Flower* (2004) and *Another Kind of Blue* (2005). Deacon's work with clay is not an easy or homogenous body of work to critique: it plays none of the obvious cards of significance that artists have used when dealing with clay. It is not overtly gestural (as with Anish Kapoor's opening up of solid masses of red clay) nor overtly referential to vessels (as with Nicholas Pope's sculptures for The oratory of heavenly space).² In fact it is difficult to think of other artists who have started to use clay and have not been in some way seduced by its complex matrix of messiness and inchoateness, the way in which it shifts its states from liquid to solid, the way in which it moves. Clay is inexhaustible stuff. It is cheap.



It has little value in the hierarchy of materials: it proclaims itself as demotic, basic, primal. It is earth. As earth it is universal but also particular: it comes out of territory, land, place. To work with it is to make something out of nothing. It is an act of Ur-creation: 'God gave man a little bit of mud' in Gauguin's words.³ It is possible to use clay to record the passage of one moment of one person through the world, to sketch, to mark in an abbreviated way the flux of feeling. Because of this the cultural history of artists using clay is one of them rediscovering immediacy. The images of Lucio Fontana pushing a long pole into a mass of clay to create an interior space, of Picasso bending the just-thrown neck of a pot at Vallauris, or of Asger Jorn riding his scooter over a playground of clay to create large random markings, are the images that tell this story. The connection between the body and the material is transcribed as speed. Speed is then transcribed as authentic experience. We could say that the narrative of twentieth century clay is of artists being experiential – from Gauguin and Nolde to Noguchi and Cragg.

Deacon's ceramic sculpture is of a different order. It is slower. He is interested in how clay moves, but not in the intelligible hand mark, the signifier of authenticity. He is interested in how clay fires, but not in the gestural markings of a wood-kiln, the signifier of robust vernacular identity. Deacon works with the German ceramics studio (Werkstatte fur Bildhauerei) of Nils Dietrich. Dietrich's studio in Cologne has

at its core a small, highly-experienced team of ceramicists that collaborates with an extraordinary group of artists and architects that include Deacon, Thomas Schütte, Rosemarie Trockel, Daniel Liebeskind and Norbert Prangenburg amongst others. There is no British equivalent to Dietrich and, indeed, the only other non-institutional ceramics studio that is remotely comparable is that of Hans Spinner, who works with Chillida, Caro and Tapies.⁴ But where Spinner provides an opportunity for artists to make highly gestural work, and fire it in a wood-fired kiln to create distinctive flame marks, Dietrich's studio has no house style. It is highly proficient at creating large ceramic structures, but each artist's work is distinct.

Two huge kilns dominate the upper floor space. Below are innumerable crated pieces, banks of stacked clay bags, a library of thousands of glaze and clay body tests. Here too are the small clay pieces, 'core pieces', that Deacon has made, some in terracotta, others in a white clay body. Some are squeezed pieces of clay – not maquettes but starting points for conversations with himself and with the studio. Others are complex geometric forms carved out of solid pieces of clay, others have the deeply inscribed marks that appear on *Flower* (2004). 'Ribbon pieces', small sculptures that look as if they have kinship with pipes, wait to be lustred gold and silver.

On the winter day on which I accompanied Deacon to the studio, a fug of melting chocolate enveloped us. Various complex

sculptures by Deacon, Louise Bourgeois and Mike Kelley (a leg) were being cast in chocolate. Vats of chocolate bubbled away. A new clay piece of Deacon's was being constructed in the middle of the floor. Another sculpture had been bisque-fired and was waiting to be glazed by him. It was apparent that Deacon worked in a highly particular way in this studio: it seemed to be mutually interrogative. Questions were going in all directions. The largest horizontal kiln had just been opened, the firing chamber suspended on pulleys above it. Sitting inside on three huge kiln shelves was Deacon's newest piece *Another Kind of Blue* (2005).

It was vast. In terms of technique it was a brilliant accomplishment: a hermetic, single volume that seemed to shift its weight as you went round it. It comprises a series of planes with the surface given over to a series of blues. Plural colours: it was very definitely a painterly glazed surface, rather than an industrial glazed surface. It seemed to echo Malevich's Suprematist ceramics: Malevich's fierce white planes superceded by Deacon's fierce blues.⁵ Where his earlier series from 2001/02, *Kind of Blue*, were open structures made up of repeated formal structures – tubes, ellipses – this offered no apparent way in. You wanted to go round and round it to see how the different planes met up. It felt both satisfyingly complete, a thing in itself, and yet quizzical. A little like Hamlet's whale. This was all the more compelling because with Deacon's sculpture we feel we should know, and understand, the ordering of the making, the building of

his sculpture. Even if it is a chimera we have come to expect that way in: the rivets, the glue at the joints, the stitching. Its all there for us to see: the fabrication is transparent. With this piece its hiddenness was startling and affecting. And with ceramic it is doubly so as ceramic has made such a virtue out of its transparency.

Also at the studio was the 2004/05 piece *The One Behind the Kiln, or Throw*. It is an open honeycomb structure made up of repeated thrown cylinders stacked on their sides so as to produce myriad view points. Some views are clear, some are blocked. Some of the edges are broken, giving the sense that it could be part of a greater whole. It is clearly made of hand-made components, but the repetition is on the cusp between the industrial and the organic. It is a map of voids, a chart of interiors, a structure constructed from absences. Deacon has a long interest in how to contain space: his work with welded polycarbonate, or his bentwood sculptures have often played with ideas of how to contain volumes. This is the repeated drama that we are invited to witness. But like many of Deacon's most compelling works, it is the pull between the detailed passages of lyricism (the pooling and fluxing of glazes, the interstices between the joined elements) and the cerebral nature of the overall structure that is so exciting. This is the sensation that the American philosopher John Dewey in his seminal book *Art and Experience* anatomised as the flight and perchings of a bird – the pull between the

activity of the eye and its rest. Dewey stressed the repetitiveness of this activity, suggesting that in a great work of art this experience was endless.⁶ In this piece of Deacon's there are a series of unfolding images and ideas. Firstly it is iterative: it reflects the nature of repetition itself. Secondly it is about making, but it is also about dismantling: it is a piece whose fragmentary nature might indicate that it is still being made or still being unmade. Thirdly its imagery is unsettling. It oscillates between stacked scrolls, and the stacked bones of an ossuary. Even Deacon's titles for it oscillate between the highly particular and the expansively general.

This unsettled feeling was present in the endless conversation about the placing of the work, watching the placing of the work. The one behind the kiln...the one in the kiln...This was more than curatorial dexterity, acuity about where the work looked best, worked hardest, it was more the knowledge that how you approached the sculpture changed your responses radically to it. This is something that Deacon has always concerned himself with, playing with expectations and framing devices for his sculpture. Recently in his curation with Clarrie Wallis and Lizzie Karey Thomas of the exhibition of medieval sculpture *Image And Idol* at Tate Britain in 2001/02 he challenged both the conventions of display (plinths work only in this way) and the idea that you can re-display. Given how engaged he is with movement it is no surprise Deacon encourages movement around his sculpture, but also through it,

as with his sculpture *Red Sea Crossing* in the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York in 2004. This is intriguing because we are used to white cube spaces being admonitory, asensual, asomatic temples, an apparatus for 'single-sense epiphanies' as an American critic put it.⁷ Deacon wants epiphanies to be fully embodied.

This unease is even clearer in *Gap 1-8* (2004). This is a series of undulating forms made from thrown and joined components that are to be placed near each other to make up an installation that will stretch through the great curved vitrine in Tate St Ives. They are forms that are on the move, slightly ameoboid 'a visual meditation on the logic of organic growth itself' to borrow the words of Rosalind Krauss.⁸ Open at both top and base, you are highly aware of the forms as a kind of three dimensional drawing in space. Their volume, their vesselness, is displaced. Near to each other they give the impression of pushing and pulling, of systole and diastole. The cuts or vents that mark the points of transition let the air in and let the air out. This work could have been made from extruded sections of clay, cut up and pasted together. But it is made from thrown vessels – superbly thrown by his German ceramic assistant Anna Zimmerman – where the curve is always the same, but the top and bottom radius are different.

In *Gap 1-8* you have a strong sense of play. One of the aspects of play is an upending of the linearity of narrative: endings are not discrete, they are generative and provisional. It is this sense of the provisional

1 Richard Serra quoted in Rosalind E Krauss *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT 1981 page 276.

2 cf *Slip: Artists in the Netherlands and Britain working with ceramic*, De Hallen/Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts 2002.

3 Gauguin by himself ed by Belinda Thomson London 2004 page cf also Merete Bodelsen *Gauguin's Ceramics*, London 1964.

4 cf Garth Clark *Hans Spinner*, New York 2002.
5 cf Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky *Revolutionary Ceramics Soviet Porcelain 1917-1927*, London 1990.
6 John Dewey *Art as Experience*, New York 1934.

7 Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimlett quoted in *Empire of the Senses*, edited by David Howes Berg 2005 page 267.
8 Krauss *ibid*.
9 Richard Deacon quoted in *?????*.

10James Elkins *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts*, London 2000 pp.
11 Deacon quoted in *?????*.
12Elkins *ibid* p?.

rather than the emphatic, the contingent rather than the rooted that mark out Deacon's sculpture. As he wrote in 1996 of a sequence of images, it 'is constructed by association, one thing leading to another in a variety of ways. The images, of complex shapes or momentary or indefinite events, allow this kind of associative interconnectivity. Complex and allusive patterns have often been used as signifiers or portents, whether of the weather or of gods: or of the actions of armies, or of individuals. Clouds, smoke, entrails, the flight of birds, the fall of sticks, the spread of tea leaves, the scatter of dust: such patterns are divined, the future is guessed. Randomness (or complexity) allows for reading, opens horizons of possibilities..' ⁹ In a parallel way Miro, Picasso and Fontana all upended the rootedness of ceramic objects and treated vessels as in some ways found objects, susceptible to the conditions of surrealist exchange, randomness. Vessels were starting points, not conclusions. Deacon takes this on, and uses the memory of the thrown pottery vessel within the work. *Gap 1-8* is 'associative interconnectivity': it is also a subtle and rather beautiful use of a material that has been through a process. Thrown clay – like laminated wood – is a stressed material that has a memory. It moves. It meanders.

'Meandering' is what the art historian James Elkins in his book on the writing of art

history, *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts*, discusses in his attempt to recover creative possibilities in writing. Elkins, perturbed by the faux rigour of contemporary art history with its dogmatic sets of rhetoric, sets out to enjoy the experiences, the 'rhythms... general directions...swerves and turns' that he encounters in writing on art. He is particularly attentive to Deacon's 'one thing leading to another', quoting Webster's definition approvingly that to meander is to 'wander aimlessly or casually and without urgent destination', in this case among the works and texts of the history of art.' He suggests that shifting, unpredictable encounters are creative. Furthermore he suggests that 'Meandering is...geometrically complex. A person who is meandering does not accomplish directed work, such as mapping, building or surveying; each of those activities is more programmatic than meandering.' It is also 'furtively autobiographical': 'the patterns of moving, pausing, sitting, glancing, and moving on all find voice in the narrative and...in the succession of narratives on a single object the kinds of tradition I have been sampling.' And fourthly 'like art history, meandering is inconsistent even though it can appear deliberate. A meandering stream is an inconstant thing, sometimes flooding its banks, other times receding and forming short-lived islands, or creating brakes and backwaters, and always dividing and redividing itself'.¹⁰

This is a great correspondence with Deacon's approach to the metaphoric possibilities of meandering. Deacon has written that 'the classic example is the turbulent flow in certain liquids – there's a point where the liquid is moving too fast for there to be anything coherent about it and another point where the liquid is moving slowly and it's entirely coherent. But there's a point between these two at which ordered pattern emerges, in the form of vortices, ripples, and eddies. This is what interests me, this openness that emerges between those two states – it's not to do with generating a pattern from a mathematical program, it's to do with this point of transition between order and disorder, where different kinds of ordering emerge.'¹¹ Elkins' uncovering of a narrative of meandering within the writing of art history, with its powerful imaging of flowing water has a direct parallel with Deacon's apprehension that his sculpture, geometrically complex, unprogrammatic, full of swerves and turns, is concerned with a 'different kind of ordering.'

Deacon's new sculpture in clay is compelling. Those moments when movement – spatial or linguistic – are captured, are moments of great beauty. They are contingent moments, ceasuras rather than full stops, 'fictions of stability'¹² places where it is possible – indeed necessary – to see constancy even when we are well aware of flux.