

RICHARD CORK/RICHARD DEACON

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At first glance, your work seems to belong to an abstract world filled with machine-age surfaces -- polished, gleaming and riveted at the edges. The forms you produce are often taller and more substantial than the people who encounter them, but after a while they also seem full of references to eyes, mouths or limbs. In spite of the industrial materials you often deploy, your sculpture appears intimately related to our own most intimate bodily experiences. Your work can inhabit an outdoor setting with confidence, stretching wing-like forms reminiscent of a bird about to take flight. But you are also at ease on a stage, producing monumental coloured objects for the Rambert Dance Company in a performance called *To My Face*. Here in your South London studio, you are hard at work preparing for a show in Plymouth. One of the largest works is already finished: a looming sculpture in laminated wood which makes spectacular use of the glue squeezed out of its sides. But the other exhibits, including one which reminds me of an outsize foot, are still being made, with careful attention paid to the methodical, openly exposed way in which one part is riveted to the next. Looking at your work, which won the Turner Prize in 1987, we are always acutely aware of how it has been put together. It cries out to be touched, crawled under or over, and explored from as many directions as possible. It repays our curiosity in full measure, changing in identity from soft to hard, dark to light, organic to mechanistic, as we walk round your work and discover how rich its mysterious, manifold meanings really are. In a sense, I suppose, having an exhibition in Plymouth is like returning to the place where you grew up. Although born in Wales, you spent most of your schooldays in Plymouth and even worked for a time in its Art Centre.

Deacon: I was at primary school in Hooe, when my father was in the air-force at Mountbatten. He had two sessions there, so I was at the school when I was five and six and again when I was eight, nine and ten. Then I was at Plymouth College from the age of eleven to eighteen. But that's not the reason why I agreed to do the exhibition. It was an opportunity to work ambitiously in a situation slightly off the mainstream. I mean, just looking at my exhibition history, those are situations that I value, because you get the opportunity to make something specific without feeling necessarily in competition with the history of the space. And from a personal point of view, there is an element of being intrigued about what it would be like to do an exhibition in Plymouth.

Cork: You're actually having a show in a gallery where you used to work on

a holiday job when you were fourteen, fifteen?

Deacon: Yes, and actually it was quite a good thing to do, because the difference between hanging art on the wall and looking at it in galleries is a major one. I have a memory of handling a Jackson Pollock, which is very different from seeing the same painting purely as a spectator. Since I was already interested in making things anyway, to handle art as physical objects seemed to be a good thing to do. The gallery is still in the same building, although it's extended. And as a teenager, there were not just cultural reasons for working in a situation where you got treated like an adult rather than a junior. To find that drinking and smoking were acceptable forms of behaviour was very refreshing. It was a good place to spend time because of that.

Cork: Were you set on the idea of being an artist at that age?

Deacon: No, I wasn't. What intrigued me about going to art school was partly that I really enjoyed making things, but I also thought that there was a possibility to find out about all sorts of different things that didn't seem determined -- in the way that, say, English or history or maths seemed determined. And I'm not sure that, when I first went to art school, I'd decided I was going to be an artist. It probably wasn't until I left the Royal College, some substantial time later, that I really decided I was going to be an artist, in the sense of engaging in the practice on a professional level. But neither had I ever imagined that I would stop pissing about in the way that I do in the studio. I mean, that seems to be vital to my ability to function in the world. But finally deciding that it was going to be the means not only of maintaining my equilibrium but also of attempting to earn my living, it took a long time before I could finally resolve that.

Cork: Why do you think it took such a long time?

Deacon: Well, it may have been a question of feeling comfortable with the description of 'artist' or 'sculptor' in relation to a practice which seemed to be almost personal. Most 'sculpture' seemed like something objective. But working in the studio, although it was fuelled by an acquaintance with art practice, gets its motivation from an internal dynamic and not from an external one.

Cork: So you didn't really want to fit in with any of the existing categories?

Deacon: I never really wanted to be any one kind of thing. I think one of the reasons that I always wanted to come to London was because I liked the privacy that London offers, by the sense of its size. So it had something to do with getting on quietly by myself, or having a kind of mental space. A physical space seemed to be what I was looking for in its public face, but I felt very awkward about the business of declaring 'I'm an artist.' That seemed to imply that what you made was 'art', and I really wasn't sure that was what I did -- in the sense that things that I deeply love and move me very much

belong to that category, and therefore to think of myself as the producer in that category just felt uncomfortable. It seemed different from being an accountant or an historian or a taxi-driver or whatever. Most of the other ways of making money didn't seem to be twenty-four-hour things. Some of them obviously are, and a lot of people are very passionate about the things they do. But in different ways, I think most of the time about what happens in this space.

Cork: Do you still have problems about being thought of as a 'sculptor'?

Deacon: I have no problem with it now. You know, I make sculpture. But I think that it took a long time to decide, because it seemed to be making claims for what I did that I didn't know, at that age, I could really support.

Cork: I'm very interested in the fact that, at art school, you were quite preoccupied with the idea of performance -- the idea of the body in action. It has remained with you, in different ways. For instance, you had a period in Chicago with a theatre company in the early 1970s. And you've done sculpture for dancers at the Ballet Rambert.

Deacon: And I like dancing.

Cork: Do you like to dance yourself?

Deacon: Yes, I enjoy dancing very much. I always have done.

Cork: How do you think this feeds into your art? Do you see it as a thread running through your work?

Deacon: I have been continually interested in the relationship of body to material, and the relationship of repetitive action to perception of time. Also, the relationship of self to a material world, as mediated through a body and labour. So I think of the sculpture as being in between me and the material world -- a world made of stuff and substance which is in some sense puzzling. I don't know how far one wants to get into the psychology or the history of those things, but I am preoccupied with the nature of the relationship between self, stuff and other. So that material substance seems to be a means of dealing with the animate and the inanimate, as well as modelling relationships to other people. Though there is always that difficulty of locating what you see at a distance with what you feel. The problematics of distance do seem to be quite close to the problematics of recognising the subjectivity of other people.

Cork: What's so fascinating about this sculpture, here in the studio, is that you see it first of all as a large, even a grand object, sitting there in its own right. And it seems quite abstract -- it's very formal and in some ways quite geometrical. But then I find a whole other response, which is surprisingly intimate. It seems to bear on my knowledge of my own body and the interior as well, not just the surface of it. You like that idea of something which has its own existence apart from you, and yet draws you in to relate to things

which are very intimate.

Deacon: Yes, if I can do that. I mean, if a physical object can transcend the boundary of subjectivity, then that seems to be what making art is about. In a nutshell, I think that my experience of looking at art is of physical substance transgressing subjective boundaries. It's not a uniquely art experience: it does happen in other situations. But those subjective/objective dialogues do seem to me a fundamental part of what I think of as important in looking at art, or in looking at dance. But it does rely on finding something in the way I feel about my body, and the way I use my body, that is hard to describe.

Cork: There's a whole series of works, stretching from the beginning of the 1980s right up to the present, that goes under the title of Art for Other People. Why did you call it that?

Deacon: Having made a group of larger works, I did actually want to make some smaller works which were rather like writing letters. I anticipated that they would end up in spaces other than art institutions -- in homes or flats, a whole variety of domestic spaces.

Cork: Not many people could fit one of your big pieces into their living room, could they?

Deacon: No, and so originally the title was fairly straightforward: these were a group of smaller works which I wanted to send out into the world for other people. But there is an ambiguity. Looking at the title in conjunction with the work, the question arises: if the thing is art for other people, then what is it for me? That becomes a question, and I think it's quite a positive ambiguity. I'm quite happy to retain it.

Cork: Looking at this sculpture, Richard, can you tell me what your starting-point for it was? How did it begin?

Deacon: I'd been doing some drawings for a proposal from Warwick University, and in the middle here, this was one the shapes that I'd drawn. At the time that I drew it, I was interested in having a look at it on its own, so I decided to do that. In principle, I'd wanted to try and make something that was a solid shape rather than a structured shape. Also, I'd done some work earlier this year with fibreglass, which is the first time I'd used it for something like ten years. I wanted to pursue working with it, but as a closed, sealed volume rather than a sheet which is the way I often use material. So the first thing was making the mould, though before we used the mould and cast it, at the same time I was making some of the aluminium sections at the back.

Cork: The actual object goes back quite a long way, doesn't it?

Deacon: Yes, and sometimes there are opportunities to make quite radical changes when you're working. That particular shape was actually very strong,

and something that I wanted to act as a guide. The kind of options I manipulated were to do with the place of this section in relationship to the other element that I was adding to it. Originally, I thought about this being bracketed by aluminium on both sides.

Cork: Oh, that would have been very different.

Deacon: Yes, I never did that because this was such a lovely thing, a seductive and sensitive object. I wanted this one side to be clear. Originally it was hollow and, as often happens with things that I make, I had always anticipated that this would be a vertical rather than a horizontal thing, forgetting that actually it doesn't stand up on that point. Somehow, in my mind's eye and all the time I was working on it, I managed not to notice the fact that it wouldn't stand up. It was only fairly late on that I realised, so some of the later changes are to do with addressing myself to that, rather than to things in the imagination.

Cork: Do you like to have a working method which allows you to change your mind, and to make drastic alterations as you proceed?

Deacon: Well, inherent in most of what I do is that possibility. What I don't like is to have a prescription. Except that I quite like rules, so I have a generative rule that then follows through and has quite major implications, in some cases, for the way it can look. So it's not absolutely arbitrary. But I like to have some sense, when I'm making something, that I'm not building according to a plan. So there is a sense of decision-making during the course of the thing. With this one, there was a prior decision about materials: there were two materials involved, and the fibreglass had an enclosed volume and I wouldn't like to squeeze it too much.

Cork: It just flows around, doesn't it?

Deacon: It didn't split up into bits, and opposed to that was the way in which the volume was constructed in the metal, by negation rather than affirmation. At least, certainly as it turns out here, on the internal shadowing of this form, so that there was a hollow space on either side which was the shadow of something of substance in the middle. If you stand over there, you get to a point fifteen feet away where all this internal construction disappears. And then that breaks up into the reflective surface at the back, a shadow of the hollow, and then on the other side you have something that's very much more prosaic, more matter of fact. And though one is just the inverse of the other -- there's nothing that happens on the outside which you can't see on the inside -- the difference between the character of the open body and the character of the closed body was perceptually very, very divergent. So that what you have, paradoxically, is something quite sensuous and rich -- a solid shape which is clearly defined and without any bits that fly off -- and on the outside you have something much more constructive and therefore, in a sense,

unnatural, artificial, more prosaic, with very little ambiguity.

Cork: Yes, it's a fairly plain statement from this side. And also, of course, what you've got here, very clearly exposed, is how it's made. That's one of the great characteristics of so much of your work. I'm very aware, when I look at it, of how it's been put together -- the nuts and bolts, as it were, are declared on the surface of the piece. Why is that so important to you? Why do you like to do that?

Deacon: There are a number of reasons why, I think. A lot of the time, when I'm using sheet material for joining one edge to another, the way in which you make your join is like a kind of drawing, and a certain amount of detailing becomes a means of defining. There's also the possibility of making inside and outside -- the logic here, for example, is that the screws are always on the outside of the bend, so that the heads appear. Whereas here, the points appear, so there is a very rational reason: it's much easier to make than it is to make an internal angle that's a bit tight. And I think also that things I've made in the past have tended to slightly strip apart where the tab is independent of the two bits they join. And at one point I started to throw the edges together, and then I began sewing the edge, wanting to make it have a degree of precision and exactitude. In other work, where two get opposed and you get something that opens up, the question is why. There isn't really an answer. In the early work I did in the late Seventies, I often found myself with a problem where a and b met. The meeting of the two parts became a focus of attention, but it wasn't particularly the focus of intention. I began to look for ways of making work which would allow the attention to be dispersed across the surface, so that the quality of attention to any one part wasn't either more or less than in other parts. So the use of this kind of detail was a means of plastering your attention over the whole extent of the work, while at the same time maintaining a matter-of-fact character to that line. Also, it does have something to do with drawing, and the relationship between how you construct an edge and how you construct a line. But in laminating and the way I work with sheet metal, the kinds of repetitive techniques that I employ are a result of a fairly desperate search, at the beginning, for a means of making work which disperses over its whole surface -- without detracting from the constructive nature of the thing.

Cork: And the reason why you address our attention to the whole surface is because you want to invite us to look at the sculpture as a totality, rather than getting hung up on particular details?

Deacon: Well, the sculptures are intended to be whole objects.

Cork: Does this sculpture here, Richard, does it represent a development of what has gone before, or represent some kind of change?

Deacon: I don't think I'm an artist who changes very fast. I'm an artist who

works with a developing language, if you like. So that a year ago, just after my Whitechapel show in 1988, I was beginning to feel that I didn't know whether I needed to change the work. But I also didn't want to get into a panic and say: 'this has to be different'. Most of the decisions that I've made in making the work are actually quite formal decisions. The question of departures doesn't necessarily come up, but neither do I feel that one starts work thinking: 'oh, let's make that one again.' Somehow, a kind of originality has become a given in art education, in terms of the way that people discuss art as being almost a sort of marketing. And I'm not sure that's really the issue, whether this is radically new or whether it's pushing within recognised territory. I've become more interested in the nature of the body clothed by the outside of the work. But I've also wanted to have some sense of substantial, fleshy structure, or being, present as a component within the work.

Cork: So when you talk about a body, you don't necessarily mean a human body?

Deacon: Although my work does not represent the human body, some elements do have a sense of substantial flesh. The large work upstairs in my Whitechapel show had that sort of presence. It may well have to do with starting to make larger projects, like the work at Munster or the commission in Toronto, picking and handling material which has a massive weight. Whereas by only working in the studio, which doesn't have heavy lifting gear, there is a limit to the mass of material that I can use.

Cork: Yes, your early work was much more open, wasn't it? Much more skeletal sometimes.

Deacon: Extremely, intentionally light. But I think the concern seems to flow all the way through, in particular this almost double concern with the body on the one hand and, on the other, materials that you use when you're very aware of the machine age, the industrial age, the world that we live in.

Cork: Do you feel that they are in any way in conflict?

Deacon: I don't think the work does imply that. But when you carve there's a consistency of structure, and when you model there's a sense of the armatures generating the surface form. Working with a sheet material -- bending, folding, laminating, sewing -- whatever I do to it, there is a sense in which the exterior isn't predicated on the interior. So the interior remains open to interpretation. I tend to describe the work as an envelope rather than anything else, and that relationship is quite a critical one. The kind of material that I've used has been arrived at by looking for a material that I could use as the structural skin at the same time.

Cork: How you obtain these materials?

Deacon: Well, I used to find materials, and now I tend to buy them. There is

no sense of the material as being unique. It doesn't have the value of particularity. Equally, the material itself is the product of manufacture, as the work is. So there is some relationship between the source of the material and the kind of material that I choose.

Cork: When I look at your work, I usually find that it suggests a whole variety of possible meanings. It seems to spawn interpretations: that's one of the excitements I find in your sculpture. I mean, this piece that we're looking at now: we've already talked about it in terms of a foot, perhaps. But it reminds me of other things like ramparts -- I get a feeling of a defensive wall. I also get a strange feeling of a billowing garment. Do you like the fact that people speculate about meaning, or would you like to control it more in the sculpture?

Deacon: I tend to think of the work as being materially and formally specific -- being a particular kind of thing and having some clarity to it. Clarity seems to me a crucial issue, so that when you look at something it seems to be distinct rather than a blur. The kinds of ambiguities that you mention are part of the way in which one handles one's perceptions. You bracket them according to different things. I don't actually think that there is an unlimited set of things that one can think of in relationship to any work. The foot/garment relationship in this work is the area it deals with, so it can be down to the ground and up in the air. On the other side, there is the sense of an empty passage through it.

Cork: Yes, it changes very much when you go round to the other side -- you realise that it has this hollowness, this sense of a flow through. It's not quite finished, of course, is it?

Deacon: No, there's another piece to go on the end, to bring it round to what I want to do with it. I don't particularly like talking about things before they're finished. But the intention somehow is, by bringing it round, to suggest that in these two ends the opening functions as both an active and a passive aperture. At the moment, I think the truncation doesn't seem to be as active as I would like it to be.