

Susan Daniel-McElroy Having seen your work evolve over the past 25 years, I am interested in the family of forms that has emerged, the different categories and the multiplicity of forms in certain materials. There is a very strong sense of rhythm and time in your sculptures, often playful happenings but generally things are never quite what they seem to be, depending on which way you look at your work. Can you tell us about the work in this new exhibition for Tate St Ives?

Richard Deacon Perhaps we should begin by talking about the works in the Courtyard and the relationship of the three sculptures there. There is one ceramic form that looks like its title, *Flower*, 2004. Then there is *Another Kind of Blue*, 2004, which is also ceramic – the title refers to a quality of form and colour in relation to the idea of blueness. The third work is stainless steel and called *Masters of the Universe*, 2005. Different approaches to likeness and relationships to likeness are used within the works. The idea behind *Masters of the Universe* has to do with the ways in which stars are grouped into constellations, it is a relationship that's dependent upon perception rather than actualities. Stars and galaxies in constellations don't have any relationship to each other they just happen to form a pattern that we perceive. The form of the constellations is purely arbitrary, simply to do with what we can see and our ability to pick up and to detect pattern of things in the sky. For example, a constellation like The Plough seems to trigger something that we like but actually those stars don't have a particular close relationship to one another. There are other stars in between them whose brightness we cannot see but the brightness we do see happens to trigger something for us. They are not patterns or clusters of stars, they are in 3D volume. *Masters of the Universe* has to do with drawing as a way of describing, a means of unifying points in space. It's not a representation of a star or anything like that, but the work refers to the way that humans conceptualize an image in order to represent it and that representation is a mastery, but it's an illusion.

SDM Which has real depth?

RD Yes, well there is an illusionary depth that is also in the steel. The way I am treating the surface gives you an illusionary depth. The three sculptures are all body size and therefore, you empathise with them. They are about your size and don't really dominate you, none of them are taller than you are, so your eye is always looking at or down on the object. The complexity of their relationship, of the ways in which these forms do or don't belong to each other, have qualities that reflect in each other. This is also a way of looking at the wooden works. I think it is a mistake to think that because wood is a friendly organic material that somehow they are friendly organic works or that nature belongs to those works because of their material. The material isn't used as an example of nature because it's not, (although all materials come from nature). The material is very heavily processed as you saw today - we do a lot of processing. In the

last few years, instead of buying wood as pre-machined, we've begun to process it in an extensive way. In order to begin to make a work there is a preparation of the material.

SDM But you are preparing the groundwork for this object which looks like nothing else, except it has references to other forms in its particular grouping?

RD Yes I'm making material, the material is in order to work, it's not necessarily connected to an individual product. I tend to think it more in terms of preparing material and less in terms of a final object.

SDM Are you thinking about chance and accident?

RD Yes, chance, accident and also wanting to keep my options open, I might add something or take something away.

SDM

Presumably as the process evolves you see things slightly differently and other ideas occur?

RD

Sometimes.

SDM

Do you find new possibilities which take you on a little further?

RD

Yes, but sometimes it's too complicated.

Going back to nature as a source, inevitably, because I use curved forms there is a certain kind of organic representation and there are relationships which do connect with nature. What do *you* mean by nature?

SDM

That which surrounds us, the light, the air, the rhythm of nature, the forms of the land, the pattern of organic growth upon it, the forms that are beneath those growths, be they rock or earth.

RD

Take *Flower* as an example, it is produced by hammering the clay rather than by growing outwards, in the same way that the head of a tool would mushroom under repeated blows. The form was evolved by hitting so it's not grown, it is not blossomed but splattered.

SDM

It does look like a blossom that is exhausted.

RD

The way the form is made is by hammering the top with a ring and continuously cutting it so it kind of spreads. *Another kind of Blue* has a couple of colours in it. The form comes from a piece of clay just thrown around the studio until it produced an elongated rhombus.

SDM

Or it could be a boaty thing?

RD

Yeah it could be a boaty thing upside down or a float.

SDM

Or it could be something you're looking into depending on how deep the blue is?

RD

Yes

SDM

A space into another space, but it strikes me all of those works in the Courtyard have a potential connection with nature.

RD

Ok yes. I have made works called *Kind of Blue* before. *Kind of Blue* is a Miles Davis album track. There were two other sculptures, one was a geometrical form and the second was a rather fleshy and pink and so blue in the sense of blue movies. The blue in this work is a deep blue together with other kinds of blues and it does have references; a boat, water, a blue whale, a bit of the sky, it has all of those kind of associations.

SDM

Can we talk about the context of the particular works in this exhibition? You have brought in association a range of ceramic sculptures which have a stainless steel work placed in relation to them and then a range of ceramic forms which are repeated, a set of multiples, an eight part work. Could you tell us something about the ceramic works?

RD

The consistent aspect in the relationship between the work in the showcase and the work in the curved gallery is to do with the repetitions and the multipart assembly. And

there is a quality of edge to be seen in the sculptures, the way in which the line draws the edge is very clear. The line is a continuous boundary to a discontinuous form.

SDM

The surface of the sculptures are very different throughout this exhibition.

RD

The works in the showcase have a rich surface glaze. The top and the bottom surface have a continuity of line, a white line, and what you see between the top and the bottom is broken and creates a very elaborate space with gaps in it – on the inside and outside of the form. So you have a complex active layer of space which is somehow contained between two contours. There is some sense in which the relationship of the edge to the surface of the big new wooden sculpture, *Restless, 2005*, has something of that kind of quality to it

SDM

Could you talk a little bit about preparing this exhibition? You are a reflective thinker, you teach in Paris, you read a lot and travel a lot and see a lot of other artists' work, there must be a philosophical underpinning in your work. Could you talk a little bit about that?

RD

Yes, but it's difficult to start without a specific question, I need to be led in to it really because I'm not a prescriptive thinker.

SDM

Are you an intuitive thinker?

RD

In talking to other artists who have a strong opinion about what a sculpture should be, I realize that I am more interested in what it could be. The difficulty of articulating the philosophical position is to do with wanting to maintain a degree of openness without it being seen as fence-sitting. The way I've always talked about ambiguity is to do with wanting to maintain an idea of potentiality in the work.

SDM

That's a very good way of putting it - an idea of potentiality keeps things open in terms of a reading and reduces the possibility of concepts in a work being pinned down. The forms that you make have a variety of potential readings which chimes with something you said elsewhere about the confluence of water. You spoke very eloquently about the shifting condition of water; there is a moment when it is moving fast and its form is incoherent and there's a moment when it is slower and you can read forms within it.

The idea of formalising momentarily a substance that is in a constant state of flux is a very evocative idea. What comes from your work often is this sense of movement and change. The changing state of an idea from one position or reading to another and a continual exploration or investigation or experimentation with the materiality of it, with no final resolution.

RD

The kinds of forms I have been interested in have changed from the eighties. Then I was more interested metaphor and I tended to use forms with likeness to other kinds of things. I was interested in the relationship of forms which echoed other things and I was interested in that 'looking like' as a relationship. And at some point I thought that a quality of equivalence is something that an amorphous form possessed and I set out to make forms without particular identity and became more interested in a certain kind of randomness, a certain sort of looseness of form-making. But at the same time that was part of a fairly elaborate making process and a rationalisation strategy in order to make it, so there is a tension between an openness of form and a complexity of making. The reason I think I was interested in that randomness had to do with the feeling that it was empowering in various ways. And I have approached it in lots of different ways in the recent past. For example, in the early nineties I was offered the opportunity to make a maquette for a commission for the Olympics in Atlanta and I started thinking about a kind of monument to the future. The actual future that I was interested in was a kind of future which had multiple possibilities. However, most monuments, most utopias are prescriptive rather than open. I began thinking about ways in which you can make a form that had an infinite variety of readings so that there was an infinite set of possibilities. The idea of the good being multiplicity of choice and multiplicity of reading. So this loose form came to seem very politically important. With the rise in fundamentalism, being indecisive seemed to be a positive position rather than a negative one. Allowing a multiple of possibilities seemed like a way you could change the future. I didn't get anywhere with the Atlanta commission but the end result of that thought process was a work in 1996 called *Laocoon*. Making works of that complexity is a very demanding and controlled process and, subsequently, I needed a different way of working. So yes the recent wooden forms very much result from a long period of thinking about the relationship between constructing loose form, constructing indefinite form and the kinds of processes that one went into in order to do that. I think also what was quite interesting was having the work open-ended. I notice that it is hard for me to keep the ends open in works - I do tend to close forms off and make closed loops. It's quite a struggle for me to open up the end. The new large sculpture we are making for St Ives is in some ways a continuation of some of the thoughts that went into *Laocoon* which is like a tangle, knot or cluster.

SDM

Doesn't *lacuna* mean space or gap?

RD

No that's a lacuna, Laocoon was the priest of Apollo in Troy who threw a spear into the wooden horse and was then carted off by the Trojans for blasphemy and tied up with his two sons on posts facing the sea. When two sea monsters came out of the sea, it was taken by the Trojans as an affirmation that he'd committed a blasphemy whereas in fact it was really a sign that he had sussed the Greeks concealed in the horse and, because the gods were on their side, they sent the snakes in! Laocoon was the originator of the aphorism 'Don't trust Greeks bearing gifts'. It is an entirely empirical way of approaching the world to say that if it's a wooden horse then the best thing to do is to stick holes in it to see if there is anything inside.

Laocoon, 1st C AD, is also what we call the statue that is in the Vatican which represents the incident with the snakes. I have various thoughts about the relationship between the curve and the straight in that sculpture. Iconographically the form is also in the painting by Poussin, *Landscape with a man killed by a snake, 1648* that I have talked about for a long time. The body of the snake in the painting is overwhelmingly vital and the looping curves unconstrained. By contrast the body of the dead man is like a rigid pole in the middle of it.

Complexity seems to me to be attached to values, not just a formal complexity but about the way we deal with or approach the world and the kind of feelings that we have about it. It's not just a kind of formal history that suggested to me to twist the wood this way and then twist the wood the other way. My thoughts always do return to some relationship between what the meaning of that might be or what the ramifications are in terms of an inside and outside in a sculptural form.

When I spoke about the fruitfulness of idle play, I wanted to suggest the opposite of the emphasis on work as a virtue. Idleness is the point when thought becomes deprogrammed and matter becomes conjectural. That's why I think it is very productive and in idleness you can do what I've been doing with this piece of plastic - playing with things brings new thoughts.

You doodle, you dream, everything becomes slightly detached and can become re-attached in surprising ways - that's what I think I am most interested in. In my experience working at something is often far less productive than taking the day off and coming back to do something the next day and just allowing things to have time, removing a bit of urgency.

SDM

Allowing your subconscious to have a bit of space?

RD

Now, it's difficult to take a day off two days before a deadline but I would recommend it as a way of balancing things out. You need idleness to be inactive...

SDM

Yes. Even in the garden you're thinking about other things.

RD

You don't think when you're idle? Or you can't think?

SDM

Well true idleness I think would be a state where you wouldn't do anything, you would have a blank mind and you would try to let your subconscious or what you do with your hands (or any part of your body I suppose) wouldn't be governed by any particular thought process. That's what I imagine.

RD

Ok all I was trying to say was that I thought that I was creative in absentia as much as I was creative by intention and that I think boredom is an interesting position to be in because being too bored to think is an unpleasant position to be in, but it does kind of produce.

SDM

Have you ever been too bored to think?

RD

Yes. It's unpleasant because actually what you want is someone or something to kill time.

SDM

And how would you kill time, what would be your favourite way?

RD

Killing time? It tends to be sitting down or lying down on the floor and trying to go to sleep, I don't really watch television; television is quite good for killing time. But I don't have a television. Another way of killing time would be to make mischief.

SDM

I want to ask you about the sculpture *UW84DC, 2001*, which was a very particular installation of related forms where one reading could be the broken forms of waves on the surface of an ocean. Could you talk about that work?

RD

The work is at least partially about language. Wittgenstein described language as a kind of terrain without a map we are parachuted into, whereas a Heideggerian concept is much more to do with a sense of it being the essence of what it is to be human. You are the spectator and *UW8* is both the necessity of time and also, punningly, the necessity of physical wait/weight. The sea is that which you are waiting for. I deliberately used the condensed language in order to reduce the romanticism of the title and because I wanted to suggest that you were looking at something you were waiting for. And that seemed to be quite significant.

SDM

The repeated, multiple gestures of the forms in *UW84DC* both bring you into the detail of that work but also you see the whole coherent form – in your mind's eye - as if from a distance. This is a very interesting sculptural proposition to highlight the ambiguity of perception.

RD

Depth is a shared invention, beyond a certain point depth disappears. To believe that the world is deep or that depth exists is a mental construct because we don't have a complete sense of whatever it is we are looking at.

SDM

So what you're saying is between the near and the far, what is nearest to you, you believe in, you see and seeing is believing. And what is far away you simply believe in because of your past experience?

RD

Yes

SDM

How much do *Individual* and *Couple* and *Restless* continue this evocation of the sea, are they still or are they suggesting something else in the world? Or are they just being?

RD

I think these forms are different because they have a different way of being banded together. On *UW84DC* the forms have little tabs which are quite musical, notational, rhythmic and quite light with screws going through to the other side. The new wooden sculptures have a continuous band of steel. They're much more emphatic, more controlled, much more frozen. And the edge is more important because it's thicker.

It's hard for me to say really until I really look at *Restless* when it is finished. The three previous sculptures evolved around a core of some sort. *Individual* is like a sort of immersion heater around a core, there are three different layers wrapped around a central core like a rigid body of some sort. When I think about it I suppose it's quite like that *Laocoon* image that I've talked about before - surprisingly.

SDM

Yes but only as it happens, not deliberately?

RD

Yes not deliberately. I'd intended it to be something wrapped around. They are refinements of things that have been developing for a while. *Individual* and *Couple* and, to some extent, *Slippery When Wet, 2004*, go back to the fragments of *UW84DC* and actually take them seriously as discrete items. You've got one work which is wrapped around a core, the second which is two skew lines joined by curves. Then the third work has a core but the elements spray off it almost like a cartoon image of a screwed up dish-cloth with water spraying off it. All those sculptures were about the idea of a centre and the relationship to a centre or to a spine. In the newest work the images are tangled - not a knot - I started by wrapping lead around and around; then there was a piece of string, this was the kind of doodling exercise that we talked about. I was trying to work out what it was that I was reaching for. I knew I had an itch and I was kind of scratching it. I wanted to try and find a way to describe this. I could kind of sit down and draw a motion but was then trying to work out what that was or how that really worked, or just the kinds of things that I wanted to do. The solution lay in using what we already had in terms of a repertoire of forms and wondering how they might go together. There's a very creative part of my relationship with Matthew Perry at that point, where he then produced models from the curves that we already had.

SDM

So you manipulated your lead and your wraps and string and you showed that small maquette to Matthew who then makes a larger model?

RD

No. Matt modelled an existing repertoire of shapes and produced parts of a possible larger structure using that repertoire which we then assembled together into a definite form.

SDM

But at that stage you don't know what the sculpture is going to look like in its final form?

RD

It's very close to the model. In the case of the work for this show, we wanted to work from a model to save time but also the physical sections are quite large and difficult to handle. It's pragmatic. I knew I wanted to work with thicker sections, with six planks rather than three wide. The relationship between the edge and the width has become more dramatic and it follows a curve in a more obstructive way - like a moving wall. Handling them and playing around with them in space would have been quite difficult as they're heavy. So it was better to have a model as a guide that we could work from. And yes it saves time.

SDM

Did you use aluminium because it has it's own innate curvilinear quality?

RD

Well yes but the curves had to follow the curves for the jigs that we already had. They are precise.

SDM

In terms of numbers, there is presumably an infinite number of possibilities for putting things together?

RD

Yes but there's only so many forms that one's interested in. And there are some curves that you can't put together.

SDM

How does something like the ceramic work *Gap 1-8* sit with the wooden sculptures? What is the relationship?

RD

Well I think they are very close because they are made from pre-thrown elements and which have been then cut up and built.

SDM

But the new wooden sculpture takes your eye through quite a number of planes which seem to be quite complex, exciting and dynamic. You try to see the whole but you can't, it is impossible to see the work as a whole. There is always a bit you don't see. That is really fascinating and the form is so complex in its parts, it is difficult to remember.

RD

Yes I think that is more interesting, though I can remember my sculptures quite well, but they are getting more complicated.

SDM

Presumably that's the internal relationship with your sculptures?

RD

Yes but I tend to have short-hand notational images of them.

SDM

Could you tell us whether music influences the titles of your works?

RD

Yes, I listen to a reasonable amount of music and it probably was very formative. I listen to quite a lot of jazz and I think jazz improvisation is not dissimilar to some of the things that I do, but, I wouldn't want to over play it. When I'm making work I am more preoccupied with something that is everyday rather than things which are in the abstract. Sitting by the stream and looking at the difference between the surface of the water and the stuff in the bottom of the water does produce ideas. I've always said one of my favourite things is clean water in a galvanized bucket because there's some extraordinary way in which the clarity of the water describes the volume of the bucket. There's a marvellous clarity where the surface of the water is present and absent at the same time. The volume of water in the bucket is present and highlights that beautiful silvery zinc colour of the bucket. A real crystalline light is present and captured within it. All it is is water in a bucket. I can relate to that notion of the zone between the bottom of the stream and the top of the stream where there's something that is energetic and exciting.

SDM

Are there any contemporary artists that you find inspirational?

RD

Thomas Schütte is one of the people that I really look at a lot. He is an extraordinarily complex and interesting artist. I've been looking at Judd again recently having looked at his work closely in the seventies. I went to Marfa, Texas, where Judd lived from 1979 as I was interested in what the last sculptures looked like - and they're wonderful. What I've always liked in Judd and I think, where he was important to me, is to do with the way in which the materials he used were real, ordinary or everyday but were also a surface so there was a relationship between the surface appearance and an empty interior. They retained their foothold on the world whilst enclosing a volume of space and influencing the space around them. There is that relationship with the way in which a thin swathe of material is banded inside and outside and I found this extremely

influential early on. The work in Marfa becomes quite transcendent, things disappear when you look at them, to do with the way they respond to light. There is also a very particular sense of location.