

Brendan Davis interview with Richard Deacon

Art Interview: You were born in Bangor, Wales in 1949. How long did you live in that area?

Richard Deacon: My father was in the military, so we moved around a lot. The reason I was born in Bangor is my mother wanted to stay with my grandmother when I was born. We left Bangor when I was four weeks old, though we visited my grandmother there every summer until I was five.

Art Interview: What did your parents do for a living?

Richard Deacon: My mother was a surgeon, and my father was a military pilot.

Art Interview: That's why you were travelling so much when you were younger? Was your mother working for the military as well?

Richard Deacon: Yes, until she got married. She was a Medical Major in the Indian army during the war. In fact, my parents met on a boat travelling to India, and they later got married there. After my mother came back from India, she worked as a Locum doctor, from time to time.

Art Interview: Did your parents have an influence on your decision to become an artist?

Richard Deacon: No, not that I was aware of, but they didn't oppose it either.

Art Interview: Did your travels as a child have an influence on your creativity?

Richard Deacon: I think travelling as a child had a big influence on the way I am as a person, but it is hard to know to what extent that impacted my creativity. When I was five, my family moved to Sri Lanka, and we spent two and a half years there. The difference between 1950s UK and Sri Lanka was pretty extraordinary. That time provided many rich experiences for me which were innocent and extremely formative.

Art Interview: In 1968 you did your foundation course at **Somerset College of Art** in Taunton, Somerset, England and took courses taught by **John Hilliard**, **Ian Breakwell** and **Rose Finn-Kelcey**, who were actually just a little bit older than yourself?

Richard Deacon: Yes, they were not very much older than me at all, but they did seem much more certain at the time.

Art Interview: How did the late 1960s help to inform your conceptual intellect as an artist?

Richard Deacon: I went to **Somerset College of Art** fairly naive about non-UK based art practices. There was a trip during the foundation course to London to see *Art of the Real*, the American lone show, and I remember fairly clearly seeing a vertically-stacked **Donald Judd** piece and having absolutely no idea what I was looking at, though I remember distinctly there was purple acrylic layered in the stack. I have a very crisp visual memory of it. There were also a couple of **Frank Stella's** in that show - not the black ones, but the coloured ones - and those I could understand more. It was quite a strong experience. Fairly shortly after that, though, I had a much clearer handle on the **Judd**, after seeing much more of it. *Art Forum* wasn't available in **Somerset College of Art's** library, but it was in **St. Martins'** library. U.S. based practices were not yet perceived as international, despite them being pseudo-international. I felt that Pop was a new generation, and was kind of where it was at. Discovering American conceptual practices did chime in somehow. I was also reading *AD Magazine*, so I knew a bit about architectural practices and polygram, those kind of conceptual practices. In terms of conceptual artwork, that was a blank to me until I got to **London**.

After the foundation course at **Somerset**, when I went to **St. Martins School of Art**, it took me awhile to get up to speed. I was aware of **Rose Finn-Kelcey's** work and of **Breakwell's** performance work, but what was happening in the United States in the 1960s had passed me by. But by the beginning of the 1970s, I was well aware of minimal and post-minimal conceptual work.

Art Interview: Did you find professors who were supportive of your work When you entered **St. Martins**?

Richard Deacon: I was in a very intensive new program at **St. Martins** that bred a great deal of interaction between its students and staff. This was sometimes positive and sometimes negative, but it forced us not to look to external models for our work, but to internalize the individual practices we applied to our work so that we might then recognize those solutions in works of other artists. I feel the course was successful

because it taught us to think for ourselves and also to think through other models of practice.

Art Interview: You were focusing on performance there, is that correct?

Richard Deacon: I did a lot of performances, yes, that is correct. But, all the performances that I did were basically questions or materials concerning the linearity of time, the impact of one's actions in the world, and the impact to the agent who made those actions.

Art Interview: Did performances like *Stuff Box* lay a foundation for your current work?

Richard Deacon: Well, in some ways, yes. They raise questions about materiality and also open up the various ways in which things can take on meaning. The kinds of action you make on a material can become less instrumental and more about the relationship to meaning.

Art Interview: How has writing evolved into an intricate part of your practice?

Richard Deacon: Writing is an intricate part of my practice. At **St. Martins**, a lot of the work I did was initially propositional, and writing contains supposition and proposition. I also became dissatisfied with photography as a way of recording events. I began, through the medium of description, to start recording my actions over an extended period, using writing to de-privilege the photographic moment. I would record an action by describing it, rather than filming it or using still photography. I occasionally still record using still photography, but in between the various moments that are photographed, I will write and describe the photographs. Writing was, in the early stage, closely linked to the practice, but the two things kind of fell off of each other. At some point, I found writing a documentary vehicle and constructed it to be a bit cumbersome and then wanted the objects to stand for themselves. Also, my writings became separated and more essay based or critically based.

Art Interview: What led you to attend the **Royal College of Art** for your MA? Did you find a nurturing environment there?

Richard Deacon: I left **St. Martins**, and I was not in an art school for two years. I felt incomplete. The Department of Media Art in the **Royal College of Art** seemed to offer a

place for someone who had my kind of skill set, which is located in relationship to sculpture but slightly peripheral to it. By the time I got to the **Royal College of Art**, I had made a decision that I wanted to pursue an object based practice. I liked the people in the environmental media department better than the people from the sculpture department. What I found interesting was that all of us were doing very different kinds of things. We not only looked at what they were, but to who was doing what in relationship to our own individual history and also in relationship to the context we imagined ourselves to be in. Each of us had constructed very different ideological apparitions to describe our activities, and yet we still had to find ways to talk to each other. In the sculpture department, you could assume you were doing sculpture because you were in the sculpture department, but I couldn't just assume I was doing environmental media because, that category didn't really exist in the environmental media department.

Art Interview: Did you have a difficult time finding your place as an artist once you left college?

Richard Deacon: In my third year at the **Royal College of Art**, I felt I was rather drawn out of that institution, and I began looking for studio space outside of the school where I could continue my work. There was an abandoned factory near where I was living, and I began exploring the possibility of using part of it as a studio space, and then it turned out that the entire building was available. I contacted **Acme** (www.acme.org.uk) asking them if they would be interested in having a studio, and they were. So, before finishing at the **Royal College of Art**, I spent my time building this studio complex and actually working for **Acme** (www.acme.org.uk). It was very important to me to have a studio. I also persuaded the other artists that it would be interesting to have a communal space there that was already paid for in our rent that we could use as a gallery or a showing space. The market was relatively dead in the 1970s. So, our idea was, "if we can't go to the world, the world will come to us" by having a gallery space. I did a show in this gallery space before I left for America. I showed the works that I had done in the previous five years which I thought were worth seeing. I was then fortunate enough to go to the United States for a year, and I kept the studio going while I was away in the States. Since my wife had a scholarship, I didn't have to earn money while I was there.

Some artists from the studio like **Bill Woodrow** (<http://www.billwoodrow.com/>), **Wolfgang Laib**, and **Jean Luc Vilmouth** (<http://www.jlvilmouth.com>), and I created a program of exhibitions when I came back from the States. There was some interest at the time for sculpture in the UK, tied in with the shows **Tony Cragg** (<http://www.tony-cragg.com/>) and others were doing in various places. The activities in the studio complex inspired a certain amount of interest, possibly because what was going on in *Object and Sculpture* at the **ICA** (<http://www.ica.org.uk/>) was enormously successful, and that had a big impact on how the works were perceived critically.

Art Interview: Did you have an active part in bringing critics into the space?

Richard Deacon: Yes, I have always gotten on well with certain critics. Both **Mike Fox** and **Lynne Cooke** were interested. There was a lot of discussion going on. The market remained the same for a couple of years, before **Saatchi** came along in 1984 and bought a whole lot of my work. Then the market started to change.

Art Interview: How were you surviving financially when you were running the studio? Did you have a part-time job?

Richard Deacon: I was teaching part-time in **Winchester**, **Sheffield** and at **Bath Academy**. So, I was doing three or four days of teaching per week.

Art Interview: You have taught consistently throughout your career. Why would an established artist such as yourself teach?

Richard Deacon: There are two reasons I like teaching. It's a good way to not become self-obsessed. Students are very interested in you as a famous artist for about five minutes, and then they are interested in what you can give them. They are interested in their own work. I also happen to like 20 to 30-year-olds as an age group. I get on well with them, and I like their energy and the way they see the world. I have taught both studio art and art history. I had a professorial role in Paris and now in Bristol, and I like that system.

Art Interview: In 1983, you had a solo exhibition at **Lisson Gallery** (<http://www.lisongallery.com/>). How did you develop a relationship with them?

Richard Deacon: Through **Tony Cragg**. In *Object and Sculpture*, **Tony Cragg** recommended **Nicholas Logsdail** to show my work. Nicholas was already familiar with the works.

Art Interview: Was **Lisson Gallery** a catalyst for your career?

Richard Deacon: Well, I would say I am the catalyst for the gallery. I don't particularly give priority to **Lisson** as the most important factor. Obviously, **Lisson** has a different kind of audience that I can't reach because, as an individual, I don't have access to European museums or to collectors.

Art Interview: In 1983, your career began in earnest. You were involved in the **Sao Paulo Biennale**, the **Serpentine Gallery** (<http://www.serpentinegallery.org/>), and the **Tate Gallery** (<http://www.tate.org.uk/>). You suddenly became very active. I'm curious, what factors supported that change?

Richard Deacon: I think it was a whole number of factors that came together, rather than any particular one. It was important to have the support of people like, **Nick Serota** (http://www.tate.org.uk/archive/journeys/historyhtml/people_dir_serota.htm), **Meryl Wilson** from the **British Council** (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/new/arts/>), and **Nicholas Logsdail** from **Lisson Gallery**. **Nick Serota** was the selector for the **Sao Paulo Biennale**. **Meryl Wilson** was both from the British Council and also the buyer that year for the **Arts Council** (<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/>), working as an exporter. **Michael Newman's** (<http://www.saic.edu/webspaces/arthi/faculty/newman/Newman.html>) articles were quite influential, particularly the ones in *Art in America* (<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/>). So, the Americans started to become interested.

Art Interview: Did you experience a learning curve in regard to production with the increase of the number of exhibitions you were involved in?

Richard Deacon: I was working on about two pieces a year until 1982 when I produced a great deal more by creating a group of small works. By 1984 I have gotten someone to help me make something for the first time. A set of studio practices was established by then but money was particularly tight. 1983 and 1984 were extremely risky times, financially. Exhibitions were in demand, but I had no idea where the money would come

from. I felt that I had to fulfil my commitments, and I hoped there would be some financial income coming back. When you have no money, any debt is a big debt and I had a young family to tend to. I was very fortunate to have a financial bank manager who tolerated the state of things and was willing to take a chance on me, as I didn't have a big overdraft. I was writing to him on a monthly basis, giving him assurance that things were good and that I was working. He enabled me to transfer my crippling anxiety on to him. It is very hard to think creatively when you have those kinds of money worries. It is a disaster for an artist if you think you must make things to sell.

Art Interview: Were you aware consciously or subconsciously that you were heading towards a great career?

Richard Deacon: I have considerable amount of self-confidence, so yes. If I had decided to be too cautious, I would have regretted it.

Art Interview: How did winning the **Turner Prize** (<http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/abouttheturnerprize.shtm>) affect you?

Richard Deacon: Actually, what was more important was being nominated in 1984. That changed the way my works were being perceived. Winning the **Turner Prize**, in 1987, didn't seem to change things for me because it was after a period when I had done an enormous amount.

Art Interview: In 1990, you received your first public commission to do the work *Between the Eyes*. That is a very different type of work for you.

Richard Deacon: Yes, although I had done some work outdoors at the **Serpentine Gallery**, which was manufactured on a large scale.

Art Interview: Was it a big change in process for you to actualise public commissions?

Richard Deacon: There was a big change in terms of scale. Although I had made large objects in the studio before, and I have a structural engineer helping me, in retrospect, I think it was a more significant a change than it appeared at the time. There were more people and details involved. It was supposed to be at the site for a longer time period, and it addressed a very different type of audience. I did an entire group of works in 1991 and 1992 in Toronto, Vienna, Auckland, and Zaragoza. I had to learn very quickly how

to respond to the site, how to ask questions within a specific context, and how to talk to different sorts of makers. Obviously, the most important part is the relationship of the work to the site and the idea of permanence.

Art Interview: Do you feel that there are inherent differences in scale?

Richard Deacon: Well, there shouldn't be. But, it is certainly true that the group of works I made in the early 1990s were the biggest that I have ever done. At some point, I started to wonder if it was necessary to make large objects for outdoors and about the role of scale in making public works. I began thinking of much smaller scale works, like the ceramics. But to begin with, I made off site models. It is very important for me to make objects that are specific to the site. The big change from studio practice is that for most studio work I produced I would choose works to a suit a particular exhibition space, though making the work always preceded that. Whereas with public commissions, the site was an integral part of the way I thought about it from the start.

Art Interview: Have you experienced contrasting situations with the various public commission boards that you have worked with?

Richard Deacon: Yes, some were better than the others. *Between the Eyes* is central art project. Basically, the work takes up two floors of the building. The Canadians gave me a lot of power. If I wasn't happy with the way it was going and I walked, then they didn't get their permit to build. So, I was an important part of a very expensive building project. By contrast, the work for **Warwick University** (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/>) (*Lets Not Be Stupid*) was an act of patronage by one person and a gift to the university, so there was less negotiating to be done. The work in Toronto was enormous while the work for **Warwick University** was quite small. At **Warwick University**, the site was remnants of an old building, but in Toronto, it was a new building, so I was starting from nothing. I find it to be a more difficult situation when both the artwork and the building arrive at the same time. I prefer to work with existing architecture remnants of some sort. In one instance, in Krefeld, Germany, I actually worked in relationship to the future. The planners said they had an idea of what they wanted to do with the site, but if we put something down for them, it might help them know where to go next. That is the only time I have had that kind of

experience, where the art comes first and the construction is allowed to go around it. Auckland and Toronto were both purpose-built central art projects.

Art Interview: Would you say that your style has evolved consciously or subconsciously?

Richard Deacon: I would say it has been a combination of both. I have done quite a lot of public projects, but I don't want to do just that. I actually prefer to do more exhibitions, and recently I have made more works that are exhibition-based.

Art Interview: It seems to me that you must wear two different hats simply due to the processes involved.

Richard Deacon: Yes. In one case, you have to say what you want to do before you do it, and in the other case, you have to do it and then decide if it's on your terms. Those are two very different approaches. It is rare for an artist to be able to do works they didn't have to tell the public about first. It is quite difficult when an artist has to explain their intentions to unknown groups of people. It takes away some of the drive to realize them.

Art Interview: How much of your work do you prepare through drawings when you are working in your studio?

Richard Deacon: There are very few works done through drawings. Some of my works go through a model making process; though it depends on which material I am working with. With wood, since I have been working with **Matthew Perry** for a long time, we have a shorthand way of talking about things. The way we try to work things out has to do with technical processes and making analogies, a small amount of model making, and discussions. The ceramic works started by being a model making process and then became much more diverse, sometimes they were more hands on and sometimes not. When working with metals, I sometimes work with industrial fabricators, and I need to have things slightly more specified than I might when dealing with fellow artists.

Art Interview: How did you begin working with the idea of using ceramics in an outdoor space?

Richard Deacon: When I started making ceramics, I realized a highly coloured ceramic object could function in an outside space in a unique way. A smaller ceramic work does

the same thing spatially as a large steel or another type of object, because the colour somehow does something outside.

Art Interview: What role does surface play and how much effect do you believe surface has on sculpture?

Richard Deacon: I pay close attention to surface, but I have a hard job painting it. I don't know if that has something to do with the relationship between how you read the material on which something is made, in relationship to the negative space that it contains. I have used things that act almost as fetish surfaces; like silk, vinyl or other similar materials. I have used glue as a way of manifesting something about the interior, which spreads to the outside. And I have used paint on the surface, as seen in most of the steel sculptures. But, I always stop short of putting a final coat on it. So, it's like I prepared to paint it rather than actually painting it.

With the ceramics, I liked that I could imagine what the surface would look like. Glazing is different from painting; the colour of the glaze you put on and what it looks like initially has nothing to do with what it looks like at the end. So, you can only imagine how it will turn out. It is that curiosity that drives me to glaze things. I always imagine a surface, and sometimes it turns out to be what I have imagined, sometimes it doesn't.

I think it must be difficult for painters, for example. Every time they put a mark down, they have to eliminate the memories of all other marks they have seen, the history that they know. Whereas in sculpture making, and particularly in assemblage, there is a less significant burden of history on the things you do to the material.

Art Interview: Would say that the material conveys an essence?

Richard Deacon: Essence, I am not sure about that, but I think material plays a role in my work. Let's go back to your question on the *Stuff Box* object. The notion of stuff is a continual thread that runs through the works.

Art Interview: It appears to me that you use the relationships between object and non-object, surface and form, negative space and positive space to emphasise the lyrical relationships between these opposing forces?

Richard Deacon: When I was young my parents took me to a place in Sri Lanka, where I saw the reclining cut out of rock. I remember very clearly the presence of that figure and the absence of the cliffs that it had been made from. I knew what was visible was there because something had been chipped away. But, what had been removed was still somehow present as negative space. In my mind they were both occupying the same space and time. It was a powerful experience for me to see both the Buddha and the cliff present at the same time.

Material acts as a positive entity, and its function is to enclose something that also exists as a positive entity. I think what you do to the material acts as a bridge between those two things, and a lot of my work maintains a dialogue between the existence of something and the non-existence of something. My work deals with materiality, both in relationship to corporal experience and also in relationship to seeing the world from the outside. The works also could represent internalization or externalization and flip between those two ways of seeing. The works maintain an ambiguity that sometimes seems to be alien and sometimes seems to be familiar.

Art Interview: One of my colleagues was commenting on how he felt that much of your work acts as containers of intimate spaces.

Richard Deacon: I think a lot of the work has a container element in it, and it also allows the room itself to become incorporated as a part of your awareness. It's not focusing only on the object, but on the space that surrounds you, in the same way that the works surround the space. The works function as a kind of skin or diaphragm, which you can have a dialogue with.

Art Interview: That being said, what is it about organic and gestural forms that attracts you in relationship to geometrical space?

Richard Deacon: Well, much of my work has geometry built into it. I always tend to resist the organic label, as it seems to bring with it a lot of other associations. I recognize there is a kind of biomorphic abstraction within my work, although I was never really sure the work was about that.

Art Interview: Do you work in the studio every day?

Richard Deacon: No, because I travel a lot. I teach in Düsseldorf, I have a studio in London, and I work with a fabricator in Cologne.

Art Interview: How many hours do you work in a day?

Richard Deacon: It depends. It can be between 10 and 14 hours. I like to wake up early and get in the studio about half past six, seven o'clock. I used to work nights, but I don't any more.

Art Interview: Within any single year of your career you have been able to complete an enormous amount of work, teach in various venues, actualise large public commissions, and exhibit in solo and group shows; how are you able to accomplish as much as you do?

Richard Deacon: Well, by having a lot of help, occasionally working long hours, and not worrying too much. Worrying doesn't help.

Art Interview: What day to day process do you employ in your studio?

Richard Deacon: In an average day, there is a fair amount of office work going on. I spend a lot of time following up on my projects, and I do some drawings and model-making. My active studio time is most likely to be the first thing in the morning and the last thing in the evening.

Art Interview. How many assistants do you employ?

Richard Deacon: I don't really like employing other people, in terms of working in the studio. So, I tend to adopt a kind of nomadic practice. I go to other people instead of having them come to me. The only person that I actually employ is my archivist.

Art Interview: You began working with **Matthew Perry** in 1984. How did that relationship develop?

Richard Deacon: I asked him for help one day, and it kind of developed from there.

Art Interview: Is he working primarily as a technical adviser or as a creative partner?

Richard Deacon: Sometimes he is at the level of a creative partner and sometimes at the level of a technical adviser. He gives an enormous amount of input on the wooden sculptures.

Art Interview: Who do you work with to actualise your ceramic works?

Richard Deacon: I worked very closely with a hand builder for a long time, but she stopped working. Now, I don't really know what is going on in the ceramic studio. I made the last groups of ceramics myself. The ceramic studio is moving from producing hand-built ceramics to a more technical kind of borderline ceramics. It's hard to know what's happening there. It's become more of an experimental area.

Art Interview: Are you producing works specifically for exhibitions, or do you try to ignore your schedule and produce as much as you can?

Richard Deacon: I produce directly for exhibitions, though I find that can be damaging creatively because it imposes deadlines, particularly when you are travelling. If you just try to produce work and make an exhibition based on what you have available, the exhibition itself will be more creative.

Art Interview: Do you experience up and down times?

Richard Deacon: I do, but I try to get around that.

Art Interview: How many works do you manage to accomplish a year?

Richard Deacon: It depends on the size. This year, I made three or four. Last year, I made a lot. I've had a horrendous exhibition schedule. For example, in 2008, I did twelve shows in one year. Luckily, I had a lot of stuff around. I had been pretty active in making things before that.

Art Interview: How many projects are you currently working on?

Richard Deacon: The exhibition that has been occupying a lot of my time in recent years has been the one in Strasbourg. It's a retrospective show that goes back to 1968. Organizing the catalogue, looking for works and making selections has been taking up a lot of my head space. I am also working on a show that will happen in October at a gallery in Paris. I also have work lined up for 2011 and 2012.

Art Interview: When it comes to international projects do you have a developed method for dealing with logistics?

Richard Deacon: Where pieces are located affects how you can think of them, either in terms of installation or potential availability. Since budgets are indefinite, we need to know about certain things before we start. Shipping works around the world is expensive, and you have to be sensitive about that.

Art Interview: Were you aware of what life as an artist would be like when you started in 1968, and has it lived up to your expectations?

Richard Deacon: I had no idea. I hadn't even imagined the possibility. I just knew I wanted to make things that were interesting. At that time I wasn't aware that being an artist could become a full-time job, although an art teacher of mine did have a professional profile.

Art Interview: How have your expectations changed throughout the years?

Richard Deacon: I don't know how to answer that. We are putting a show together now, and I said to Matthew, "I don't know how to do this. This is quite hard work. We're still working like we're 35 years old, and we're not." So, there are physical limitations that happen which will probably have some impact on what we do. There must come a point when we won't be able to move heavy things around. I don't think I have the ambition to make something enormous any more.

Art Interview: What do you consider your greatest successes to date?

Richard Deacon: The exhibition I had in 1993 was pretty good. I think the series of exhibitions I made with the **Marian Goodman Gallery** (<http://www.mariangoodman.com/>) in New York was pretty good. I still think the wood object I did in 1998 was spectacular.

Art Interview: What can we expect from you in the future?

Richard Deacon: Something better, I hope.

Art Interview: Do you feel you have to continuously raise the bar?

Richard Deacon: No, I don't feel I have to raise the bar. It would be nice to make something in a material that has the same richness as wood.