

Custom Made

Looking at Some Sculptures by Richard Deacon

“I don’t want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member.”¹ Groucho Marx’s statement could also convey a sense of the sculptures of Richard Deacon, given that one of the outstanding character traits of these works is – paradoxically enough – that they seem to avoid similarities in their appearance. In fact Richard Deacon’s sculptures can be recognized as such by the fact that they are not immediately recognizable. This is perhaps something of an exaggeration, because it would be possible to argue that, on the contrary, Deacon’s works are readily recognizable, for instance by the fact that he often works with wood as a matter of preference, that he likes bending and twisting pieces of wood, and that he is so intrigued by the screws and fittings needed to secure these pieces that he chooses not to hide them and instead leaves them showing on the surface in distinctive configurations. Other distinguishing features could also be cited, such as his interest in combining different kinds of (supposedly incompatible) materials, in creating intertwining constructions, in introducing curved lines into a space, and in devising highly associative titles. But could these characteristics serve as the basis for a consideration of Deacon’s work or are they just side effects that would sooner distract one from his art? The features listed here are diverse and can scarcely be reduced to a single common denominator, yet they do highlight two interconnected principles: firstly a pronounced interest in surfaces and, secondly, a working method which, unlike a construction that grows from a three-dimensional core, takes the artist in a roundabout manner from a “discovery” to the end-result. In 2012 Deacon himself commented in connection with an exhibition of some of his latest works,

“I’d like to think that the surfaces not only fit the works, but are the works. As they say, what you see is what you get.”²

However, while Deacon can be regarded as a classical sculptor in the sense that he makes individual, free-standing objects that take their place in the tradition of British sculpture with such diverse forerunners as Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Henry Moore, Anthony Caro and William Tucker, he also maintains his distance from them, since his work is neither primarily Cubist or Constructivist, that is to say, Modernist in its approach. Instead he favours a never-ending exploration of different work processes, some familiar, most unfamiliar and all the more exciting for that, as he waits for the next discovery, which he hastens by frequently and avidly embarking on lengthy trips and by engaging in dialogue with the technicians and expert craftspeople employed in the workshops that he visits to produce new pieces. The term “producing” is not meant in a derogatory sense; it is closely related to Deacon’s own preferred term “fabricating”, which he uses to indicate that he is not yielding to some form of Romantic inspiration but rather engaging in processes that require him to leave the usual, narrow confines of artistic work – the studio – and to enter other spheres, that is to say, places where “serious” things are produced on a daily basis. He already articulated this idea as long ago as 1983: “I am a fabricator, not a carver or a modeller. In this sense manufacturing or building skills are of most interest to me.”³ Twenty-five years later he returned to that statement and reinforced it: “The sculpture that I make is, in most cases, neither carved nor modelled – the two traditional means of making sculpture – but assembled from parts. I am therefore a fabricator and what I make are fabrications.”⁴ This is not to say that Deacon produces assemblages in the spirit of that very extensive category with its roots in Surrealism, because he neither approaches

his sculptures with the intention of creating collisions between alien components nor does he combine parts in the manner that is seen at its best in the work of artists ranging from Julio González to David Smith and John Chamberlain. For Richard Deacon fabrication has nothing to do with the techniques traditionally used by sculptors but rather sees him embrace all the modes of production that he has access to today and that often, although not always, involve complex construction processes. However, it is not techniques for their own sake that appeal to Deacon and it is worth going back to his early days as an artist in order to gain a better understanding of what drives him. When he recently compiled the anthology of his own writings he chose to include several texts written when he was still a student: accounts of creative processes and activities that could not be described as fabrication and transcriptions of dialogues relating to those processes. Tasks of his own devising were executed, with no explicit intention or goal other than to establish an approach to things. The underlying intention in the realisation of these actions, the rigorous discipline with which Deacon carried out seemingly meaningless tasks, and the exclusive concentration purely on perceiving and experiencing the things he was working with ensured that he never fell into the trap of simply adopting the stylistic traits of his teachers and becoming associated with any particular school. To this day his approach can perhaps best be described and understood as a kind of performance, that is to say, a mode that Deacon adopts when he is exploring an idea and distilling from it the conceptual framework needed to develop an object. This is exemplified in the sculptures on show in this exhibition, even if the unifying factor in this diverse selection of works is only the ten-year period during which they were made. It is not by chance that Deacon himself came up with the exhibition title On The Other Side, as an indication that these pieces are in opposition to or an alternative to something, albeit without defining that

something. Before we know where we stand, we are already confronted with an alternative, a counter-argument, an answer to a question that we are unaware of. Even before the artist and the viewer have taken up their positions something has already been tabled, which now has to be dealt with. This is seen, for instance, in the ceramics that Deacon worked on around ten years ago and that ultimately led to the works shown in the Welsh Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2007.

A good point of departure for any exploration of Deacon's works may be found in the artistic, craft processes: in the case of these ceramics this is the thrown form, i.e. the use of a potter's wheel to construct a symmetrical, hollow form from a lump of clay. However, Deacon's interest is not in an individually made vessel but rather in the repetition and accumulation of forms as a means to creating a final, combinatory form. He first took this approach in Close to Home in 2004. In this piece the vessels merge into each other creating an elongated, undulating opening at the top. While convex and convex forms run in parallel here because the external walls are all joined together, in his Gap sculptures Deacon abutted external and internal surfaces in such a way that positive and negative forms intertwine and there is no longer any clear distinction between the inside and the outside of the figure. With this aim in mind and also with the intention of diverting attention from the shape of the vessels to the contour lines, Deacon sliced the vessels horizontally in two. This gave him a group of bulbous elements that could be linked like pieces in a chain. The width of the rounded forms and the choice of section gave them the appearance of a varied selection of figures with pulsating outlines that either opened out or, by contrast, looked more like closed chambers of some kind. Unexpectedly this sequence of small segments of a circle gave rise to the closed, organic-looking line that was

familiar from many of Deacon's earlier works and that had already emerged from a wide range of different circumstances. In Border Traffic Deacon created a synthesis of small, seemingly random elements, in which he restricted the variations to two types: an elongated two-part unit and a three-part unit in the shape of a clover leaf. The sculpture consists of three of the former and five of the latter and deals differently with the theme of inside and outside: here convex external surfaces in proximity to matching neighbouring units can also be read as internal surfaces. Deacon changed two aspects of this configuration for the related group of works he made for the Venice Biennale in 2007. Firstly, he combined the shapes in such a way that now the concave internal surfaces served as external surfaces and, secondly, he did not place the pieces on the floor but instead used long hooks to hang them on the wall, so that they would be perceived quite differently. Viewed from the front the sculptures looked like drawn outlines: from the side, however, their plasticity and colour-glazed internal and external surfaces came into their own.

Deacon's work is never constrained by the supposed limitations of his materials. Thus the principle underpinning Border Traffic led to the group Customs. Vessels sliced into two are now replaced by metal pipes that are variously arranged and connected to create a single form where external and internal curves are no longer distinguishable. The openings in the positive forms are closed off with a cap; in the negative forms they terminate in a torus. From the front the bodies look like profiles, from the side they appear to be elongated volumes. The title Customs – calling to mind “customize” or “custom made” – alludes to the individual adjustment or arrangement of a unique object so that everything fits perfectly, as in the specific configuration of swelling forms and deep hollows here.

While the combination of freely produced elements in these works could be described as improvised, Deacon is also interested in systematising that process in terms of both the production of the elements – as modular units – and the method used to combine them. It does not come as a surprise that the decision to reduce the available vocabulary in fact resulted in a large number of works – the one-off sculpture gives way to series, as in the illuminating case of the series of Infinities. Deacon's interest in modular units goes back a long way, to 1969, and his attempts to create a planar form with an alternately positive and negative outline that could be freely grouped in rows. For his exhibition New World Order at Tate Liverpool Deacon took another approach to the same idea, this time laying out flat steel elements with two, three or four evenly distributed centres in various configurations, but soon abandoned this attempt. He was only able to take this idea forwards when – having played about with the sections for a while – he changed two factors: firstly, he now added the numbers to create higher numbers – for instance $2 + 3 = 5$, $2 + 2 + 2 = 6$, and so on; secondly, by punching holes through the centres of the two-layered steel units, they remained both flat and stable, which made it possible to work with larger sizes. Both the configurations and the process of addition were endlessly variable – hence the title of the series, Infinity. Infinity #35, for instance, comprises two differently shaped pieces joined together, each of which adds up to 11 ($3 + 4 + 3 + 1$ and $2 + 4 + 3 + 2$). Even if the inner structure always remains the same, the outlines form their own, irregular shapes. The unpredictability of these pieces lies in the way the light plays on the steel surfaces and breathes life into the alternation of positive and negative, the sequence of ridges and hollows and their interaction in different configurations. Counting and addition, individual figures and combinations extend across the wall in potentially infinite variety.

Optically and by virtue of the interplay of pairs of opposites these may appear to be related to the ceramic works described earlier here, however, they are not related in structural terms.

It has been clear from the outset that Deacon is neither a sculptor uncovering an inner form by removing surface materials nor is he a constructor putting together a coherent sculpture around a skeletal framework. Although some of his early works may have a somewhat skeletal appearance, any expectations that this would be fleshed out soon dissipated because the focus was on that “armature” in its own right, on its complex linear forms and the differentiated physicality that was not covering an internal structure but rather taking the exterior inside and vice versa, creating a visual continuum. Deacon was particularly attracted by the way vessels are produced in ceramics workshops, where the inside is hollow and one’s entire attention is focussed on the “shell”, which is both an internal and an external form. The armature and the material are one and the same as the shell or casing, while the empty core can give rise to speculation. Deacon likes to encourage the latter by giving his works evocative titles with shifting, metaphorical implications. Contours and outlines are a recurrent feature of Deacon’s work: for instance in the group of linear wooden sculptures made in 2012. These are only really identifiable as a group by their related titles – Aluminium, Copper, Iron – which refer to the different powdered metals infused into the waxed surfaces; other than that every line is individually formed and has its own specific qualities. It seems that Iron is describing a rectangular form, whereas Copper appears to recall the evocatively opening sculptures of the early 1980s with their connotations of human physicality. Meanwhile Aluminium is neither symmetrical nor cuboid and, with its many twists and turns, draws attention to the surprising linear shapes it

describes, which are always changing depending on one's standpoint. The coherence of the line sustains the notion of a figure, whereas in a sculpture such as Orinoco the emphasis is on fluidity. Here lines are bundled into two dense currents that are captured at each end and led back into the ongoing flow. Partly due to the tendency of these elements, the idea of a single, eccentric figure now gives way to the notion of a calm, circular movement. These different uses of wooden lines exemplify the way Deacon is able to give his materials unusual, contradictory appearances – rigid wood that flows, a fragile ceramic panel that serves as a structural, load-bearing component.

In recent years it has above all been ceramics that have allowed Deacon to develop sculptures as a test bed for venturing inside from the outside and outside from the inside, partly on the basis of the many ideas and active support he received from Niels Dietrich in Cologne. Undergrowth relies on modules that recall stereometric models in the sense that they take the form of open-sided polyhedrons made from cardboard tubes. A related structure had already been seen in 2002 in Like You Know, although here the connecting pieces were so solid that the work as a whole became a self-contained figure. By contrast, Undergrowth consists of three different models that have been interconnected in such a way that none of them is fully visible. There is neither an outline describing a coherent form nor a skeleton that can be identified by dint of its missing skin. Interior and exterior figures mingle and cannot be clearly separated from each other. It does not come as a surprise when Deacon mentions that this work did not start with an abstract idea but rather with a photograph he had taken of a group of his skeletal polyhedrons set out to dry on a checkered cloth in Niels Dietrich's workshop. There was a remarkable formal coincidence between this photograph and a 1930s postcard of the Bernese

Alps he had recently unearthed in his mother's papers. The conceptual leap was to think that the various polyhedrons could somehow be woven together and that undergrowth was both geological and botanical.

The processes that led to the ceramics Tropic and North are very different. Tropic is not constructed around lines that mark the outermost points of the body like a framework of sorts. On the contrary, in this case the lines arise solely from a negative process, that is to say, the hollowing out of a figure and the creation of planar, concave forms, which is done from individual points. Thus the continuity of the lines is constantly interrupted, in that the planes plunge towards the interior of the figure and draw attention away from the external contours and redirect it to the pseudo-perspectival vanishing lines. This is reinforced by the finish, which consists of a number of different glazes, which Deacon allowed to run across the various planes with the result that these are now linked by the colour runs that cross the sharp edges. If it seems that this sculpture evokes the interplay of concave and convex forms in late Cubism, this is in fact a morphological similarity that is at odds with the pragmatic, improvised production process, which is not in fact governed by a particular set of principles. By contrast, the hollows in the surfaces of the North ceramics were not achieved by removing material. These works grew outwards from within: Deacon crumpled sheets of clay, like rags, and threw them down, thereby creating a multi-layered, modelled sculpture without ever touching it – a paradox, on a par with the creation of a figure by hollowing out a block of clay. The link between these sculptures is that ultimately the unformed North sculptures are also seen as a unified object because of their glazes: the capacity of the colour marks extending across all kinds of unevennesses to draw things together is greater than the individuation of folds and hollows. The seemingly

miniature group of “ceramic shells” is also worked from the inside outwards. In this case Deacon constructed positive forms from cardboard; although two (Hive and Max) were then coated in fireproof clay, of the kind used in high-precision metal casting, the majority served as receptacles for the liquid clay. The ceramic shell was thus built up on the inside of the cardboard and revealed as the outside surface when the cardboard burnt away in the firing. The use of cardboard allowed Deacon to create extremely fine ceramic walls (otherwise not seen in this medium) that clearly reveal the nature of the initial form.

What does it actually mean to use elements to create an order that neither arises from any formal predisposition nor is derived from the confrontation of heterogeneous materials, of the kind expected in Modernist montage? Dividing and combining, defining individual elements and extrapolating a configuration: Deacon has often exploited these polarities in order to devise a rule of his own making that is not intrinsic to a particular material. For his Assemblies he created beam-like elements with a non-rectangular cross-section and used these to construct sculptures. These constructions were pieced together by fixing the flat sides of two elements together; since the same side could never be touched twice, the next elements had to be joined to another side, which meant that they pointed in a completely different direction. The challenge was to arrive back at the first element by means of the smallest possible number of connections, thereby creating a closed, stable structure. In the case of the wooden sculpture Walking the Walk the point is that neither the solid lines of the “supporting” sections nor the connecting pieces ever touch. A negative precept leads to the relationship between the wooden elements, which – aside from their turned forms and dimensions – only have in common the fact that they are all innately unbalanced and would immediately topple over if the

underlying rule were not holding them together and allowing them to “walk”. Another rule forces the steel ribs together that make up the Siamese works. As the title suggests, these structures are joined at one plane and are therefore to be read not as two distinct forms but rather as a double form. Since they have one plane in common, the coherence of the two parts is compromised: the linear outlines coincide and the boundaries between inside and outside are no longer distinctly divided.

The individual sections of the Siamese works are related to the Range ceramics Deacon made in 2005. With their compact, closed exteriors these are the antithesis to the first series of ceramic sculptures. The Range sculptures also mark the beginning of the division of a whole into partial planes – initially as a three-dimensional endeavour and later in a graphic version, that is to say, in a series of drawings. As it happens these amounted to twenty-six in total and this number – not the appearance of the works – suggested an alphabet, which then led to a plastic realization in the shape of Alphabet reliefs. Looking at the reliefs it is impossible to say whether a single plane was divided up into separate, individual planes or whether, as in the Assemblies, individual sections have come together to form a whole, albeit without each losing its unique character. The impossibility of deciding what “complete” and “whole” means with respect to a form also comes to the fore in the diversity of the either closed or as yet incomplete external contours. Deacon added yet another interpretative loop when he understood that the sheet steel used for the reliefs could be folded in different ways and that the choice of metal, the positive and negative shapes of the planes – even their colours – could be used to add another level of differentiation to the signs on the wall. An alphabet, whose signs take on a life of their own – surely a perfect metaphor for the sculptures of Richard Deacon.

Dieter Schwarz

¹ Quoted by Groucho Marx himself during an episode of the American television show *What's My Line* in April 1967.

² Dieter Schwarz (ed.), *Richard Deacon. So, And, If, But. Writings 1970–2012*, Kunstmuseum Winterthur (Düsseldorf: Richter|Fey Verlag, 2014), p. 96.

³ Ibid, p. 96.

⁴ Ibid, p. 226.