

In the Studio

In 1991 Richard Deacon bought a new two-storey unit on a small industrial estate in Herne Hill. The lower floor, with factory doors opening directly on the exterior, is the workshop for fabrication. The upper floor is his drawing studio, office and ‘conceiving space’. Here every surface is arrayed with stuff (a word Deacon uses often to describe the things around him) from the tables on which sketches and papers form a purposeful deep litter, to the shelves on which he keeps his collections, a touchingly boyish miscellany of natural history relics and man-made artefacts. There are shells and skulls picked up on walks and expeditions, fragments of birds eggs, wooden toys, tin toys and lead soldiers, plastic animals, leather suitcases, attaché cases and trunks, aluminium saucepans, tin teapots and a gollywog, rocks and minerals (purchased as well as found), baskets from the Amazon, wooden shoes from Ladakh, a weaver bird’s nest carried back from Botswana in a plastic bottle neck, fishing twine and coils of rope of many kinds. A giant Philodendron dominates the space, its leaves recalling Matisse cut outs, and a rubber plant, both classics of the sixties interior. And on the walls are maps – a road map of India before Partition, found in a skip in Peckham, and two world maps, one with Britain at its centre, the other showing the world from the other side, with Australia and the north Pacific as its central points.

Deacon’s mother and father - a doctor and a pilot - met on the boat to India in 1943 and married in 1947, the year of Indian Independence and Partition. Born in 1949, Deacon travelled with his parents when his father was posted to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1955, and spent three years there. A sense of historical stretch and a deep awareness of changing political geographies are in his constitution.

Deacon’s collecting started with stamps, a passion passed on by his mother. His collections have an autobiographical and intimate quality, but they also make manifest his capacious curiosity about the world, its changing historical realities and the ways in which these can be represented. The collection started with his mother’s trip to London for the Queen’s Coronation in 1953, returning with stamps for her four-year-old son. In Sri Lanka the natural world took over and Deacon turned to butterflies – labelling and naming – but when he returned to England he became a much more serious stamp collector. To begin with they were all British: ‘about sets, the look of things on the page, the pleasure of arranging’, but he also relishes the way a stamp can act as a sort of historical *punctum*: he has stamps from the Weimar Republic overprinted with the evidence of hyper-inflation, stamps from Austria

overprinted 'Deutsch österreich', stamps from the Everest expedition in 1924 'dispatched by postal runner to India', stamps commemorating J F Kennedy's assassination, stamps from Persia overprinted 'Iran'. There are first day covers kept in a handkerchief box, stock books with glassine pages, and an array of albums that convey a fascination with the materiality of these things. The stamp collections fuse intimate and external histories in a manner that asserted itself again in 1987, when Deacon made an exhibition of 'personals', newspapers kept by his father to commemorate important world events.

Amongst the collected objects are things Deacon has made or is making – maquettes in clay, steel, wood and other materials as well as those produced on a newly acquired 3D prototyping machine. The objects on the shelves are sorted into categories and typologies, but there are also strays and intruders. Deacon has written about his fascination with the unformed and undifferentiated, his interest in associative connections, his attraction to the ambiguous and undetermined, hybrid or polluted.

Transformation is a constant motive in Deacon's work – a desire to make visible the insubstantial and shifting: 'Clouds, swirls of water, shapes in the fire, stains, vomit, pebbles, smoke and various random devices have all been both instruments and agents for artists'. His working processes are laborious, evident and undisguised, but the work can suggest movement – a choreographed dance even – that is graceful, light and fast, or its writhing forms can appear to have generated so much tensed energy that they rise up, like ropes twisted on themselves.

Despite their emphatic abstraction, Deacon's works are porous to the world. The continuities of exterior and interior surface or skin, the voids, cavities, orifices and protuberances that are present in the objects he collects, migrate into the work. But Deacon's work also deals in juxtaposition, discontinuity and contradiction. On the staircase to the studio are pieces of Malachite, presented on brackets made of moulded wood, in a formation reminiscent of the flying ducks that used to decorate so many British interiors. This surprising combination of object and support recalls the unexpected range of Deacon's interests – from medieval sculpture (he designed the bases for an exhibition of medieval carvings at Tate Britain in 2002) to religious reliquaries, from contemporary ceramics to prehistoric hand axes, from Modernist furniture to the naturalism of the nineteenth-century French sculptor Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, from David Smith sculpture to early Renaissance drapery, from British cathedrals to Poussin.

Deacon's studio collections are his familiars, talismanic of his relationships with things in the world, natural and manmade, closed and open, formed and formless. Like his sculptures they speak of the associative possibilities suggested by hand and eye, memory and imagination, states of concentration, distraction or reverie: 'one thing leading into another in a variety of ways'.

Richard Deacon in conversation with Teresa Gleadowe, 7 March 2013