

Beauty And Beast

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Deacon's use of the term sculpture, in the titles of exhibition catalogues as in conversation, is deliberate, polemical and not without irony. His current definition of sculpture is a single object made of a single material, with the emphasis on made. Intention and meanings are important but inhere in the material and its structure rather than precede it. Deacon calls himself a 'fabricator': "Material and its manipulation are core areas in what I do. Matter, stuff are the words I tend to use".¹

Although Deacon may not always have held to his definition of sculpture - for instance to the single material - there is a consistency to his work that goes back to the period of open experiment at St Martin's. 'Stuff Box Object', 1970-71 records an 'exchange' of location and materials with a fellow student and the series of operations with the 'stuff he inherited (a large wooden box, an amount of raw flax joined by strips of fibre glass, straw, chicken shit and scraps of wood). These included various types of transformation, concealment, construction and destruction together with elements of performance, starting with Deacon climbing into the box and adopting a foetal position, and culminating in a lengthy apprenticeship in plastering the surfaces of the box. The ritually repetitious and satisfying nature of these activities asserts itself even through the deadpan documentary writing:

"At 4.30 I fetch a bucket of water, pour a little into the bowl and mix up a small amount of dental plaster. I flick this plaster with my hands against one of the slatted sides of the object.

I continue working alternately from end to end until the bucket is empty. I wash my hands and the bowl and leave the Studio to fetch a carton of tea. I sit and look at the plastering whilst I drink the tea?

A suite of drawings, 'It's Orpheus When There's Singing', 1978-79 bridged the gap between 'Stuff Box Object' and two exhibitions in 1985 of Deacon's large laminated wood sculptures; 'For Those Who Have Ears and related works' at the Tate Gallery, and 'Blind Deaf And Dumb' at the Serpentine. The sculptures hark back in form and title to the drawing suite and to Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus'. They have a strong sexual charge, rooted in the very openness of readings, paradoxically both direct and allusive, rather than in specific sexual symbolism.

Deacon called the drawings 'anticipatory'; they are not drawings for sculpture, although they are very large, grand works, positing a sculptile sense of gesture in space. Given that nothing was given, they are a series of visibly experimental marks, concerned with the generation of meanings in form. Deacon's description of his procedure denotes a kind of rationalised automatism:

"There was no object being drawn, so in order to get to a point where I could draw what I wanted, it seemed necessary to have rules. These were a means of avoiding some decisions about the appearance of the drawing as it developed. The drawings were constructed using a string, a pin and a pencil - this was the rule. All the curves were then built up from arcs or segments of circles of varying radius. This construction created a very fine mesh of marks, from which a final form slowly emerged, almost as if it had been captured".³

The search is for ways of investing potentially sculptural ideas of a general kind: enclosure, aperture, with metaphorical - or perhaps better, analogical - significance. The forms finally captured in these drawings, Deacon says, can be thought of as the head of Orpheus but also any number of other objects. The aperture could relate to the body, or "other very domestic objects particularly pots' and pans, shoes, hats -there are lots of objects which have a volumetric shape with an opening..."⁴

Deacon commented that "The drawings seemed to show that what was enclosed had a relationship to the contour. This functioned like a skin over the interior, and the interior remained a hollow resonant space".⁵ This idea, taken in conjunction with such works as the open slatted bell-like 'Untitled', 1980 with its extra vulva-like opening, brought the 18th century artist William Hogarth and his treatise 'The Analysis of Beauty' to mind. The comparison was with Hogarth's imaginary model for draughtsmen. All too often, Hogarth argued, the artist considers only that part of the surface of an opaque object that is presented to the eye. To understand the whole object, we need an idea of its inside too; thus we should imagine the inward contents of an object scooped out to leave only a thin shell, made up of very fine threads so that the two surfaces actually coincide. Hogarth

pursued this notion of the identity of the interior and exterior surfaces by suggesting that the imagination would "enter the vacant space within this shell and... view the whole form within".⁶

Hogarth based his idea of beauty in an abstract form, rather than in an idealised human shape: the serpentine line. This opens up precisely those possibilities of play between contour and volume that generate metaphor or analogy in Deacon's work, while grounding these and always returning to the material. It is not that Deacon pursues an aesthetic based on the serpentine line, but bringing it into play does help to float his work free of comparisons with biomorphism, with its fixed nexus of organic plant/human body/earth meanings. It also points to a different type of spatial modality from that of Gabo, who constructed volume not through mass but through plane. With Deacon, once the contour is established as a spatial boundary it is freed of the notion of a defined space without thereby simply becoming drawing in space. The notions of an identity of interior and exterior, of the relation of skin to contour, of contours that are boundaries, volumes that are hollows, continue to provide a fertile ground for the paradoxical ways in which Deacon plays with the relations of space to structure.

In 'Feast for the Eye', 1987 the three enclosing elements are discrete boundaries - only with difficulty linked to each other. We find ourselves at a point where structure as surface - that is the notion of a contour related to the volume implied by the three elements - can only be conceived as a kind of formlessness which dramatically contradicts the powerful steel 'ducting', a 'packing case for space'.

'Between The Two Of Us', 1984 is unlike the lithe, open shapes of laminated wood pieces such as 'For Those Who Have Ears No 2', 1983 or 'Turning A Blind Eye', 1984 in its compacted wholeness; yet this appearance of wholeness is deceptive because, like the other works it is founded in symmetry, in other words in a doubling. It reads in several ways: as a butterfly, or perhaps as the concentrated dynamism of a dancer. It is not just the title that connotes sexuality, but this certainly helps to keep the various visible analogies vibrating against one another. The edges of the upper and lower wing/limbs are crucially different; while both are meticulously riveted, the steel edges of the upper set are bent upwards, while those of the lower wings are folded down along the curve. They thus seem to push against each other, forcing or emphasising upward and downward motion. The canvas or sacking (the lettering 'London' just visible, suggesting a mercantile origin) hangs like a cape, or a bag or the empty skin of a chrysalis between the wings.

'Troubled Water' of 1987 is an unexpected work. It's unusual for Deacon to take a readymade element as he has taken the A-shaped beams here; it is also unusual for him so openly to parody the modernist sculptural discourse of part and whole. The hint of calipers, the wooden segment, the odd relation between geometrical forms and the nose-like pod or protrusion on which the whole barely balances recall the moment of the coming into being of the geometry-generated spontaneous drawings.

It is simultaneously comic and grand, the nearest, in some ways, to the idea of a machine aesthetic, but that of the huge pistons, pumps and hammers of the early industrial age now preserved in the Science Museum.

While Donald Judd's minimalist sculpture, which has been important to Deacon, has an industrial look, Deacon's although industrial sometimes in material or scale, has a man-made, artisanal quality. Noting the excessive procedures of riveting, or glueing, screwing, pasting, chipping, beating, Peter Schjeldahl argues that Deacon's violation of the principle of economy of work to idea, a principle, in the aesthetic context, that holds that excessive craftsmanship is a vulgar distraction, "amounts to an original sculptural dictum that is both formally impressive and comical". Schjeldahl calls this the "tone of labour"⁷ and connects it with work of an old-fashioned small-industrial-workshop kind.

The autonomy of the sculptural object can be conceived more readily than it can be either experienced or demonstrated. Deacon confronts the question of site-specific sculpture for reasons of practical necessity, not as chosen procedure. He contests Henry Moore's dictum that the proper place for sculpture is out of doors, but is equally disturbed by the proposition that "the proper home of the autonomous modernist sculpture is the museum".⁸ This is not only prescriptive, but based on a highly reductive sense of 'autonomous'. Neither exterior nor interior sites are a priori conditions for sculpture. One way to posit its autonomous identity is to challenge the site: the two separate sculptures of 'Blind Deaf And Dumb' at the Serpentine Gallery, one inside, the other outside, appeared to contain the architecture, rather than vice versa. The identity of interior and exterior, always a concern for Deacon, was thus brought into question. A further problem in this context is the dependence of the object in purely physical terms on its setting. While minimalists like Morris,

Judd or Andre took "the ground plane ... [as] the necessary support for the maximum awareness of the object",⁹ Deacon minimises the physical contact with the ground. There are no pedestals, and works are curved to keep the point of contact with the ground tenuous.

Solid or volumetrically enclosed works like 'Beauty And The Beast C, 1995 and 'In The Flesh', 1992 are also concerned with the relation between contour and surface. The beauty of the clear plastic material of the former, polycarbonate, is lost or corrupted by manipulation. It is impossible to realise the potential of this manipulable substance, its animation into contour and transparent volume, because in the very practice of heating and bending it the pristine transparency is lost.

In the 'Back Of My Hand' series, 1991 the steel surfaces are often pitted so that light animates them; here, and to a greater degree in 'Beauty And The Beast' hollows and protuberances are on a perceptually shifting scale that at times gives one the sense of the small and intimate, (like the back of one's hand), at others expands into a landscape of hills and valleys.

This strange capacity to shrink and expand, like Alice alternating between potion and cake, is a persistent quality in Deacon's work and can strike whatever the actual dimensions may be. It is partly a measure of the success of establishing the object's autonomy, for scale is something we experience as determined by distance and perspective, which normally fix an object.

The idea of an invented map, which is visibly part of the 'Back Of My Hand' series, is at one end of a continuum of ideas about surface and boundary which is marked at the other by 'In The Flesh', 1992 a formless form, a seductive wooden

substance without identity. In so far as a map has boundaries, 'In The Flesh' might be seen as its contradiction, for the formless is a transgression of boundaries. The need for differentiation, order and purity which the very idea of the formless affronts is "the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise".¹¹ The paradoxical value of formlessness is that it is "an apt symbol of beginning and growth as it is of decay".

'Beauty And The Beast D' 1995 a tumble of convex/concave planes, hinged like children's fortune-telling folded papers, places the very notion of manipulation at its metaphorical centre. And with the irony never far from Deacon's practice, 'Beauty and the Beast D' succeeds in making of inherently structured, neat and geometrical shapes a virtually form-less mass.

1.Jon Thompson, Pier Luigi Tazzi, Peter Schjeldahl (ed.), Richard Deacon, Phaidon Press Limited, London, 1995, p.15.

2.Richard Deacon, *Stuff Box Object 1971-72*, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff. Published to coincide with the exhibition of Richard Deacon's sculpture at the Lisson Gallery, July 1984.

3.Richard Deacon, 'Silence Exile Cuning', exhibition catalogue published by Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 1988. Extract republished in Richard Deacon, 1995, op. cit. p. 117.

4.Richard Deacon, 'Talking about For Those Who Have Ears No 2 and other works', interview by Richard Francis, Tate Gallery, Londres, 1985, p. 7.

5. *ibid.* p.119.

6.William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, 1753, reprinted by Scolar Press London 1971, p. 8.

7.Peter Schjeldahl, Richard Deacon, exhibition catalogue, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, February 1988.

8.Richard Deacon, 'What Car? Correspondence with Lynne Cooke 1992', in Richard Deacon, 1995, op. cit. pp. 129-130.

9.Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture', *Artforum*, February 1966, reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art, A Critical Anthology*, E.P.Dutton, New York, p. 224.

10.Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, extract reprinted in Richard Deacon, 1995 op. cit. p. 105.

11. *ibid.* p.1

