

Peter Schjeldahl, Deacon's Faith

'What's that, then? Is it ducting?' one man said to another in London in 1985.

The questionable object was a metal sculpture that Richard Deacon was assembling outside the Serpentine Gallery. 'Nah/ the other man answered, 'it's art. Look at the way it's put together.'

Deacon told me happily of the overheard conversation. I used it in another essay I wrote about his work. Now having agreed to discuss a single piece of Deacon's -1 have selected *Keeping the Faith*-1 think again of a casual exchange that touches the heart of his sculptural poetic.

'What's this, then? A bunch of lattice?'

'Must be a form for something.'

'Looks like a jet engine.'

'A squashed sort of one.'

It's not finished, whatever it is.'

'Can't be. Wants cladding.' My imaginary flaneurs are less canny than Deacon's real ones. 'Art' is not an explanation that occurs to them. I made sure of it so I could hear them out.

Keeping the Faith (it is often wise to postpone contemplating Deacon's subtle titles, which reward rather than direct attentive looking) is a bentwood framework riddled with holes left by the screws that held it together for gluing. Its form is symmetrical on the left-right axes of its length and breadth while asymmetrical on the up-down axis of its height, which thus feels distorted ('squashed'). It does not look like a finished thing, but rather like the completed phase of a fabrication process.

The nearest word for the work's type of form is 'pod'. Viewed from the side, it might well evoke a jet engine - or a Janus-headed fish of the bottom-feeding variety that has an underslung mouth or a Janus-hooded racing car with an air-scoop grill. Wrecking these associations is the odd hump in the middle of its bottom. I can't relate this eruption to anything imaginably functional.

The crease along the top and the hump in the bottom of the piece make sense together if you picture a small symmetrical pod in some pliable material, such as clay, grasped evenly with the fingertips of both hands and squeezed. Your fingers would make the crease, your thumbs the hump. To think of this while looking at the sculpture is to trigger a scale shift, summoning the fantasy of a King Kong-sized manipulator.

Viewed from either end, the work presents the graphic outline of an oval pinched in the middle, a shape with a biological or caricatural air: a diagram of cells separating or the mouth of a comic-strip character crying 'Waaah!' Also suggested is a figure eight or the infinity sign. Anyone looking at photographs of *Keeping the Faith* might deem such graphic resemblances primary. But they are the last aspects one notes in the structure's actual presence, where the bent maple slats and oozing yellowish glue exert an imperious matter-of-factness.

As a framework, the piece might seem to anticipate a completed hollow object that is either solid-walled (if a mold were the next, still transitional stage) or clad in form-fitting sheets of anything from riveted metal to kite paper. It is impossible that the pod could become a merely component part of some other form or that any additions to it (on the outside, at least) would significantly alter its shape. You would not go to the trouble of perfecting those streamlined contours and then jam something else onto them.

The making of *Keeping the Faith's* unknowable object has halted at the framework stage where any fabrication yields the maximum of information about itself. Think of a house that is under construction, when everything is in place except wallboard and siding. What you see is the total quiddity of 'house' minus the idea of what it is for: habitation. The next phase of work will humiliate the structure into amenity.

Before concentrating on the sculpture's literal makeup, I return to its evocation of a jet engine or a racing car, as something to keep in mind. The form says *whoosh*. It looks like a product of exhaustive testing in a wind tunnel. Justifying its immobility is just its Janus-facedness, incurring stalemate by trying to zoom off in opposite directions simultaneously. To marry itself to speed seems the work's narcissistic fixation. (Everything Deacon makes can seem self-obsessively preoccupied with some action or other that it is somehow prevented from performing.)

I am moved - ravished, really - by the sculpture's extravagant investment of exacting toil in the execution of a design that had to be smackdab perfect in advance. Did Deacon work the form out on a computer? I can picture webbed tracteries of pixel light rotating this way and that on a screen, adjusted by the hummingbird of a cursor. Whatever the process, one stage of it was necessarily a set of terrifically precise plans and measurements that presumed extreme technical knowhow and discipline. This thought lends a complicated poignance.

What do we require physically of any sculpture, beyond that it not spontaneously fall apart? It seems to me an article of sophisticated taste, tested in the experimental history of modern art, that the minimum criterion of sturdiness and elaboration in an artwork should be close to identical with the maximum criterion. That is, we view excessive craftsmanship in art as a vulgarity fully as distracting as shoddiness. An artwork should be made exactly and only as well as it must be for its idea to be realized.

Deacon has violated this principle relentlessly. Indeed, a powerful impression of over-the-top craftsmanship is a keynote of his poetic - of the Deaconian. It amounts to an original sculptural diction that is both formally impressive and comical, like an Armani suit on a horse. Elsewhere I have called this quality of Deacon's art 'the tone of labour'. It is a high tone, a toniness, a showy expenditure, and yet innocent of pretension. The labour is of an old-fashioned, artisanal, small-industrial-shop kind, and its motive feels earnest rather than gratuitous. It conveys a certain anxiety, as if afrighted by visions of probably physical ordeals in a world less considerate of art than we assume ours to be.

There are hundreds of screw holes. (Where are those proletarian screws today? Have they moved on to serve other projects, or have they joined the reserve army of the unemployed?) There is a profligate amount of glue, bleeding from the joints and buttered around the edges of the two ends (making those edges read as 'lips'). (You know that the sculpture is right-side-up, by the way, by observing the glops and speckles of glue that fell on the interior humped expanse.) And the slats!

They are beautiful forms in themselves, some of the slats that must bend severely in both longitude and latitude to follow the overall contour. If you could hold just one of these in your hands, knowing nothing else about the sculpture, you would have an accurate sense of the strength, precision and grace of the object it was engineered to be part of. Deacon's use of the slats' thin, naked maple celebrates the talent and, when in skilled and respectful hands, the eager obligingness of wood.

There are three layers of slats: forty wide ones running lengthwise outside, a lesser number of somewhat narrower ones hugging the circumference underneath, and about a hundred rib-like ones, narrower still, forming the inner wall. The strength of the crisscross, which gathers into an hourglass-shaped mesh from end to end across the top, is obviously formidable. (Basketry is not evoked, by the way: no interweaving.) Assuming that the glue is sufficiently tenacious, nothing at all should happen if you jump on the sculpture. (Don't, though.)

Keeping the Faith crouches low to the floor, coming up to just above knee level. This disposition feels vaguely aggressive, as if the thing considered biting you in the ankle. But the threat is never imminent. The form Looks more aggressive-more whooshy and tigerish -the farther from it you are. It is energized by distance. Up close, as you Look down at it, it may suggest a surreally gawky item of furniture, a fun house coffee table, if it suggests anything. More likely, you will be lost in contemplating details of the construction - Like brushstrokes when you step within the inner limit of a painting's pictorial illusion.

So there is a doubleness of aspect: what the form suggests and how the form is put together. Is such doubleness intrinsic to all and any art? Exactly. Its routine emphasis in Deacon's work helps to explain why he is a major artist. He renders dramatically specific in each art object things that are true of art objects generally. He brings to exacerbated consciousness at the same time idiosyncratic feeling and aesthetic phenomena. Major artists are philosophers of art. Deacon is a philosopher of art.

Where would you put *Keeping the Faith* if you owned it? It would hardly matter so long as the site afforded access to the work in the round. I have seen it in a gallery and in a warehouse. It looked identically fine and awkward in both places - fine because it engaged me in its protocols of meaning and awkward because it felt essentially oblivious to its surroundings, where it seemed less architecturally installed than parked and 'in the way'. I love all of Deacon's work for its reliable independence of the gestalts of institutional space. In any space, it seems to be on my side, to know how I feel, even to be like me: a citizen never quite comfortable in the world.

To commune most frankly with the sculpture, you will squat down as you do when conversing with a small child. At eye-level, the pinched-oval, wailing mouth confides its message in a rush. The message is the package of negative space, of nothingness, inside the two-chambered pod that may seem no longer shaped from without but swelled from within, like lungs or a bellows. The hump in the bottom may suddenly suggest an instrument of speech: a glottis. The glue-lipped mouth forms a syllable that means exactly so much space configured in just this way.

Some religious people speak of emotional emptiness as 'a God-shaped hole'. It is a lovely idea even if you don't believe it: that we contain spiritual cavities into which God fits like a key. I confess to knowing the empty feeling, an inner void - a core of nothing - that, lacking all sensation, can be more awful than pain. I take fleeting comfort in the God-shaped-hole metaphor, which redescribes the emptiness from an affliction to a capacity.

I am pretty sure of going beyond, in this, what Deacon had in mind for his sculpture, if indeed he had something in mind. Not 'to have in mind', passively, but 'to mind', actively, is what a good artist does, making through selfless concentration on the actual work an unprejudiced medium for the expression of whatever is there to be expressed in the artist's or viewer's unconscious, or in the air. But by choosing for his title the phrase 'keeping the faith', Deacon indicates that he notices something about his idea, and the associative process thus begun emboldens my interpretation.

In vernacular use, 'keep the faith' is an injunction to stay loyal to a value or a cause. It was popularized in the 1960s by an old-time Harlem politician, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., whose insolently loose morals, outraging the middle class, targeted him for destruction in government circles and the press. 'Keep the faith, baby', he would say, appealing to a constituency meant to understand his essential oneness with them beneath corrupt appearances. Powell's 'faith' was an invisible integrity.

So is any faith, defined as confidence in the reality of something rationally unprovable. *Keeping the Faith*, the sculpture, goes to tremendous trouble to form and to preserve - to keep - a strangely shaped quantity of air. The effort symbolizes the importance of keeping. Faith is not symbolized. It is a fact or It isn't, understood or not understood, meaningful or nonsensical. Its proposition does not brook argument. What you get from the sculpture is the sheer, mere urgency of something unseen. What your heart does with that is your heart's affair.