

MAKING RICHARD DEACON

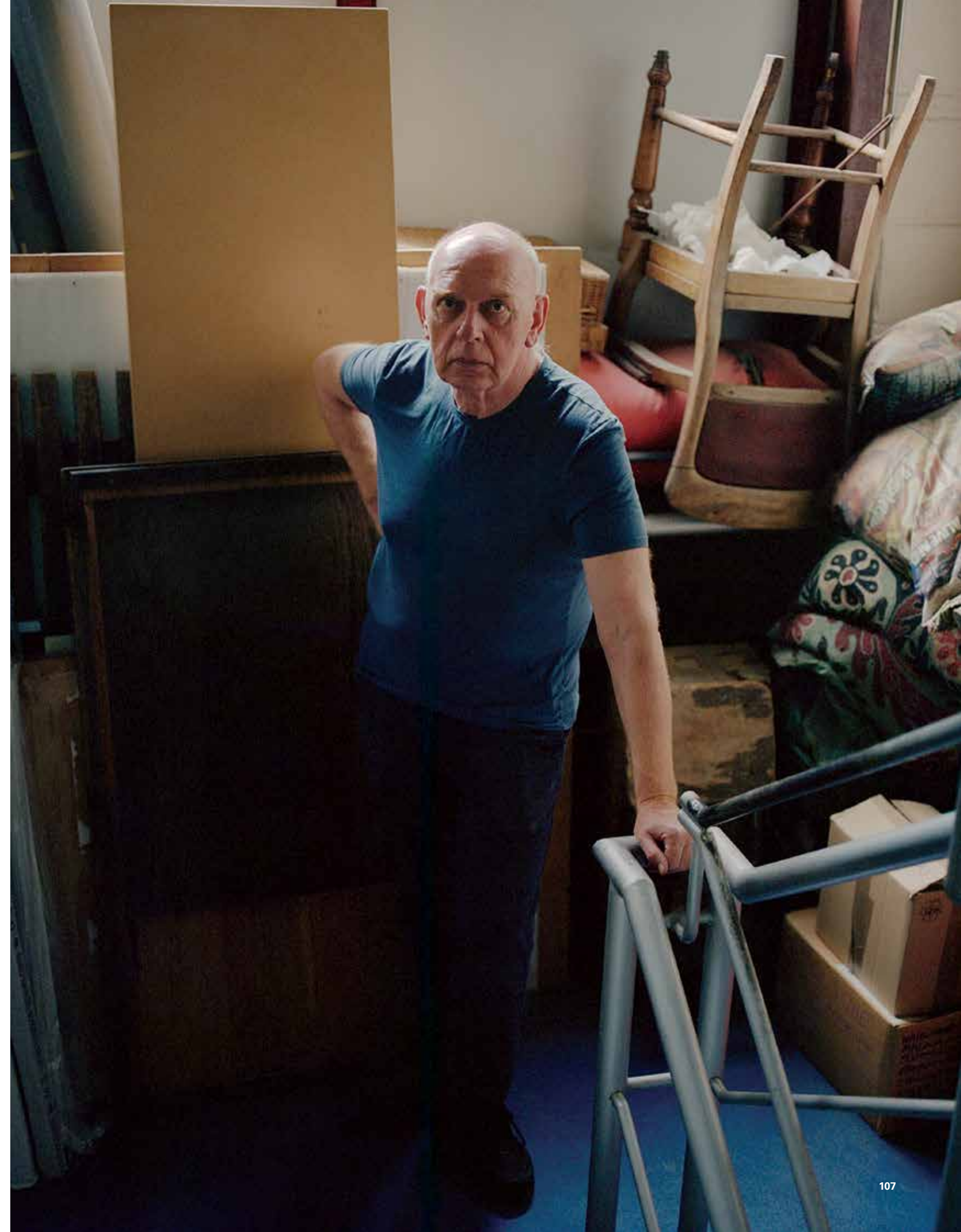
— On how artist and audience make art, with a little help from a questing eye. **RACHEL CAMPBELL JOHNSTON** discovers the questions that drive **RICHARD DEACON**
Photographed by **SADIE CATT** in his London studio

Forget trying to fix Richard Deacon down. He is far too restlessly inquisitive for that. As a sculptor he is ready to try pretty much anything – except stick to a single easily recognisable style. He has pressed and stretched timber into slow looping spirals. He has set great strips of steel rippling out towards skies. He has stacked linear shapes into labyrinthine geometries. He has moulded ceramics into organic forms. He has flexed, squashed and riveted; steamed, buckled and looped.

“The excitement lies in the process of making,” says Deacon. “I am not a carver or modeller;

I’m a fabricator. I like the idea of making things up.” Intrigued by the potential of his materials – he ranges omnivorously from wood, clay and metal to lino, rubber or foam – he moves from one piece to the next, testing the laws of the possible. He makes stuff do all sorts of stuff that you didn’t think that it could.

“Rules: they are there to be broken,” announces Deacon – even his own. A while back, visiting the Kailash caves in India, he was struck by the strangeness of making a building not by assembling, but by taking a solid block and carving it out and so – despite his declaration that he is →





not a carver - he decided to apply this technique to his sculpture.

Flying in the face of convention, Deacon creates complex abstracts. They have earned him a high reputation. In 1987 he won Britain's most prestigious contemporary art award: the Turner Prize. In 1999 he was appointed CBE. The Tate gave him a major mid-career retrospective. He has been the subject of several international shows. But try to make sense of his symmetries and confusions; try to pick a clear path through his spatial conundrums, try to follow the flow of the lines that get lost.

Above: "Weaver bird's nest from Botswana, found near my hotel in Gaborone when I was there in 2009 to run a workshop for artists from many different parts of Africa," says Richard Deacon.

I defy you, the viewer, not to find yourself baffled. But I suspect you will feel yourself fascinated at the same time.

Deacon, born in 1949 and brought up in Bangor, in North Wales, first discovered his fascination for sculpture at school. He realised, quite simply, that he "liked messing around with materials". He enjoyed the physicality, he explains. It was

like sport, or dancing: there was a rhythm to making things.

This is the rhythm that he has picked up, played with, and amplified over the course of his career. The starting point of a piece can be anything. It might, he explains, come from the material he is working with or from what he has found in the street; from a mundane experience, or a book he is reading, a conversation he engages in or a drawing he has done. "All you need is to be interested in something and the rest follows from that. And the simpler the thing, the better," →



Richard Deacon has been collecting objects since his childhood. On these shelves in his studio, there are lots of articles from all around the world, including the toys from his, and even his mother's childhood. He shows a minifigure of Marge Simpson and tells us it's his favourite because of the sculptural blue hair.



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he suggests. “If you started with wanting to make a work about death, for example, that would in the long run be reductive. But if you start simple it might come in at a later stage. When you start with something small it can get bigger. If you start with something big, it can only get smaller.”

He takes his 1996 Laocoon as an example. It is a piece that meditates upon one of

the classical world’s greatest marvels: a statue that records the fate of the Trojan priest who, issuing his now time-honoured warning about Greeks bearing gifts, was punished by the gods who sent a monstrous pair of sea

Above: Fossils and flints from the beach at Happisburgh, Norfolk provided as material to be both a starting point and potentially incorporated into a sculpture to be auctioned by the charity Explorers Against Extinction scheduled for October 2023

serpents to devour the screaming Laocoon – his agonised bellow is immortalised in marble – and his two hapless sons.

Deacon creates a writhing clot of steamed beech-wood and aluminium which captures - but barely controls - a sense of sheer thrashing energy in coils that corkscrew, flow and knot upon the gallery floor. To see it is to sense your visceral response. →

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But the starting point for this piece, Deacon explains, was just a piece of cheese on a supermarket counter. “It was that cheese with holes in it,” he explains, “and I was looking at it and wondering what would happen if the holes got so big that there wasn’t enough cheese left. I decided to try to pack a hole into space”. And so “something that was very speculative and banal” he says, “became something really quite grand, something with art historical resonance.”

The processes of making piece inspired an ongoing series in which Deacon, intrigued by the possibilities of wood, began to experiment. I began to wonder if I could bend it without having to laminate it. I started twisting wood, one end against the other, wringing it out like a cloth. It was the beginning of a 20-year period of continuous exploration. I found it endlessly exciting to explore the dynamics. And I found myself spinning off into all sorts of different concepts and ideas. It all ended up a long way from that piece of supermarket cheese,” he says.

“It’s a question of interest,” explains Deacon: “of finding something interesting without knowing what the conclusion is. The end point only comes when you think that you understand something.” That, he suggests, is when his ideas start drying up. But the work has an afterlife long after he has made it. It finds new layers of meaning as it is looked at.

“I think the making of art and the looking at art is a shared activity,” says Deacon. Art, he suggests, is quintessentially a collaborative process. He has

frequently made work with fellow sculptors – his contemporary Bill Woodrow, prominent among them. He respects and depends on the skills of the craftsmen he employs. And he sees us, the viewers, also as his collaborators. “I think the audience is as important to the artist as the artist is to the audience” says Deacon.

You understand this the moment you stand before one of his abstracts. As you watch it coil, flow and loop you can’t help but start wondering. Are these the industrial innards of some factory production line, or the sloughed-off skin of a reptile perhaps; maybe its the whorl of the human ear that you find there, or a magnified viral structure, or a spongy fungal growth.

It might be any or none of them. “Works don’t carry fixed messages,” says Deacon. “The function of art is to provoke questions: but it does not necessarily answer them.” Art is a dialogue. And, when it comes to the Deacon’s sculpture, it is emphatically a conversation in which we must take part. So don’t try and fix it. Just go with the flow.

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*Deacon’s upcoming exhibition will be at **LISSON GALLERY** Shanghai — 29 October 2022 to 14 January 2023*

*There’s another exhibition of new sculpture planned for **GALERIE ROPAC** in Salzburg — October 2023*

*Richard Deacon is also currently working on two commission proposals, one for a guesthouse in **KARUIZAWA, JAPAN** for Daikin Industries, the second for the **2024 BEAUFORT TRIENNALE** which takes place along the Belgian coastline — These are in the very early stages of development now.*

*A third commissioned project, **Fourfold Way** (Black Bronze) for the Swiss Leschot Foundation, administered by **GALERIE SCHULTE** is near to being finished at the Noack Foundry in **BERLIN** — This will be installed next year.*

*On the desk, there’s the first model for the sculpture **In The Air 2021** commissioned by the St. Bride’s Farm Sculpture collection, Virginia, USA*

