

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Baku.
ART. CULTURE. WILD.

The Alchemist

Spring 2014



Photography by Robert Wyatt. Images courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery

Richard Deacon transforms the mundane into sculptural gold. After a major retrospective at Tate Britain, and works on show at both Lisson Gallery and Marian Goodman's 50th and 40th anniversary celebrations respectively, he is the recipient of the prestigious Ernst Franz Vogelmann Prize for Sculpture 2017, with an accompanying exhibition at the Städtische Museen Heilbronn in Germany, running until February 2018. *Michelle Cotton* was allowed into his studio

Richard Deacon likes his privacy. Rather than using his south London studio as space for a production line, like many other artists, Deacon treats his as a sanctuary, a place to think and reflect and allow ideas to take shape on paper, first, or as little clay or plastic models. "Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor have all expanded their studio operations, whereas I have made myself nomadic," he says. "I find it a bit paralysing to have a lot of people in the studio. I prefer to keep the studio as a private space." Consequently, his colossal, twisted steel sculptures are fabricated at a metalworks in Bletchley, Buckinghamshire; his organic-looking ceramic creations are produced in Cologne, Germany; and everything else is constructed offsite by a network of trusted craftspeople.

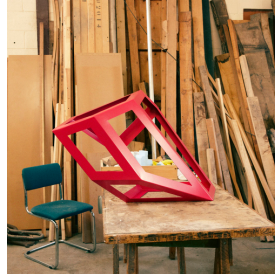
Deacon, who is best known for his complex large-scale works, and for winning the prestigious Turner Prize in 1987, began gaining attention three decades ago as one of the so-called 'New Generation' of British sculptors, alongside the likes of Cragg, Gormley, Kapoor, Richard Wentworth and Bill Woodrow. Their radical work concerned itself with form and materials, both of which had perhaps become unfashionable the decade before. They embraced the urban environment, exploring the meaning of objects and playing with primary colour. This impossible-to-ignore group became associated with Nicholas Logsdail's Lisson

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Gallery in north London, which this year is celebrating 50 years with 'Everything At Once', a major exhibition of gallery artists held in collaboration with The Vinyl Factory at 180 The Strand.



In fact, Deacon is the only living artist to have held major solo shows at Tate Britain, as well as its regional outposts in Liverpool and St Ives. The chosen pieces for his 2014 retrospective at Tate Britain spanned the breadth of the artist's career, including a delicate pastel and pencil drawing entitled *It's Orpheus When There's Singing #7* (1978–79); a 3m x 4m flower-like marble and leather sculpture, *Art for Other People No 12* (1984); and a long, twisting, intricately worked wood and metal piece called *After* (1998), plus much, much more. "Over the years the Tate has bought many of my important pieces and has a very good representation of my work," says Deacon of the landmark event.

Born in Bangor, Wales, 64 years ago, Deacon grew up as the son of a pilot who had served in the British Royal Air Force. His parents had lived in India during the Second World War, and when Deacon was six the whole family moved to Sri Lanka. He recalls those three years as a richly formative experience. "It was a complete revelation," he says. "When we first arrived I remember seeing a snake charmer playing a pipe at a market. He took out a mango stone, put it on the ground and piled up earth in a cone above it and then a silk scarf over the earth. He played again on his pipe and the handkerchief rose up in the air, and when he whipped it away there was a tree underneath it with leaves fluttering in the breeze. That was enough to convince me that we had arrived somewhere quite special." Sculpture was a part of the revelation, too. Deacon remembers visiting the 12th-century garden city of Polonnaruwa and staring, through child eyes, at the huge images of Buddha carved into the cliff face, unable to understand how they had come into being: "I had this powerful sense of positive and negative space, the Buddha that was there and the cliff that wasn't. There was something wonderful about realizing those two things at once; I think it activated something in my head."

That was just the beginning of a lifelong curiosity with objects – he has explored the potential of all manner of everyday materials, from polycarbonate and vinyl to cloth, corrugated iron and foam. These days Deacon usually restricts himself to using laminated wood, aluminium, steel or fired clay for his abstract forms, which could be wall-mounted, free-standing, as small as the palm of your hand or as monumental public pieces, such as *Once Upon a Time* (1991) – a green and red jutting steel creation attached to the surviving wall of the old Redheugh Bridge in Gateshead Riverside Park.

NEW YORK PARIS LONDON

WWW.MARIANGOODMAN.COM

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



One of his first forays as an artist, which began in performance, was a work for radio. “It used the body as a material and was purely based on a sequence of sounds that I produced by hitting one body part against another,” he explains. “I was quite fit at the time so could create a lot of combinations!” That was in 1972, Deacon’s final year on the now legendary ‘A’ Course at Central Saint Martins in London, having first studied at Somerset College of Art in Taunton. The ‘A’ course that he was part of was a radical teaching experiment where, for example, students were shut in an empty white studio every day and banned from speaking or leaving the room for eight hours at a time. “It was a complete surprise,” he recalls. “On the first day our names were read out and as we went into the room we were given a block of polystyrene. On the wall inside there was a set of instructions – no talking, we had to be present and so on – and that was the way it went for a year.” After the first week the group of students returned to the studio expecting to find everything as they had left it, only to discover that their previous work had been removed. At other times the materials remained. “There was never any discussion, there was never any critique as to whether it was good or bad, we had to decide for ourselves.” Deacon concludes, “it was very liberating despite its constraints”. As an artist, he says it taught him “not to plan ahead”.

Post graduation he focused his attention on creating props for his performances, using plaster and bits of board, before later deciding to extract himself from the picture entirely and concentrate on sculpture. “I knew that I wanted to make objects,” he says. “I began to understand the performance work as a kind of apprenticeship that had helped me learn how to use a studio.” Deacon was still hungry for more and, two years after finishing at the prestigious Saint Martins school, enrolled on the Environmental Media course at the equally revered Royal College of Art, London.

Since then his works have been exhibited at such major institutions as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, to name a few. In 2007 he represented Wales at the Venice Biennale. And besides a substantial holding at the Tate, his work can be found in important public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.

Despite these extraordinary accomplishments, Deacon maintains a less willingly public persona than some of his media-friendly contemporaries. It seems apt, then, that he should find inspiration in astronomy and architecture – fields that allow quiet observation. As a young artist

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

he visited almost every cathedral in the British Isles. “What was interesting to me was the relationship between the inside and the outside,” he says. “A Gothic cathedral is like a Richard Rogers’ building – it has its guts on the outside. I was looking at the quality of space and line within the cathedral.” Deacon compares his fascination with Gothic architecture to the Hindu temples that he first encountered in Sri Lanka in the 1950s. “Most Hindu temple architecture takes the mountain and the cave as its model; they are models of mountains and their internal spaces are caves. Gothic cathedrals are a bit like that,” he adds, “the structure allows a cave or a cavern of some sort to be present, they appear to be built around the space.”

He cites an ambitious group of 1970s American sculptors, including Donald Judd, as well as Henry Moore’s work from the 1930s – “particularly the carvings” – and the Modernist sculptor Barbara Hepworth as endless sources of inspiration. “Hepworth is still underrated,” declares Deacon. “I think it’s her work, rather than Moore’s, that has been continuously of interest to me.” When he was 16 years old he even tried to interview Hepworth for his school magazine – she turned him down. Though, clearly, Deacon was not deterred for long.