

RICHARD SLEE

Allen, Chay. Richard Slee, *Studio Voltaire*,  
Frieze, June 2012

frieze



'I'm a lumberjack and I'm ok, I sleep all night and I work all day...' – though not so much these days. In Richard Slee's exhibition 'Camp Futility', at Studio Voltaire, we enter the abandoned workspace of a composite mythologized figure: tree-feller, prospector and craftsman.

Inspired by Slee's recent residency at Alfred University in New York, the show investigates the symbolism associated with the popular perception of the pioneer spirit in America as a predominantly mythic construct. Integral to this is the notion of a masculinity parodied in various motifs throughout the gallery. *Kross Bow* (all works 2012) incorporates moustaches as handlebars (quite literally handlebar moustaches) at both sides of a crossed rope, creating a five-metre-

long bow-tie. *Arrow*, meanwhile, features a brass phallic shaft with small ceramic moustaches for the fletching and arrowhead.

The numerous moustaches in the space, including 13 on one wall, present a parodic, circus-strongman-style notion of masculinity, and invite associations with late-19th-century American figures such as General Custer and Wyatt Earp. Similarly, the brightly coloured handles of the cross-saws on workbenches in the centre of the gallery confuse both the saw's period and gender-specific associations. As if to clarify the gender-period stereotype that Slee attempts to expose, a cross-saw and moustache ensemble close to the benches, *Hanging Cross Saw*, makes this explicit.

The vibrant colours used in the saw handles and the ceramic Camp Fire in particular contrast a Pop aesthetic with the associations they both have of craft, labour and utility. Indeed, the visual seductiveness of all objects in the exhibition is entirely related to their lack of functionality. Apart from the saws' handles that could never support excessive manual labour, and the camp fire that can never be lit, there is a Silent Flute and a Gun that cannot fire bullets. Pre- and latecapitalist associations of commodity are conflated in these objects: they are both artistic and by extension monetary commodities without having any utility.

The contrast of the deskilled and the crafted in Pan contribute to this critique. A readymade gold-mining pan, enhanced with ceramic and resin, it symbolizes the move from craft industry towards speculation as a means of production in which labour is often disproportionate to reward. Furthermore, the pan's function as a tool to find a preformed commodity speaks of the reliance upon readymade goods in a consumer society.

The site of Studio Voltaire, a refurbished chapel with a vaulted wooden roof, reinforces the sense of a lost identity associated with the vernacular community. The chapel, a historical locus of community activity in the UK, creates a perfect backdrop to Slee's critique of the tradition of craft, community and identity. 'Camp Futility' encourages us to question the function of myth and identity creation in a developed capitalist society, and to recognise the role of capitalism in developing a narrative bond with the goods we consume rather than produce. While this evidently contrasts with the pre-capitalist American Southwest, the tales of legendary lumberjacks that bonded this agricultural society remind us that today's myth-making industry is merely a modern adaptation of a centuries-old tool.