Richard Slee


His work is made of clay, but Richard Slee goes out of his way to shatter the cosy certainties of ceramic convention. As a display of his latest strange, witty and iconoclastic pieces opens in the V&A Ceramics Galleries, Caroline Roux gets to grips with “the wizard of studio pottery”

Portrait by Edina van der Wyck

Utility to Futility. Ceramic hammer heads, glossy black ceramic ropes suspended in a cloud formation and carpet beaters rendered in clay and presented like trophies have been arranged to confuse and entertain visitors, not least those who have come to the galleries expecting to see a profusion of pots.

As the show’s curator, Amanda Fielding, says: “The timing is significant because Slee is now very consciously uniting the strings that bind him to the specialised world of ceramics.” Indeed, his first solo exhibition in a gallery associated primarily with fine art and which represents artists including Spencer Tunick and Bob and Roberta Smith (Hales Gallery in the art-centric area of Shoreditch, London) opened on the same day, 4 June. Previously Slee was represented by the applied art specialists Barrett Marsden in London.

If Slee is now swimming from what Grayson Perry has described as the lagoon of the craft world into the ocean of the art world, it’s only ever been a matter of time. For however much he might love clay (“I distrust the ceramics fundamentalist, the pottery bore,” he says as we walk through the V&A, “but I’m so loyal to this material”), it has always been a starting point for pieces which comment on the world
Richard Slee

Around us, as well as the state of ceramics, rather than an end in itself. In work which seems to elude popular culture with ceramics history, in one super shiny piece (his ability with glaze is peerless), Slee conjures a sort of magic, producing brightly coloured, almost cartoonish art that makes the viewer laugh first and question later. It’s not for nothing the ceramics expert Oliver Watson calls him “the great wizard of studio pottery”; and it’s worth noting that Slee liked the title so much, he’s even made it part of his email address. Richard Slee was born in Carlisle in 1946. At the end of his secondary modern education (there were just three pupils in the sixth form; one of them was Ben Campbell, the campaigning feminist journalist), he failed to get into architecture school and, horrified by his accountant father’s offer to help him to find a job in a bank, went to art school instead. He started studying industrial design at the Central School in London, but sidestepped that after presenting a coffee table in the new brightly coloured Italian style. The tutors “went ballistic”, and Slee (“disillusioned”) quietly slipped into the ceramics class. There, alongside fellow students including Alison Britton and Andrew Lord (now among the UK’s most acclaimed practitioners), the eighteenth-century Staffordshire tradition was dissected and absorbed; the colours of Sèvres were consumed and digested. These influences, the perfection and the colour, have been part of his work ever since. “In Sèvres,” he says, “I saw a juxtaposition of colour in an abstract way – that was exciting for me.” He also saw a perfectionism that has become synonymous with his own work, now so flawless, so inhumanly exact – take the lustre-glazed butcher’s hook “5” from 2005, for example – it would appear to be slip cast or machine made. “I wanted to be a potter back then, making things for ordinary folk, but not ordinary things. That was my mistake.” After years of getting by, doing shop fit-outs...
with a company called the Electric Colour Company up and down the King's Road and murals based on Roman figures for the Golden Egg restaurant chain with Kate Weaver in Croydon ("absolutely dire!") he recalls, Slee set up his studio in Brighton in 1980. He played with the idea of pots, reducing them to their component parts and clumsily reassembling them. He looked back at the eighteenth century’s love of creating mementoes from the natural world, and produced pieces that brought the past to the present, such as the baby blue 1980s Coach Shell in the V&A permanent collection, set on little feet that turn it into something you might expect to find in Alice’s Wonderland. You can imagine it dancing on the table at the Mad Hatter’s tea party.

He did a degree by project at the Royal College of Art in the mid-1980s and, though it was meant to be technical (to formulate a clay body), he took the opportunity to show his displeasure with the banality of contemporary ceramics decoration. “It was all spirals and stars then; I wanted to create a decorative system that was sophisticated and studio based.” So he made a bean-shaped plate decorated with beans. “It was Pop Art, really,” he says.

He has always played around with contemporary culture and a rather British kind of knockabout humour. In 1991 he made the ecstatically happy Acid Toby – a toby jug with a big yellow smiley face – and its moody counterpart Drunk Punch, neatly representing a wave of good-times pill-popping that was making Britain’s pub-bound, alcohol-soaked culture look old and tired. In Sausage (2006, in the V&A permanent collection), a piece with the sort of production values that would make Jeff Koons proud, an over-sized gleaming white sausage is lashed to a workbench with bungee ropes, suggesting the current state of the middle-aged British man – no longer good with his hands, but asserting his masculinity through the banality of extreme sport. (This is classic Slee: to use the laughable, almost grotesque,

extraordinary painting/construction/ installation hybrids, and then colleagues have worked with in the UK, such as Cullinan Richards, Robert Holmes, Adam Gillam, David Rhodes and Gareth Jones are great because of the ways their work crosses painting with other territories to a greater or lesser extent. Erick Fitzgerald is one of my oldest friends and a great painter based near Ebbao. Painter and writer Sherman Sam also introduced me to the work of Thomas Nokowski a number of years ago, which was a real discovery. I could go on, there are many others. The crucial thing for me is mobility and generosity in looking at other artists' work.

KB: I have been looking at very early Renaissance Florentine panel painting recently. I am struck by the colour relationships, compositions, and surface painting and patterning techniques such as sgraffito. Are there paintings from history that you study in this way?

AB: Not systematically, but in the big collections and when I travel. Fifteen minutes in front of a Piero della Francesca at the National Gallery is never time wasted.

KB: Is there a spiritual factor somewhere? Perhaps this might be a question about philosophy or which philosophers have been important? What sustains your practice?

AB: Going way back in my own reading and thinking, the intellectual wrestling with the Medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart (around negative theology) has an analogue but critical link to my own approach to making art. There was logic (having grown up in a Church of England vicarage) to finding a way to philosophy via theology. My first ever catalogue text, from a writer called David Miller, discussed my work in relation to negative theology, and in the world of ironic 1990s Brit Art my then gallery showed this as career suicide – suggesting I drop the essay and get Sarah Kent to write something more catchy! The interest in the kind of thought Eckhart pioneered hasn’t been supplanted, but the notion of silence (thinking of concrete poets such as robert lax and don mylvester hoochard) is carried in my approach to ideas of attentiveness in art, not as something quiet or passive, but as a social and political force.

KB: Despite the crisis in painting, which seems to have gone on forever, there is plenty of renewed interest at the moment, with lots of painters just getting on with it, ‘hang ups’ gone and looking to the future. How do you account for this? Or perhaps I am wrong. You teach in several art colleges and see what is going on first hand.

AB: I like Thierry de Duve’s essay in Kant after Duchamp. The Readymade and The Tube of Paint, in which he describes Marcel Duchamp’s crisis with his own inadequacy as a painter as a trigger to his whole artistic career. The truth probably is that everyone is responding to painting (or the idea of painting) all the time, leading to all sorts of individual crises on a near-permanent basis. This is far more interesting than the end of painting (in 1961 - courtesy Douglas Crimp). It has always been ending; the critical questions are more about if any of us are capable of having a useful crisis with painting, or art in general, or art in a social context? I don’t see a crisis of painting in art schools. There is a crisis of resources, of cultural confidence in the value of art as art, as opposed to a weak subdivision of the social sciences, but the energy and desire to make painting, among students and artists in general remains undimmed.
Locke's installation, The Nameless, 2010, made of cord, plastic beads, and gaffer tape, taps into the narrative art of the past, outside of time and sequence.

tyrant using weapons who are almost invisible under the ill-gotten wealth and flowers cloaking them top to toe. "It's about making something knowingly exotic to be consumed—playing with a whole bunch of stereotypes," says Locke. "It's making a dark boogeyman for our times, who's going to come and eat your babies." Despite considerable commercial success, the artist has been on the wrong side of the trends for the big institutions, being considered either too foreign or too homegrown, which both frustrates and amuses him. "Everybody's hunting for the latest thing, but what if the latest exotic cool thing is around the corner? Give me a solo show at Tate Modern, and I'll blow your socks off! In other words," he asks, "how do you want me?"

Locke used to resist biographical readings of his work; these days, however, he embraces the personal influences that shape it. He traces his interest in paint and regalia to boyhood memories of killed buggie bands marching through Edinburgh and credits his love of color and kaleidoscopic excess to the tropical vibranse and cultural diversity of Guyana, where Christian, Hindu, and Muslim festivals are widely celebrated. Locke is married to Indra Karmo, an artist and curator he met in the early 1990s when both had studios in a squatter's building, along with the British Nigerian artist Yinna Shonbare. By way of hobbies, Locke enjoys visiting stately homes, traveling, and collecting "weird things," such as obsolete share certificates, which have featured in several works, including Gold Standard. The piece consisted of enlarged certificates pasted temporarily across a building facade for the 2012 Deptford X arts festival in South London.

Over the past year, Locke has branched out into new mediums in two projects. The first, a bronze sculpture of a black moon goddess exploding in stars, titled Selenae (2013), was commissioned for the facade of a hotel in London's Soho district. The second, Mummy's Little Soldier, depicting a glass voodoo doll, was shown at the Glassstress group exhibition "White Light/White Heat" at the 2013 Venice Biennale and subsequently at the Walker Collection in London.

Despite the variety of materials he employs, Locke regards all of his art as interconnected—"like DNA," he explains, "it loops and twists around." He says his aim is simply to create hauntingly vivid works. He marvels at Titian's graphic 1556 painting The Martyrdom of St Lawrence and Velázquez's 1650 Portrait of Pope Innocent X, which he finds so lifelike he exclaims: "God, you bastard, you'll kill me without blinking!" Locke sees the power of his own reliefs as being in the figure's eyes, which he adds right at the end of a work. "So when I put eyes on the queen, it's for you to imagine and think, God, that has a reality to it," he says. "That's what I'm trying to do—to make something that gets under people's skin."
The bronze sculpture Solena, 2013, which updates a Greek goddess in the figure of a black woman, is informed by the Baroque, Art Nouveau, Victorian fairy tales, and more.