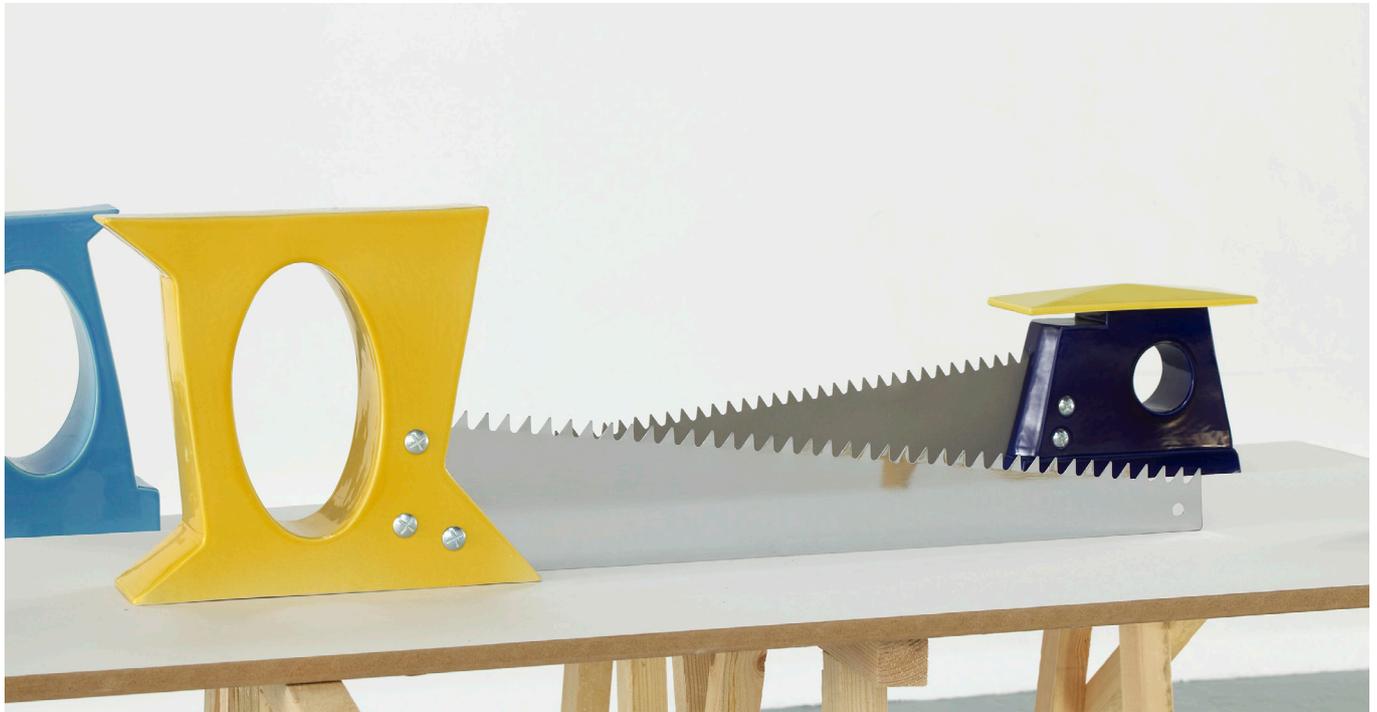


RICHARD SLEE

Skye Sherwin, 'Artist of the week 188: Richard Slee', The Guardian, 3 May 2012



Richard Slee, *Camp Futility* installation view, 2012

Known as the 'wizard of studio ceramics', the sculptor has emerged as one of British craft's most compelling figures.

Ceramics artist Richard Slee once named Disney's Fantasia among his many inspirations. Brooms and buckets don't dance in his work – it's more like the sorcerer's apprentice has waved a wand around an animation cell and brought it to vivid 3D life. His creations are cartoonish – from an oversized wooden peg hammered into a tree stump, to black boots as smooth and round as giant eggs – and his glazes are impossibly lush.

Slee's love for cutesy characters and a high-gloss finish has often seen him aligned with pop art maestro Jeff Koons. Yet his work has a resolutely British quality, more mantelpiece bric-a-brac than The Disney Store. *Appropriated Rabbit*, his lustrous tangerine-hued bunny with buck-teeth and half-moon eyes, is based on a jumble-sale find. Cheap and cheerful figurines have starred in a number of his works: *Wheelbarrow of the Medusa*, where his daughter's cast-off ornaments are stacked up on a yellow ceramic wheelbarrow, riffs on the desperate survivors clinging to the raft in Gericault's famous painting.

Known as the "wizard of studio ceramics", over the last three decades Slee has emerged as one of British craft's most

compelling figures, and has only recently focused his activities on the art world. Having immersed himself in the methods of 18th-century porcelain producers such as Wedgwood, he opened his first studio in 1980. But while his handcrafted forms are renowned for their exacting finesse, his output has been anything but traditional. The now destroyed *Anvil*, one stand-out work from the 80s, turned the blacksmith's striking block into a breakable ceramic target in a comment on the futility felt living under Margaret Thatcher amid socialism's ruins.

The slide "*from utility to futility*" (as his 2010 V&A show was titled) is a recurring concern. Slee's current London exhibition, *Camp Futility*, sees him turn a sensibility steeped in postwar suburbia to the lost world of America's frontiersmen and mining industries. Here, large black moustaches cover one wall like pantomime props. Beneath this a camp scene unfolds around a ceramic fire, whose smoke has turned solid and rises in a phallic plume. Saucy, suggestive shapes abound – from a long pink recorder by the fire to skewered sausages. Meanwhile, a series of saws on workbenches have ceramic handles in bright sky blue or midnight purple.

Pairing the mass-produced with the handmade, the functional with the ornate, Slee wryly suggests different kinds of fragility and obsolescence, particularly of masculinity built on

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DIY. Gorgeous they may be, but the decorative surfaces and sexual throb speak of buried frustrations.

Why we like him: For his jaunty bit of social satire, *Acid Toby*, a traditional British Toby Jug sporting the yellow smiley face of the rave era.

Getting messy: While Slee admires the smooth, slick Koons, his favourite artist is the original Los Angelino bad boy Paul McCarthy, renowned for his ketchup and chocolate sauce-splattered abject performances, which savage consumer culture.