

RICHARD SLEE
Caroline Roux, A Wizard with Clay,
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Richard Slee

A WIZARD WITH CLAY

You don't have to talk to Richard Slee, the ceramics artist, for long to realise that he's never much liked being told what to do, not by teachers, colleagues, or gallerists. Which is probably why he likes clay so very much. "It comes in a bag, it has no shape," he says at one point. "You do what you want with it." Though he doesn't say it, you can imagine he sometimes wished that the same applied to people too.

Slee is one of Britain's most slyly witty and stylistically wilful potters, though "potter" is a title that feels increasingly irrelevant as his career goes by. This summer a solo exhibition of his work – which through the years has moved from perverted ceramics archetypes to experiments with ready-mades to the re-creations of day-to-day tools and objects in exquisite porcelain that he is making today – comes to the V&A. In an (unintentional) celebration of his 30 years of practice, he has filled the five large vitrines that occupy the light-filled temporary exhibition space at the eastern end of the spectacular new Ceramics Galleries with new work in a show called 'From

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"

Portraits 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 amassed 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 untying 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



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Richard Slee

Previous page: Richard Slee with *Pickaxe*, 2009, in the V&A Ceramics Galleries. Right: *Carpet Beater*, 2009. Below: *Hammers* (detail), 2009/2010. All images of works courtesy Hales Gallery and the artist



around us, as well as the state of ceramics, rather than an end in itself. In work which seamlessly elides 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.

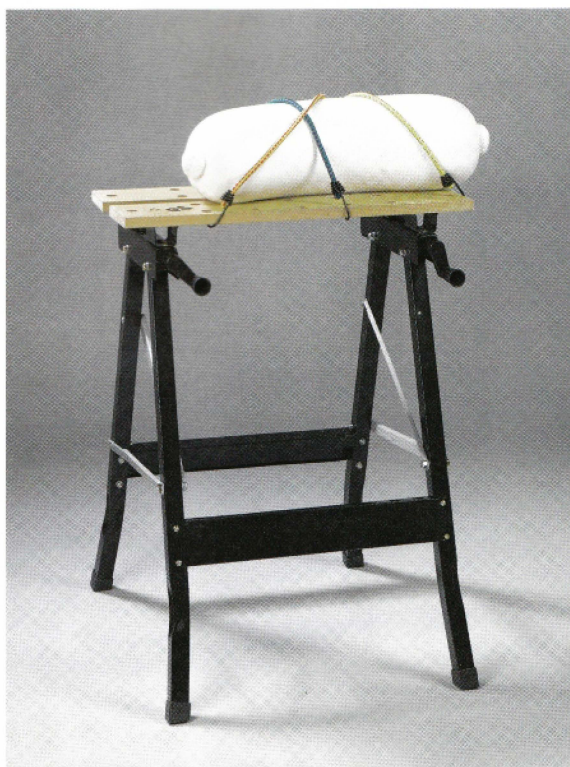
Richard Slee was born in Carlisle in 1946. At the end of his secondary modern education (there were just three pupils in the sixth form; one of them was Bea Campbell, the campaigning feminist journalist), he failed to get into architecture school and, horrified by his accountant father's offer to help 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 "S" 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 *Conch 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.

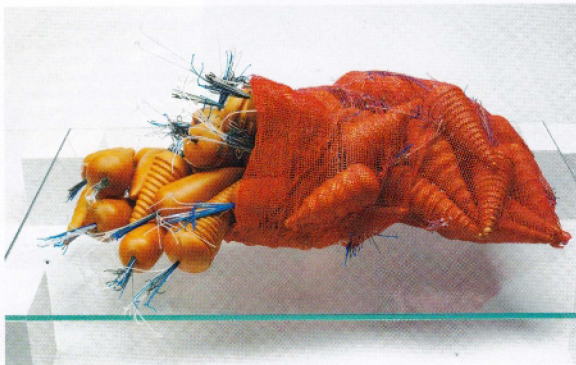
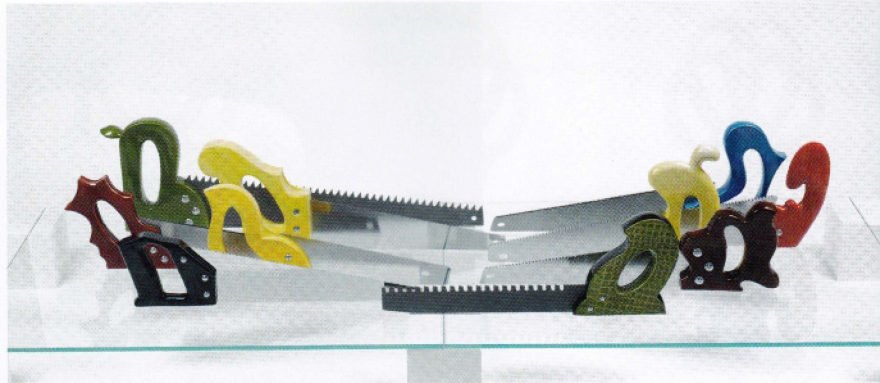
He has always played around with contemporary culture and a rather British kind of knockabout humour. In 1991 he made the ecstatically happy *Acid Toby* – a toby jug with a big yellow smiley face – and its moody counterpart *Drunk Punch*, neatly representing a wave of good-times pill-popping that was making Britain's pub-bound, alcohol-sodden 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 oversized gleaming white sausage is lagged 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 lunacy of extreme sport. (This is classic Slee: to use the laughable, almost grotesque,



Left: *Sausage*, 2006
© V&A Images. Below left:
Piggy, 2009, ceramic and
latex party ears, 24cm
high. Below: *Syphoned
Modernism*, 2001 © V&A
Images



Richard Slee



Above: *Saws*, 2009/2010.
Left: *Carrots*, 2009/2010.
Below: *Pair of Hammers*,
2009/2010



phallic symbol of the over-stuffed sausage to make a valid social comment.)

Not one to bore himself, though, Slee has consciously bookended his career at several points. His obsessive referral to ceramics history was terminated with a piece called *Plough* in 2004. In *Wheelbarrow of the Medusa* (2001) he marks the end of his pieces using ready-mades (such as *Sell* from 1990, belonging to collector Edgar Harden, where a found ornament of a tiny French rococo table is placed in a rolling Martian landscape). "To stick things on was seen as a terrible crime [in ceramics]," says Grayson Perry in an interview recorded for the V&A about Slee's work. "I think in many ways that might be where Richard has to be careful. It's the sign of a ceramist looking out, trying to expand what ceramics is, rather than an artist coming from the outside, saying what is ceramics?" Harden, however, disagrees. "The more I see the work, the more I appreciate the irony and admire the interpretation of the found object."

Wheelbarrow of the Medusa is a riff on Delacroix's *Raft of the Medusa*: the barrow piled high with valueless kitsch ornaments, ready to be discarded forever, in the same heart-wrenching way Delacroix's raft is crowded with those doomed by shipwreck. Slee attributes his move away from this format to his chronic fear of romanticism: "I keep thinking I'm too romantic. It's a continual danger in ceramics, it's so prevalent." Added to that is a deep dislike of the self-referential. "Like all those jewellers who go into their family history in their work. If I hear one more thing about absence and loss, I'll scream." It would seem, then, that in his current work he is on safe ground. "Now when I use a found object, it is a tool and it has been bought. It has no romantic associations for anyone," he declares, an enthusiast of both the tool merchant's and, more recently, eBay.

'From Utility to Futility' is, in fact, a comment on the story of contemporary ceramics. *Hammers*, a vitrine piled full of 102

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hammers with exquisitely wrought ceramic heads, and *Saws*, a landscape of saws with variously rococo and cartoonish handles, speak of a world in which aesthetics has superseded usefulness. "Look at Lucie Rie, who went from making tableware to completely useless long thin bottles," says Slee. To reinforce the point, in another vitrine you will find *Pickaxe*, with what Amanda Fielding calls "its ceramic head of joke wood", and *Shovel, Rake, Dust*, where the dust has been aggrandised with the addition of diamanté and the shovel and rake dignified with gold lustre handles. "There is so much myth about the value of porcelain," sighs Slee, "when its only value is what has been done to it."

Now that he is so clearly untying those strings that have bound him to the world of applied arts and floating into the big art sea, where will he come to rest? His frames of reference – 1940s Disney animation, especially *Pinocchio*; the endlessly returning phallus, in the form of carrots, sausages, sprouting plants – bring him into the space occupied by his own favourite artist, the American Paul McCarthy, whose work is also dominated by sexual emblems and human mess. Slee's brightly coloured and perfectionistic renderings of popular cultural subjects, with knowing allusions to art history, mean some see him as the pottery equivalent of arch postmodernist Jeff Koons. Or perhaps Slee simply stands alone: an artist who has chosen the unlikely medium of clay to work his own special magic.

Caroline Roux writes about design for the *Guardian*, the *Observer* and the *New York Times*

'Richard Slee: From Utility to Futility', V&A, London SW7 (020 7942 2000, www.vam.ac.uk), until 3 April. The Ceramics Study Galleries have been funded thanks to a substantial gift from The Curtain Foundation. The British Pottery Gallery has been funded by Sir Harry Djanogly. 'Richard Slee', Hales Gallery, London E1 (020 7033 1938, www.halesgallery.com), until 17 July

www.vam.ac.uk

Right: Richard Slee in
the Ceramics Galleries.
Below: *Dust*, 2009



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