

RICHARD SLEE

Isabella Smith, *Island Fantasies: Richard Slee imagines the post-Brexit utopia that never was*, Crafts Council, 22 February 2023



Installation view of Richard Slee, “*Sunlit Uplands*”, Hales London, 21 January - 4 March 2023. Photo by Charlie Littlewood.

Tell me about the phrase ‘sunlit uplands’. Why did you choose it as the title for this installation?

The title comes from H. G. Wells’ *The Discovery of the Future* [1902]. The phrase was picked up by Winston Churchill in a wartime speech, in which he talked about defeating Hitler and moving into the ‘sunlit uplands’, where Britain and Europe would be free – Churchill was very much about uniting Europe. Recently it’s been hijacked by Tory politicians talking about what they imagine the results of Brexit will be. I wanted to make something akin to a utopia.

As a pastel-hued landscape, many won’t find it reflective of today’s reality. Why did you depict it in such a fantastical fashion? There are even a few unicorns.

Once you start looking at it more closely, hopefully you’ll see darker aspects – drowning lions or gravestones. It’s like a treasure hunt. There are a few in-jokes, which I don’t expect many people to get – for instance, there are some pieces featuring miniature mantelpieces from a doll’s house. It’s a reference to Gavin Williamson, who was ‘fireplace salesman of the year’ twice running before he became an MP. Though it is visually attractive, I wanted to avoid sentimentality and whimsy.

Tell me about the motifs you’ve used. I saw pastoral imagery such as tree-stumps and wheat sheaves, and scrollwork that reminded me of ornate pargeting.

Yes; the wheat sheaves turn into solar panels at



Richard Slee, *Uplands (28)*, 2021, Glazed ceramic. Photo by Charlie Littlewood.

one point. Wheat sheaves are a romantic image from the past – we don't see them anymore. I was making these pieces like a collage of ornamental bits. Sometimes they were telling a tale; sometimes they remind me of animals, sometimes people. Sometimes they're more surreal than anything to do with reality.

There are 408 pieces – why did you choose to create such a profusion? I was reminded of a Women's Institute cake sale...

A lot of people made that same remark. A group of Chinese and Japanese art students loved it – perhaps because the colouring is much like the pastel tones of their confectionary. It wasn't intentional; it's my palette. I really enjoy the brightness you can get from earthenware glazes. When I started, I intended to make 144 pieces because of the word 'gross', which refers to a group of 144 items. It seemed to fit in with the political terminology of 'sunlit uplands'. But I just kept going.

***"Sunlit Uplands"* is a huge singular artwork, rather than a series of individual pieces. What do you hope will happen to it?**

Last night a friend was telling me that it should go to a public collection, as people will want to keep seeing it. I'd love for it to have a public life afterwards. It's been one of the most popular shows Hales Gallery has had – I must be on Tiktok or something.

There's the occasional rubber egg in the show, which made me laugh. Tell me about combining ceramic with other materials such as glass, wood and metal.

Rubber eggs are a reference to *Gulliver's Travels*, in which two nations go to war over which end of the egg you should break. There's also a fair few cast-iron pieces: rail heads from fencing. I wanted to take common things you don't look at often, but that are in the back of your head,

and change them into something else. The glass and wooden bits were lying around my studio; I stuck them on and they seemed to work.

As a ceramic artist all my making career, the history of the medium can weigh you down. What does someone like me make in the 21st century? I've tried to make something relevant for today, but that might last. If I'd made Brexit commentary all about Jacob Rees-Mogg, it wouldn't last forever – people wouldn't get the reference. I'm not as clever as Hogarth.

I know it sounds romantic, but once you've fired something it will last thousands of years. So if you're putting something into the world, you've got to make sure it will last.