

Shared Sculptures: Bill Woodrow and Richard Deacon

Bill Woodrow (b. 1948) and Richard Deacon (b. 1949) have been making sculpture together for over thirty years and this new exhibition is the first to showcase the sculptures made over this whole period. They have created over sixty sculptures altogether, through five main bodies of work, which have been variously shown in exhibitions over the years staged in Britain and abroad: *Only the Lonely* (1993), *Monuments* (1999), *Lead Astray* (2004), *On the Rocks* (2008) and *Don't Start* (2016).

They call these works 'shared sculptures' – rather than joint or collaborative works. In doing so, they highlight the important *equality* of authorship and responsibility at stake. Both artists are very much equal partners in these works' making and ownership. The first sculpture they made together was titled *Democratic Process* (1990), which was indicative of the mood of their endeavours. Trust and friendship are important ingredients in the works too.

Woodrow and Deacon, who both attended St Martins' School of Art, have been good friends since they met there in 1969. The school had established an international reputation for cutting-edge contemporary sculpture during the 1960s and it was an exciting and challenging place for a young student to be studying at that time. Their friendship developed further, as they both came into view as artists in the early 1980s as part of a talented group that would soon become known as the 'New British Sculptors' and which included Tony Cragg, Antony Gormley, Edward Allington and Anish Kapoor.

It was a generation that responded to the aesthetics of American minimalism and to the constraints of European conceptualism, reintroducing narrative and drawing upon a broad range of images, materials and objects, often found and recycled, for their sculpture. Woodrow and Deacon's shared sculptures continue the spirit of such endeavours, taking them both into new artistic terrain, outside the logic of the individual artist's oeuvre and off the beaten track of their own artistic branding. In doing so they have also both created what Deacon has sometimes liked to call 'a third artist', an artistic force who stands to one side of them. As he has commented recently: 'It is a useful way of setting up an independent category.'

Their shared sculptures have thus provided fascinating opportunities for them both to take a step outside their own practices. We might read their shared sculptures as adventures that they both go on together, offering the chance to take things in new and surprising directions, whilst also enabling their own, personal artistic preoccupations perhaps to come into sharper focus indirectly. The subtle impact of their shared work on their own individual practices is also an interesting topic and one that Woodrow has recently reflected on in terms of language: '...it has certainly increased my vocabulary. A lot. You don't notice at the time that you're doing something, but you can trace it back. And having that openness to absorb and then re-energise and reinvent something, but knowing where it's come from, that's good.'

Dialogue is also central to their shared making processes: a sculpture will be arrived at through a series of moves, with each artist engaging with and responding to the actions of the other. Sometimes this is spoken and conversational, but often it is silent and based on more intuitive, artistic exchanges. At the beginning, Woodrow and Deacon started working on their shared sculptures in their respective studios, physically moving the sculptures from one studio to the other between stages. After a while, however, they began working together, in each other's company on the work. It was a bold step that took some getting used to, since it laid bare even further the dynamics of their respective creative processes, at once their strengths and vulnerabilities.

Play also has a very important role and the pleasure that they have had in the making of these sculptures, freewheeling within and between them, is very clear to see. Some are charged with a sense of humour; others are animated by musical references. This spirit is also reflected in the word-play of the titles they have chosen for many of the works - and for the exhibitions themselves. Their designs for their exhibitions' preview cards are also always humorous, often showing the artists as a duo or double act, or physically conjoined as a single body.

Since their first exhibition, *Only the Lonely* in 1993, assemblage and construction have been important means of making their shared sculptures. Through this, works are often built up, piece by piece in hybrid ways. Since then, they have gone on to work within the frameworks of particular materials and themes for each new body of work.

For the shared sculptures that they exhibited at FIAC in 1999, sculptures were made of found and discarded objects. These assemblages were then cast in bronze and placed on narrow plinths that have been topped with sheets of sandblasted stainless steel. Several of the sculptures in this group were heads and bodies, the anatomies of which configured in surprising, multipartite ways. *Ready Rubbed*, *Shrink to Fit* and *Piked* are shown in this exhibition. They have wit, spontaneity and immediacy and the lively contingency of their original assembly shines powerfully through – resonating through a material for so long associated with memory and durability.

In *Lead Astray* (2004), lead and wood took centre stage as materials, as the idea of the island became their subject. There were thirteen islands altogether in *Lead Astray* and *Ash Island*, on display here placed on the floor, was the very last one they made in that group. The sculpture, which is only small, is an ash tray – a lead ash tray, punning on the exhibition's title - as well as a geographical entity, complete with snake for cigarette. *Lead Astray* also included a work on paper entitled *Desert Island*, also on view. Conjuring up ideas of Robinson Crusoe, the Garden of Eden and a popular radio programme, this work is a prelude to the larger works on paper that they would go on to make together and which will be shown later this year at the Ikon in Birmingham. The exhibition following *Lead Astray* was titled *On the Rocks* (2008) and this body of work witnessed an extensive exploration together of glass as a material for their shared sculptures. Tables and bottles were created that embraced both the everyday and the mysterious. Glass is a good material for such combined associations. They made a number of glass sculptures entitled *Bouteille de Sorcière* and *Clear Bottle*, some of which are included in this exhibition.

In their more recent body of work, which when it was exhibited in 2016 went under the title *Don't Start*, fish, fishing and the submarine world become the subject. They made sculptures called *Flounder*, *Angler*, *Monster*, *Lobster*, *Tiddler* and *Conger*. The latter two are on display in this exhibition. *Conger* is one of the largest works they have made to date. It comprises two main components: a free-standing perforated, stainless steel structure and a smaller form, resembling both an eel and a nuclear submarine, made of foam, resin, wood and paint, lurking at the foot of this metallic screen, like a conger eel in the coral reef.

Conger is a compelling sculpture and, as with so many of the shared sculptures that Woodrow and Deacon have made over the years, a very slippery one too, its subtle meanings difficult to grasp. This difficulty is something that is also subtly echoed in the titles of the *Don't Start* works – each with -er endings, generating a repetitive 'er, er, er' and giving this group of works an implicit hesitancy and indeterminacy. Here, as in all Woodrow and Deacon's shared sculptures, the titles are used as active and constituent parts of the works themselves, part of their material in a way. Always playful, often mischievously so, their titles sometimes give viewers clues, helpful handles on things, and at other times deliberately send them off in the wrong directions with red herrings and other diversions.

Dr Jon Wood