

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Richard Deacon at Marian Goodman

Richard Deacon is among the several British sculptors now making work consequential enough to influence others' practice. His development of an existing tradition, his exploration of materials and construction methods, his sense of reference and of language have all been exemplary. While Deacon's work is indebted to William Tucker's and thus to Anthony Caro's, he has freshened and extended their language of connected parts. In his best pieces Deacon seems to be both learning from the historical vocabulary of Constructivism and reinventing it.

A Deacon trademark is the assembling of repeated elements—of identical structure if of differing sizes—into fractious wholes. He favors hand tools over machines to laboriously fabricate and piece together compound curves and volumes from sheets of metal, masonite, plastic, cloth, linoleum and rubber. His obsessive recourse to glue and to near-humorous legions of rivets, screws, bolts and staples calls attention to his constructional methods, methods which function much as "touch" did in traditional sculpture to lessen the distance between viewer and maker.

His third solo show in New York consisted of four pieces, each fabricated very differently. *Untitled*, 1990, at first appears bulky and opaque, suggesting a wing taken off Mercury's helmet and blown up to a public scale. Measuring 6 by 4 by 11 feet, it is a laminated particleboard form completely covered with small sheets of copper, each of which has been hammered to bulge out pillowlike from its center and then stapled to the wooden structure. The copper swellings reiterate the puffiness of the whole. Deacon often keeps his pieces light, whatever their scale, by making them physically open. Here, instead, he uses the thinness of the copper skin and its suggestion of respiration to lift up the work. The sculpture is funny, a workman's response to today's overblown logotypes or to yesterday's massive sculptured angels.



Richard Deacon: Installation view of the exhibition, 1990; at Marian Goodman.



David Nash: Installation view of the exhibition, 1990; at Louver. (Review on p. 202.)

Characteristic of Deacon's sculptures is how difficult they are to describe. *Skirt*, 1989, is an open semicircular duct, 32 inches high and 11 feet wide, made of 11 galvanized sheet steel modules and two end pieces identical to the others in cross section but much narrower. The 13 units are put together with rivets so numerous as to

function visually like a zipper, making the seams both emphatic and provisional. Though composed of planes and simple curves, the sculpture is perceived as a sweeping compound surface. *Skirt* is larger than the body but not yet architectural. It is buoyant and looks portable, a trait of Deacon's best works; it hovers above the floor without

denying its own materiality.

A second large untitled piece is made out of clear plastic sheets that have been cut, heated, shaped over a pattern and welded together. The sculpture conflates the biomorphic and the engineered, calling forth both the head/ear/eye/mouth forms ubiquitous in Deacon's work of the early '80s and a gun-

ner's turret on a World War II bomber. The curved volume ends abruptly in a vertical plane with a single, large perforation. By giving physical as well as visual access to the interior of the piece, Deacon makes us conscious of the plastic as an incomplete membrane, structured by the grid of its seams yet vulnerable. Deacon achieves something rare in making our perception of his sculptures flicker unendingly between their autonomous parts and unitary wholes.

—Anne Rochette and
Wade Saunders

David Nash at Louver

Unlike the newly environmentally aware artists, Nash long ago took an ecologic stance—he lives in rural Wales, depends on fallen wood as a sculptural material and uses every bit of the tree, even making the charcoal he draws with. Over the last 20 years, his wood sculptures have been consistently inventive and playful: he has fashioned geometric solids, anthropomorphic figures, enlargements of everyday objects and pieces demonstrating such natural processes as drying and warping. Nash has won attention with his “growing” sculptures (saplings planted or manipulated to attain desired configurations when mature) and also for his ability to coil unexpected forms from the natural contours of the tree.

In this exhibition of 15 sculptures and drawings from 1989–90—his first major showing in New York since the Guggenheim's “British Art Now” in 1980—Nash's ingenuity was clearly evident. *So Each Season* consists of a stack of log segments, each with a substantial branch attached. Nash has slightly hollowed the tip of each log segment so that it suggests the bowl of a spoon; the branch is, of course, the handle. Descending vessel is a V-shaped crotch of a tree with one of the branches trimmed flat so that the other can rise from a stable base. This rising branch has been cut into planes that splay out, fanlike, except for the two center pieces, which remain joined at their far end and thus imply the branch's now-varnished continuation.

All of Nash's works are linked by their common source in fallen trees; in fact, his conception is so tightly bound up with his preferred material that the work



Hain Schult: *Untitled*, 1989, oil on aluminum,
37 by 74% by 9 inches, at Germania van Eck.



Haim Steinbach: *Family pride*, 1990, mixed mediums,
62% by 55 by 21 inches, at Sonnabend.

would be nearly meaningless in another medium. But this devotion to a single material hardly limits his imagination. *Three Utens* (the reference is to Jerry's frantic stage character) presents figures with bloated bodies and heads as insubstantial as Pop-art sticks. Also figural are *Inside/Outside's* two three-legged elements, actually inverted tree crotches, the smaller of which has been cut from the larger in a kind of cesarean birth. (The jaunty style of this pair—one can imagine them in top hats and tails—is reminiscent in spirit though not in construction of *Three Dancy Scuttlers* from the Guggenheim show.) *Crack and Warp Column* is a vertical tree trunk cut horizontally into thin, lunch-plate-like slices that have

been allowed to dry as they will. *Corner Ball* is a huge wooden sphere with a thin vertical bar which seems just to have landed from space.

Incipient movement provides formal interest in most of Nash's sculptures—rough surfaces imply quick, energetic shaping, and many works have unexpected distributions of mass that make them seem precariously balanced. The works' physical qualities are also appealing, particularly their generous scale, warm color and tactile surfaces. The tree may be a more restrictive block of material than, say, marble, but Nash and his trees collaborate, contributing to a variety in his work that is nearly as wide as nature's.

—Janet Koplos

Haim Steinbach at Sonnabend

With his sleek, wedge-shaped, Formica-clad shelves displaying implacably (if often ironically) attractive commodities, Haim Steinbach is usually thought of as a critic of consumerism. But while the shell may tend to reduce everything on it to a buyable product, it may also be seen as a pedestal or altar—an elevated site for objects that are loaded with cultural significance. Steinbach's art goes beyond the critique of commodification into an open-endedly suggestive inquiry into what certain kinds of objects mean to us.

Lately, Steinbach has turned his attention from the alluring new product to the collectible antique: *Family pride* [sic], for instance, consists of a yellow shelf bearing two turn-of-the-century wicker basket planters and two kitschy cookie jars. In another piece, a big (about 8 feet high) minimalist wardrobe-like box contains a fancy 1920s-vintage stuffed dog on its floor, below a single low shelf bearing an old shoe-shine box and three Victorian footstools. (There were several of these large box pieces along with the shelf works.) The antique objects differ from what we're used to from Steinbach—they're old, humble and rather shabby—but the focus on what the desirable object means remains the same. To engage these sculptures is to wonder what it is about the antique artifact that is so compelling to modern imagination that a huge industry has grown up around it. Nostalgia? Elitism? A comforting fantasy of historical continuity for a disconnected and fragmented culture?

This line of questioning is extended in a work displaying a selection of objects borrowed from the Indianapolis Museum of Art. Standing in a row on a yellow shelf are an African mask, a small modern sculpture by Pol Bury and four 19th-century storeware vessels. Here the disparate objects become emblematic, each the embodiment of a modern mythology: the mask stands for belief in the magical, intuitive power of the primitive other; the sculpture represents modernism's faith in its own rational enlightenment; and the vessels are emblems of postmodernism—faith in the authenticity and common sense of rustic folk. Such objects are put in museums