



mattness of the unglazed plinth.

As with the gluey seams of Deacon's earlier, bent-wood sculptures, which seem to weep under the strain of holding things together, these trickles of perspiration are humorous indicators of inward pressure. But their apparent ill health also creates a much-needed smokescreen. Just as, through it's rather cheerful wonkiness, *House Version* cleverly hoodwinks us into considerations of Deacon's by now familiar sculptural agenda – all that rubbing together of the macro and micro, megastructure and Petri dish – through their sickly presence the 'Range' pieces make you forget for a moment about the prefigured strategies allied to his art – contrasts of tone, texture and weight, openness, solidity and so on that, while entirely virtuous and obviously sustaining for the artist, can make his practice appear unduly hermetic.

Range is also the title of the exhibition and elsewhere Deacon seems eager to spell out the breadth of his vision, curiously undoing some of the magic as he goes. In a series of collages, he inserts into the skies above mountain ranges in Europe and the desert landscape of Marfa, Texas, cross-hatch ink drawings of cell-like accumulations. They might refer to the 'Marfa Lights' phenomenon that has beguiled visitors to the area for aeons, or more generally (and banally) to a sense of interconnectedness, the surface of the image peeled away to reveal eternal rhythms and structures. Shown on the floor, two further

sculptural pieces, *Ribbon Bow* and *Another Ribbon Bow* (both 2004), consist of seamless coils of unglazed ceramic that continue the debate between interior and exterior, positive and negative space. They certainly offer relief after the sick-bay atmosphere of the *Range* sculptures but, while they lighten the mood and expand the repertoire somewhat, they also remind us that, essentially, Deacon's is an art of balance and that he is firmly in control. Like a seasoned tightrope walker wobbling for our amusement, he courts failure to secure our attention and ensure our delight.

MC

Above
Richard Deacon
Range B, 2005, glazed ceramic on unglazed plinth, 104 x 67 x 64 cm
PHOTO: DAVE MORGAN
COURTESY LISSON GALLERY, LONDON AND THE ARTS

Right
Installation shot of Thomas Hirschhorn *Superficial Engagement* at Gladstone Gallery, New York
PHOTO: DAVID REGEN
COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK
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New York

Thomas Hirschhorn: Superficial Engagement

Gladstone Gallery

14 JANUARY – 11 FEBRUARY

While we bear constant collective witness to the resiliency of the human body, whether through tales of wilderness survival or the spectacles of modern athletics, when interrupted by images of the rough edge of war, we come to understand that our human bodies are the most fragile of containers, no match for lethal combinations of high velocities, hot metal and hard ground.

Thomas Hirschhorn's newest installation, *Superficial Engagement*, exposes such combinations in myriad photographic reproductions of scenes from recent global conflicts, but it is interested in another, one in which the images of bodies pushed beyond recognition in the most unimaginable ways are juxtaposed with the intensely geometric drawings of one Emma Kunz, a Swiss 'researcher'-cum-artist of the mid-twentieth century, whose unique abilities as a healer, we learn, supposedly derived from her innate understanding of the world's physical rhythms, to which Kunz gave material form through the complex documentary code of her art.

Each set of images thus entangles a less visible side: the photographs show a gruesome violence and recall the political rationales that it subtends; the drawings reveal an objective geometric *ratio* and hint at the mysteries that it may unfold. Then the images are multiplied *ad infinitum*, or *ad absurdum*, depending upon whether or not you buy into the 'more is more' aesthetic mentality; 'I want it loaded' is how Hirschhorn describes the intention of his aggregative sculptural strategy, perhaps like a gun.

If this juxtaposition appears overly simplistic, something of an artistic one-liner, then Hirschhorn must be given credit for understanding this at the outset. The 'superficial' aspect of his engagement, he claims, is to be embraced, not denigrated. And as if to ward off the potential for such denigration, Hirschhorn has included within the piece the means of its own mediation.

Scattered throughout the installation are mannequins pierced by hundreds of nails and screws. Though these may be taken as mere symbolic punctuation to the photographs of torn and broken bodies, one image reveals a seventeenth-century fetish statue to be the source for such configurations. William Pietz, in his masterful socio-anthropological account of the fetish, traced the origins of these statues to the abrupt confrontation between Portuguese traders and the tribes of the West-African coast. The resultant sculptures combined components of both cultures as a way, in Pietz's words, of 'fixing together otherwise heterogeneous elements'. But this fixing resulted in 'a kind of external controlling organ' and thus presented 'a subversion of the ideal of the determined self'. If *Superficial Engagement* is, as Hirschhorn would have it, an activist's attempt at healing through the power of art, then we need to recognize that the fetish, though certainly the figure for this kind of heterogeneous confrontation, does not heal but merely substitutes. It offers an alternative to personal agency, which is superficial indeed.

JTDN



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