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 ip the 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.

As with the glazed 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 its rather cheerful wonkiness, House Version cleverly hoodwinks us through its rather cheerful wonkiness, so Deacon’s use of seamless coils of unglazed ceramic on unglazed plinth ensures our delight. MC

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.

Above: Richard Deacon, Range 6, 2005; glazed ceramic on unglazed plinth, 50 x 67 x 65 cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST, LONDON AND GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Right: Installation shot of Thomas Hirschhorn Superficial Engagement at Gladstone Gallery, New York.

2003, 104 x 67 x 64 cm. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.