

12 September to 1 November 2008

Richard Slee

A Happy Face. A red-eyed demon. A cartoon pirate. A toby jug. A man just slightly past his prime, double chin starting to show. Those are just some of the images that Richard Slee has condensed into his recent self-portrait; clearly, here is a man of many parts. So why should we expect his work to be any different? Like the zigzagging, ill-fated flies that play a starring role in this exhibition, Slee charts an unpredictable movement in his work, veering from point to point. The whole pattern makes a crazy kind of sense, but just try guessing which direction he'll go next.

It's an inspired combination, the seemingly random and the seemingly inevitable, and it's one that Slee has mastered. Every image that he generates has the resolution and charisma of a perfectly designed plastic toy, or a three minute pop song. He does not shy away from the world of commodity culture, as many who work with clay are inclined to do. On the contrary: he is confident that he can go toe-to-toe with China's manufactories, and fight them at least to a draw. Or maybe even work out some common ground.

And so almost every one of the works Slee has made over the past year incorporates mass-produced merchandise. Like many artists who deal with found objects, he sees them as a way of setting himself problems. So these things, in their unlikely profusion—a frying pan grease guard, towel bar holders, a plastic vent, a pair of craggy antlers—do serve a function for him. They prime his pump. But the tactic requires delicate handling. Quite apart from the difficulty of living up to the qualities of industrial products, which defeat many artists bold enough to try, there is the matter of tone. Slee has sometimes been branded (wrongly) a nostalgist, or a social critic, but his genius is in avoiding such obvious poses. He neither swoons over the sex appeal of commodities, nor rages against their pervasiveness. Nor is his magpie-like work an exercise in taste—good, bad, or otherwise.

So why does Slee pick out the things he does? He has his reasons. Given that he has granted us license to read his work in terms of self-portraiture, let's take him up on it. Let's try to puzzle out what sort of character we are dealing with, taking it for granted that it may be a case of multiple personality. (One of Slee's fascinations is fancy dress shops, where temporary identities can be bought off the peg.)

Here's a roughly transcribed snatch of conversation from our last meeting:

GA. Why did you call this one *Sartorial*? Did you just like the word?

RS. Yeah. Yeah, it's old fashioned. Leery, geezery.

GA. What is a "geezer" exactly? We don't have that word in America.

RS. Like a bloke with a wax moustache. Or Terry-Thomas, telling risqué jokes. You don't get young geezers—unless they're old before their age. It's like the bloke in the corner of a dingy pub. He'd play darts if there were a dartboard there, and he'd have a fag if he were allowed to.

The geezer, then: one of the many sides of Slee. He identifies a little with the chap whose timing might be slightly out of joint, culturally speaking, but who feels perfectly at ease nonetheless.

Another alter ego, perhaps, is the model railroader. It's not a pastime that Slee indulges in himself, but he's been to the shops and seen the wild look in the clientele's eyes: "men about my age, spending a fortune." In this hobby economy, pointless bits of paraphernalia are hoarded like treasure. That's right down Slee's alley, obviously, as is the archetypal image of the enthusiast, the man of the house wrapped up in his miniature downstairs empire.

One of the things about a Slee exhibition is that it conforms to the neutral look of an art gallery—white walls, white plinths, nothing too out of the ordinary—but also suggests the qualities of many other kinds of space. If the suburban basement is one possibility, then another is the gentleman's club. And sure enough, here is a hunting trophy on the wall, a pistol from a bygone era, a big brass handle for the door, gaslights that have lost their flicker. One piece, *Escape*, says it all: where does a fellow go these days to let off steam?

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, there is one persona that is conspicuous by its absence. In this show, which seems to be above all about masculinity, where is the father? One wall is adorned with a family of hairstyles—a mother, a teenaged hippy, and an innocent child—but no dad. Fringed epaulettes hang in mid-air. A pair of wizard's shoes are left to one side. This disappearing act could be taken as a meditation upon the artistic condition, which always involves leaving one's progeny to fend for themselves. But it seems more likely to be a further spin on the theme of male trouble. A Freudian could have a field day at this exhibition, with its rude sex toy forms, numerous references to the closet, and its generally fetishistic, patent-leather gloss. Ceramics is after all a priapic medium: it starts soft and becomes hard, in the process sometimes losing all sense of proportion.

Fortunately, Slee is wise to the Freudian game too. He knows that a show about his own desires and anxieties, however sublimated, would be a dull and self-indulgent affair. Take one last look, then, and notice the celadon-blue profiles that hang on the gallery walls. No self-portraits, these are more like another cipher of masculinity: the digitally fabricated "wanted criminal" signs that we might see at a police station, or on the TV news. Such images, cobbled together from spare parts, seem to be depictions of anyone and everyone all at once. If this show is a form of elaborate, indirect portraiture, then it works much the same way. One thing you know for sure about Richard Slee: he'll always get his man.