

RICHARD DEACON'S WOODEN FLIRTATION

Two heads and a dead leg at L.A. Louver

BY CHRISTOPHER MILES

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No wonder the queen honored him as a Commander of the British Empire. Richard Deacon knows how to take over a space.

Dead Leg, a new work by the British sculptor, rises and falls between the floor and heights of up to 8 feet, and with a footprint of roughly 29 by 9 feet, dominates L.A. Louver gallery's main space in Venice. Look and learn; it's a one-work lesson in sculpture. With the complex and shifting gestalt of the overall form and variations within its structural and aesthetic approach, the piece keeps the viewer in a dance between trying to master its exterior plan and navigating its interior. You find yourself bobbing and weaving among its curves, intimately examining its intricacies, and tracing the ways its lines occupy, map and divide space.



Courtesy L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

So compelling is the *Dead Leg* that you leave the gallery feeling like you've been in the company of someone you're glad you got to know a little and want to know more. But recalling the encounter is vastly easier as a matter of visualization and subverbal inner dialogue — creating your own memory-based 3-D virtual tour, and, in a kind of sculpture viewer's equivalent of air guitar, reliving the assorted head snaps, shoulder tilts, neck cranings, and stooping and ducking involved in tracing the sculpture's path. Try to talk to yourself or someone else about what you've seen at L.A. Louver, and save the most general and insensitive of descriptions you can blurt out, you'll find that the more you try, the more you stammer through half-thoughts and — because your superego forbids you from doing the full-blown air-guitar routine for fear you'll resemble a mime trying to track the path of an invisible hummingbird — find yourself augmenting spurts of language with some fusion of improvised sign language, charades and hula arm movements. Language simply falters with regard to the *Dead Leg*, but since this is a newspaper, here goes.

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When you pass through Louver's front door, the first thing you spy through the entrance to the main gallery is the *Dead Leg's* dead leg, a massive tapered, round, laminated oak object, looking something like a stretched butter churn and suggesting a bell-bottom version of a peg leg. Entering the gallery space, you find this form to be an appendage to a much larger structure composed primarily of twisted and bent lengths of 2-by-2-inch oak stock. As much as it is an appendage, the work's namesake is also its point of origin and its end, with the rest of the sculpture behaving something like a genie exiting a bottle and enjoying a good time before going back in.

As the leg's round taper diminishes in diameter, hard-edge fins emerge at 90-degree intervals around its circumference, and by the time one's eye reaches its top, it has transformed into a 6-inch square wooden tube with a cross section of oak 2-by-2s arranged in a fashion analogous to the 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8 and 9 positions of a telephone's keypad. Via a feat of carpentry, these eight pieces then divide into two groups of four. The first consists of elements arranged at the 2, 4, 6 and 8 positions, with occasional blocks in the center to maintain positioning, and creating a length of wood appearing almost as if it's extruded with a cross section of a plus sign or cross. The second consists of 2-by-2s separated by open space, occasionally pinned in place by steel spacers, and positioned at 1, 3, 7 and 9, to create a four-cornered cross section like the four dots on the side of a die (: :).

The ends of such sections fit perfectly as finger-jointed couplings, and this is how the sculpture is constructed, with bent and twisted alternating "cross" and "four corners" sections, banded with stainless-steel jackets at each coupling, snaking around the room, beginning and ending back at the leg. All of the wood is bent by steaming, and then clamping and strapping the lengths to custom jigs for bends, or literally winding them up into twists, and then leaving them in place until they hold the shape. Bent into compound curves, the "cross" sections generally handle the composition's angles and loops, while the other sections, composed of straighter but twisted lengths, serve as the sinew between them.

Any woodworker will tell you that the above description involves a lot of demanding and unforgiving technique — this despite the fact that Deacon has made clear that he isn't interested in making sculpture for the sake of technique — and the sculpture itself echoes both assertions. As much as it is fascinating to follow every cut, splice, joint and pin in its making, the result of all the crafting that goes into this sculpture ultimately inspires less the fetishizing of craft than fascination with the way material, as Deacon said in a recent interview, "can be made to respond." And boy does it respond. It is in fact shocking that out of oak and stainless steel, the artist has made something so graceful, but such is key to both Deacon's talent and his project as an artist.

The physical presence of the sculpture can be likened to twisted rawhide or rubber bands or to the tracks of roller coasters, but the work is perhaps better described less as analogous to objects than in terms of a progression of movement, beginning and ending from a fixed position, using the sorts of terms used to describe gymnastic choreography: pikes, tucks, somersaults, saltos. It's a nimble juggernaut.

Such a sense of movement isn't surprising coming from Deacon, who has collaborated in the past with dancers, and who has repeatedly shown himself able to make a work that reconciles relationships between the clumsy and the graceful in both form and structural function. Collaboration played a major role in this work as well. *Dead Leg* is billed as a work by Richard Deacon in association with Matthew Perry, who has worked with Deacon for 24 years, and is the man behind the fabrication of the piece. Deacon, who is similarly associated with Anna Zimmermann in the production of many of his ceramic works, isn't shy about such involvement — "working through other people," as he has termed it — and its effect on the work. In fact, he sees Perry's involvement, not only as a fabricator but as an innovator, as significant in the development of the work. An assembly process created by the pair had a clear impact on this piece, both in its making in the studio and in its installation in the gallery, with every segment suspended from scaffolding until the whole was complete.

As has been the case with many titles given to works Deacon and Perry have cooked up together — some seemingly intended to drive home an abstracted point, some intended to obfuscate a bit — the title of the *Dead Leg* suggests an awareness that this object flirts with reference and even story, but such flirtation avoids literary consummation in favor of a different kind of knowing. The *Dead Leg* remains a kind of open metaphor that does all right in the world of language and letters, but does better with a vocabulary the mind knows through the body.

Richard Deacon in association with Matthew Perry at L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice; Tues.–Sat., 10 a.m.–6 p.m.; thru January 12. (310) 822-4955.