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17 MARCH TO 22 APRIL 2006

RICHARD SLEE AT BARRETT MARSDEN GALLERY

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Richard Slee has established his position in the applied arts by questioning that field's particular assumptions: how cosy, for example, can historical ceramics be considered from these present sceptical times. To give a difficult frisson back to the object, by splitting it off from and then re-assembling it with its usual context, this was and is still his method; but his surrealist's eye has shifted its focus now, it seems, away from the problems of history and towards the problems of making itself. With all the motifs of DIY and making-do, of shed-life and working snacks, this new show can be read as a portrait of a surrealist's working environment.

If there is one particular pre-conception the new work addresses it is of the artist's practice as separable from the broader visual world we inhabit. His work insists that to separate work from its environment is to be blind to the world. Plastic combs from Korea, dog leads from Napa Valley, model Beetles from Hamburg, these zany but prevalent goods from around the world are force-fitted as subject-matter through a hardware store vernacular and then married to his trade-mark gleaming ceramics. The artfulness of Slee's work is that these puzzling conjunctions arrive before us without any apparent trace of contempt or arbitrariness. One can never say, as one can of much post-modern work, that his is a straightforward indictment of consumer appetites – for even in the sharpest of these pieces there is the feeling that tenderness can be drawn from them.

If there is a tenderness to Slee's work, and if it is that quality which distinguishes it from sourer work, how is this achieved? By ambiguity and economy, but perhaps most of all by the sense that the artist is as involved in the psychological situation as much as 'society' or 'historical forces'. The coat hooks that populate the gallery are waiting for his own settlement as much as anyone else's. And the work-mate's inflated German sausage is being ironic about the artist's own maleness as much as it is being ironic about maleness in general. In getting the language of ceramics to meet the language of makeovers and of B&Q ('the cathedrals of our time', he calls them) Slee has found a way of opening up a field that is rightly considered too insular in its language and its content.