

Press Release | New Display

9 December 2021

Slee's Swans



Richard Slee, *Swans*, 2019, ceramic and latex. Photo: Annik Wetter © Richard Slee

Slee's Swans: 13 March – 14 August 2022

High-resolution images available for download: <https://bit.ly/3ldmrfs>

Witty, poetic and surreal, *Swans* shows Richard Slee at his finest. In this new work, fourteen majestic swans glide across the tranquil surface of their museum plinths. With twisting, sinuous necks and red latex beaks, the swans exude a restless, inquisitive energy that animates the surrounding space. Their spiralling bodies call to mind spinning tops and evoke a child-like sense of delight.

Slee has remarked upon the swan's 'gentle and subtle counterfeit of grace', inviting the viewer to reflect on the unique position this 'royal bird' occupies within the collective imagination. Over the centuries, swans have appeared in popular tales from the erotic Greek myth of 'Leda and the Swan', to Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Wild Swans' and Pyotr Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake'. Folklore has made the swan a magical symbol of physical transformation, chastity and beauty.

Although the perfection of the swans' ribbed conical bodies resembles the sleek industrial aesthetic of mass-produced design, Slee's *Swans* are hand built, combining traditional wheel-thrown techniques with extruded and moulded clay. The addition of the latex teat is a playful example of how Slee combines synthetic materials with innovative ceramic forms to create complex modern narratives. While Slee uses skills and processes that are rooted in

the discipline of pottery, his conceptual approach to ceramic sculpture dismantles the boundary between craft and art.

Slee says: “I have made other swans but these I see as a set (a Bank, Bevy, Drift, Eyrar, Gaggle, Gargle, Herd, Wedge of Swans). I like the way they crop up as subjects in the decorative arts. The first piece I made was *SWUCK* in 2000. I guess it’s a subject I enjoy.”

Slee uses the subversive power of humour to interpret and reframe familiar objects. *Swans* is a mischievous nod to the traditions of illustrious porcelain manufactories, such as Meissen, whose graceful and naturalistic swans were famous from the eighteenth century onwards. Throughout his career, Slee’s work has referenced decorative, domestic ornamental wares and ceramic traditions, in order to explore the cultural and historical associations that ceramics have accrued from their display within the home.

Slee is known for his brightly coloured, glossy, narrative works that take inspiration from archives, found objects and souvenirs. Their expressive bold outlines and simplified forms are indebted to the ‘Krazy Kat’ comic strips of George Herriman and possess an affinity with the 1980s Memphis postmodern design movement. His first large-scale ceramic work *Cold Frames* (2000) – a major outdoor commission completed for ‘Sculpture at Goodwood’ – brought the artist critical acclaim.

Slee is one of Britain’s most important contemporary ceramic artists. Born in Carlisle, Slee trained at the Central School of Art and Design and the Royal College of Art. Valued for his immense contribution to academia, Slee was made Professor of The University of the Arts in 1992 and Professor Emeritus in 2012. He was awarded the Jerwood Applied Arts Prize for Ceramics in 2001 for ‘expanding the dialogue between ceramic tradition and visual culture in ways that resonate outward’.

Swans was first exhibited in 2021 in *Problem Pieces* at Ariana Museum, Geneva, Switzerland and makes its UK debut at the Sainsbury Centre this Spring.

Richard Slee is represented by Hales Gallery, London and New York.

Free entry, this display will be located in the East End Gallery. Free parking subject to availability, two cafes, shop.

Link: sainsburycentre.ac.uk/whats-on/richard-slee-swans/

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Notes to Editors

Press Enquiries

Penelope Lucas | p.lucas@uea.ac.uk

Amber Lawrence | amber.lawrence@uea.ac.uk

Exhibition Information

Slee's Swans

13 March – 14 August 2022

Free entry, no tickets required

Visit sainsburycentre.ac.uk or call 01603 593199 (Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm)

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About the Sainsbury Centre

The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts is one of the most important public university art galleries in Britain. It was founded in 1973 at the University of East Anglia (UEA) with the support of one of the nation's great philanthropic families, Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury, who donated their extraordinary art collection which includes works dating from prehistory to the late 20th century from across the globe. A radical new building by Norman Foster was designed to house the collection and was his first public work.

The Sainsbury Centre holds one of the most impressive art collections outside of the national institutions. It includes a significant number of works by modern masters of European art such as Pablo Picasso, Edgar Degas, Elisabeth Frink, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Moore, Sonia Delaunay, Tess Jaray, Francis Bacon, Cornelia Parker, Jean Arp, Mary Martin, Rachel Kneebone and Amedeo Modigliani. There are major holdings from Oceania, Africa, the Americas, Asia, the ancient Mediterranean cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome, as well as Medieval Europe. Alongside these permanent collections, it hosts a range of exhibitions in the largest suite of temporary exhibitions galleries in Eastern England.

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