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**Pièces à problèmes**

**Robert Dawson and Richard Slee**

**18.06.2021 — 09.01.2022**

Un musée,  
Ville de Genève

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# Pièces à problèmes – Robert Dawson and Richard Slee

Exhibition at the Musée Ariana,  
18 June 2021 – 9 January 2022

For a quick overview of the exhibition brochure, go straight to  
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## QR Codes

You'll find QR Codes on the exhibit labels for Robert Dawson's works. You can scan them with your mobile phone camera or a free QR scanner app. You'll then be able to discover the pieces from the Musée Ariana's collections that inspired the artist and the reflections underlying his creative process.

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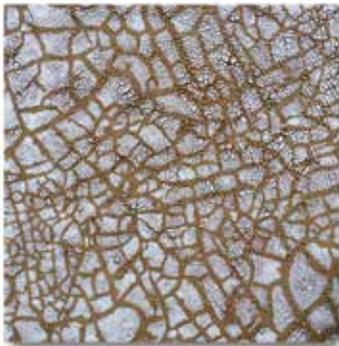
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## Introduction

**“If you came from another planet, the world would seem pretty weird.”**

Robert Dawson

Robert Dawson was the instigator behind “Problem Pieces”, an exhibition project that developed from his nostalgic relationship with Geneva - the city where he grew up - and from his interest in the Musée Ariana. He scoured its collections and architecture over the course of two stays in Geneva to select motifs that he felt would work well visually when manipulated or presented in a different context. Whether he liked a motif or not did not influence his choice. The project proposed by Robert Dawson is also the opportunity, for the first time since 1993 (*Against Nature*, Sight Specific Gallery, Arundel, Sussex), to exhibit again as a duo with his friend, Richard Slee. Since that time, the two artists have worked in parallel, pursuing their individual approaches and continuing to share an affinity that goes beyond their taste for invented and subverted objects or motifs. These two figures met at Camberwell College of Arts where Richard Slee was teaching. They’ve since tackled certain shared themes, while employing very different ceramic languages: one proposes composite objects with bright and shiny surfaces, while the other explores the texture of raw clay on canvas. The Musée Ariana displays here a panoply of objects that, while certainly have the potential to destabilise visitors, offer an original perspective from which to contemplate the world.



**Robert Dawson** (1953)  
***Extra Dry***, 2019

Clay on canvas  
H. 106 cm

**Richard Slee** (1946)  
***Swan***, 2014

Wheel-thrown, moulded and extruded earthenware, glaze, latex  
H. 43 cm; W. 68 cm

## Problem Pieces?

Do Robert Dawson and Richard Slee define themselves as ceramists or artists? To this question, Richard Slee responds that throughout his career he's been alternately 'potter', 'studio potter', 'ceramicist' and 'ceramic artist', but he thinks he might well end up as 'artist'. For his part, Robert Dawson replies that he spends his days playing with different machines and materials and doesn't consider himself either an artist or ceramist.

For Slee, the question isn't actually of fundamental importance, since ceramics is more a discipline than an art as such. Dawson, for his part, regrets the term 'ceramicist': "Who would want to be defined in terms of one material?". He continues, "... in fact, everyone's an artist". Both certainly reject the unhealthy rigidity of any form of categorisation.

"The only thing I could possibly revere would be mystery itself – as well as instability, change and our insecurity. If we didn't have them, if we weren't so vulnerable, life would be unliveable" (Robert Dawson). In this joint exhibition, the two artists pose for us an open-ended question.

Its title, "Problem Pieces", was chosen by the artists and comes from the Musée Ariana's storerooms: it's the title of a Compactus shelving unit where items from the collection with attribution issues are kept. The only thing we know for sure about these pieces is that their initial attribution is to be ruled out, but we haven't yet discovered their true identity. This is nevertheless a dynamic ensemble whose composition evolves regularly. With the aid of ongoing research and visits by international experts, particularly during the preparation of exhibitions, these works gradually acquire a more precise position in the history of ceramics. The title this storage space inspired in Robert Dawson and Richard Slee catches our attention immediately, of course, and recalls our two artists' constant questioning: fixed concepts, the world and more specifically the arts, are all subject to their scrutiny.



| The Musée Ariana's storerooms

## British ceramics: an overview

Richard Slee (1946) and Robert Dawson (1953) are among the artists whose work is nourished by changes in the arts and design on the international level. They are sensitive to the society around them, while at the same time possessing a creative dynamic that echoes the generations preceding them.

During the 1960s, in the huge wake left behind by Bernard Leach (1887-1979) – so predominant in Britain from the 1920s onwards as to become almost an orthodoxy – a new group of modernist ceramists emerged. They were united by their relationship to material, while having different forms of aesthetic expression. Lucie Rie (1902-1995), Ruth Duckworth (1919-2009), Hans Coper (1920-1981) and Gordon Baldwin (1932) took ceramics beyond its traditional boundaries. This approach matured in the 1970s and brought about major changes in British schools of art.

**Hans Coper** (1920-1981)  
**Vases on bases Cyclade,**  
1975; 1971; 1974  
Wheel-thrown and handbuilt  
stoneware,  
black and white glazes  
H. 22.5 cm; H. 21.8 cm;  
H. 24.7 cm  
Musée Ariana,  
Inv. AR 2018-230;  
AR 2015-181 / 182  
Gift of Frank Nievergelt, 2015



**Lucie Rie** (1902-1995)  
**Vase**, 1983  
**Dish**, 1976  
 Wheel-thrown and engraved  
 porcelain, oxide  
 H. 26.8 cm; Diam.13.7 cm  
 Musée Ariana,  
 Inv. AR 2015-279/276  
 Gift of Frank Nievergelt, 2015



**Gordon Baldwin** (1932)  
**Vessel on base**, 1984  
 Moulded earthenware, glaze,  
 blue, white and black  
 painted decoration  
 H. 29 cm; W. 38.5 cm  
 Musée Ariana, Inv. AR 2003-392  
 Legs Charles Roth, 2001

The following generation of ceramists fundamentally transformed contemporary British ceramics, moving away from wheel throwing and utilitarian production and choosing brighter colours. They also worked with a more diverse range of clays and showed a certain eclecticism in their forms. Their great freedom of expression was always based on sound technical mastery.



**Elizabeth Fritsch** (1940)  
**Dish**, 1975  
Handbuilt grogged  
stoneware, blue and white  
matt glaze  
H. 12.3 cm; W. 15 cm  
Musée Ariana, Inv. AR 5767

In the late seventies, Elizabeth Fritsch (1940), Carol McNicoll (1943) and Alison Britton (1948), stood out – along with Richard Slee (1946) – through pieces created using unconventional techniques, pushing back the boundaries of functional ceramics and never scared of taking risks. They number among the most committed ceramists of this new ceramic movement in the UK, working with excessive, almost baroque, forms of expression. Highly innovative, they polarised opinion at times, often receiving more recognition abroad than in their own country. Their style questioned materials and firing, what the most conservative referred to as “the proper work of the potter”. In the early 1980s, following on from those of the Central School of Arts and the Royal College of Art, a new generation of talented ceramists emerged at Camberwell College of Arts. The Crafts Council (created in 1971) was to provide significant support for ceramic creation over the years.

The Thatcher government’s budget cuts in the 1980s undermined social conditions in Great Britain. The polemic soon become apparent in the field of ceramics. Some ceramists express themselves in this language critical of contemporary society. Richard Slee, Carol McNicoll and Grayson Perry (1960) and Steven Dixon (1957), though their aims might not all be political, are singularly attentive to the community in which they live. Some have delved into the long English tradition of political and satirical ceramics.

During the 1990s, certain artists took a historicist direction. They drew inspiration from mainstream industrial wares (e.g. Staffordshire figurines or Wedgwood pieces), but also from the history of ceramics. The ceramic collections of museums are a rich source for the fertile exploration of forms, designs, colours and textures, with the institution itself being called into question. It was in this same period that ceramists began to explore the notion of space, proposing installations with increasing regularity in both traditional and unconventional exhibition venues, chosen for their contribution to the ultimate message of the work shown.

The cultural hierarchy of materials, moreover, was itself overthrown: usually associated with sophisticated pleasures, porcelain is now roughly modelled, while brick earth has gone beyond the construction context to be exhibited on display pedestals. Richard Slee was one of the first ceramists to question the boundaries between art and craft. In some of his creations, he explores the notion of the value of clays, fundamentally of little worth compared to the materials worked by goldsmiths, for example.

For the past twenty years, interrogative and nonconformist approaches to contemporary British ceramics in response to social issues have become endemic. While the question of the status of ceramics and ceramists remains open, the diversity and complexity of the uses of clay as a response to the cultural environment clearly show that, as a medium, clay has for a long time now no longer been limited to the making of decorative or utilitarian objects. Ceramic artists take their technical knowledge of a complex material of almost limitless potential far beyond the potter's studio. Finally, while they no longer only identify themselves, in fact, with a specific material, their artistic emancipation plays a decisive role within our visual culture.

## Robert Dawson

“The ideas underlying my work are very simple. I hope to make something that looks good, but for something to look good some kind of gentle violation of expectation is required.” Robert Dawson takes an oblique look at the world through what he calls acts of sabotage, an off-beat and humorous consideration of what is sometimes regarded as obvious or taken as read. He transforms the familiar into the exotic.

Robert Dawson works with first and second-hand photographic imagery, which he then digitally processes. He’s always been interested in the world of print and in the raw aspect of Robert Rauschenberg’s screenprints (1925-2008) or the artworks of Andy Warhol (1928-1987). Notable influences on him are Georges Braque (1882-1963), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1997) and the abstract expressionists, as well as the painter and engraver Patrick Caulfield (1936-2005) and the sensuality of the canvases of Op Art artist Bridget Riley (1931). Ceramic history is of course a fundamental anchor point: he’s never sought to deny the past. Instead, his creations offer a fresh take on history or explore his relationship to his predecessors.

Piero Fornasetti (1913-1988) for the  
Porzellanfabrik Schönwald  
**Theme and variation no.8.**  
1960-1988  
Moulded porcelain, printed decoration  
under transparent glaze  
Diam. 25.7 cm  
Musée Ariana, Inv. AR 2018-049  
Don Thévenon, 2017



In the early 1990s, Robert Dawson visited an exhibition of the works of Piero Fornasetti (1913-1988) at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Although not interested in Fornasetti’s imagery or art, he was drawn to the smooth and incisive effect of these black prints on white porcelain and was particularly interested in their technical process of ceramic transfer. This gave rise to his blue and white work in which he subverts common motifs from the history of ceramics, such as the *Willow Pattern*.

Robert Dawson (1953)  
*Spin*, 2010  
Print on bone china  
Diam. 27 cm



Robert Dawson (1953)  
*You know it's gonna be alright*,  
2004  
Print on ceramic tiles  
H. 120 cm; W. 480 cm  
Voewood House, Norfolk

"I draw on the computer with photos to create new things". Robert Dawson's digital manipulations, which he then applied to tableware and tiles, twist and fragment historical motifs to create new designs with surprising and even provocative optical effects. In 2015, he changed his working methods on discovering the artistic techniques used by a painter friend who works with stencils. Appreciating above all the immediacy of this technique, he subverts it by taking raw clay as his medium, which, through a meticulous process, he then adds to the canvas in the same way as oil paint. The colours are thus those of natural clays, to which he sometimes adds textile pigments. Synthetic adhesives ensure that the mixture binds well to the canvas.



| Stencils made by Robert Dawson

Stencils made by Robert Dawson |



| Detail of a canvas by Robert Dawson

Yet at the same time as developing a new artistic technique, the artist remains rooted in the ceramic motif and its history. Stencils with their cut-out shapes are indeed common throughout the history of ceramics, being widely used, for example, in the ceramic industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The decoration was created with enamels applied by brush or airbrush through a series of stencils, allowing the colours to reach only certain areas, and in various thicknesses over the glazed surface.



**Stove tile**

Switzerland, 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century  
Moulded and wheel-thrown terracotta,  
slip under glaze, stencilled decoration  
H. 19.9 cm  
Musée Ariana, Inv. AR 2018-150

Robert Dawson recalls that in the late 1980s, when he was working with screen printing and lino cutting in parallel with starting to work with clay, he discovered the creations of Jacqui Poncelet (1947) and more specifically her slip cast porcelain bowls. The surface effects of these pieces appeared to him as a type of three-dimensional engraving. He was then impatient to apply these techniques to his own work. It is the artistic processes of these references, however, that are more important to him than their meaning and the message they convey.

Optical illusions are omnipresent in his work. The ambiguity of the motifs in cavalier projection (multistable spaces) particularly appeals to him. He's not interested, however, in the illusions of Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972). In Dawson's view, "we know immediately what we're looking at – a simple representation of an impossible reality" – and so they lack mystery. "The cavalier perspective, on the other hand, offers a reflection on the ambiguity with which we have to live. I like using this imagery because it introduces a feeling of uncertainty." Although ceramist Elizabeth Fritsch (1940) is not one of his primary sources of inspiration, it's interesting to note certain stylistic connections between their two œuvres which both play with two and three dimensions.

Having grown up in Geneva, he explored his nostalgia for our city by focusing on the Musée Ariana. For "Problem Pieces", he rediscovered its collections and architecture by working in its storerooms and galleries, examining the historical architectural plans, the design traced by the floorboards, and even that of the old ventilation grills.



Ventilation grid at  
the Musée Ariana  
H. 66 cm



**Emile Grob ty**  
(1844-1906),  
*Mus e de Monsieur  
Gustave Revilliod    
Varemb *  
Trav e, 1877-1878  
Indian ink and watercolour  
H. 93.5 cm ; W. 58.9 cm  
AVG, 342, Ph.54.2

This has resulted in canvases of various formats, whose origins we can hardly guess at any more. For example, a Chinese openwork basket from the Qianlong period and its presentation stand has become “Marli” (2019) on the canvas, with its large interlacing forms on a brown ground. Similarly, a flower extracted from a blue and white design has been combined with a zigzag pattern, reminiscent of bus stop road markings, but which in fact reproduces the motif of a parquet floor in one of the Musée Ariana’s galleries. Arabesques and ornaments are studied, assimilated, reinterpreted and then finally recomposed, without ever neglecting their original balance and symmetry, to generate new perspectives and new visual games.



**Robert Dawson** (1953)  
**Marli**, 2019  
 Clay on canvas  
 H. 78 cm



**Basket and stand**  
 Chine, c. 1790  
 Porcelain, painted cobalt oxide  
 underglaze decoration  
 H. 12 cm ; Diam. 23.5 cm  
 Musée Ariana, Inv. 04493  
 Legs Caroline Stadnitski, 1906



**Robert Dawson** (1953)  
***Revolver*** (detail), 2020  
Clay on canvas  
H. 118 cm

The design for “Revolver” (2020) was created from a photograph of the floor mosaic on the South Terrace on the Musée Ariana’s first floor. Using stencils and then manipulating the image, the artist has assembled a new composition by superimposing a circular motif evoking “Target” (1958) by Jasper Johns (1930) or, in another register, Richard Long (1945). The discreet lines are scarcely visible, but can be sensed on exploring the rhythm of the tesserae on the canvas, which suddenly shift.

**Tile**  
Moulded earthenware, painted  
polychrome  
*grand feu* decoration  
H. 30.2 cm  
Musée Ariana, Inv. AR 12970



**Robert Dawson** (1953)  
**Shoot**, 2019  
Clay on canvas  
H. 87cm

The sources for “*Shoot*” (2019), on the other hand, are Spanish ceramic tiles held in the Musée Ariana’s storerooms. The artist appropriates their structure and creates an illusory space using the notion of cavalier perspective.

What to some may appear merely ornamental is thus in fact “scholarly, intelligent, exploratory, skilful and progressive” in the words of Richard Slee, who however qualifies this statement by adding “but as I’m his friend, my view is biased”.

Robert Dawson employs much pre-existing visual material originally intended for very different purposes. In his hands, a common motif is magnified, a refined drawing can become garish or be multiplied, giving viewers the illusion of being drawn into the canvas. “As a teenager, I liked to see the images on the big screen at the cinema. Later, I realised that before the existence of the camera, nobody had experimented with enlarged or cropped images, or depth of field, or even those with unusual viewpoints - all those things that, often without us being aware of it, form our aesthetic sense today”.

The ideas underlying his work are in fact simple. He likes beautiful things, as well as challenging preconceived ideas, and he invites the spectator to question the initial significance of what they see. Yet his work is still resolutely accessible, since the sources remain identifiable. By revisiting the past, Robert Dawson explores the links that connect him to those who came before him.

## Richard Slee

In stark contrast with Robert Dawson's works, Richard Slee exhibits two groups of sculptural objects that differ greatly from one another while still sharing their maker's acerbic view of the world and of life. One group is colourful and considers the theme of usefulness by replicating household tools in a material that renders them totally useless. The second and much more sober group, comprises resplendent stylised swans, on show for the very first time. The Ariana's dark display tables immediately appealed to the artist as the ideal platform on which to glide his birds. Despite their reserved air, Richard Slee's swans are proud and inquisitive at times, though one of them is dying.



**Richard Slee** (1946)  
**Swan**, 2019  
Wheel-thrown, extruded and  
moulded earthenware,  
glaze, latex  
H. 26 cm; W. 49.5 cm

**Richard Slee** (1946)  
**Swan**, 2019  
Wheel-thrown, extruded and  
moulded earthenware,  
glaze, latex  
H. 28 cm; W. 63 cm



## Richard Slee's Swans

Swans are historically well-represented in the arts and decorative arts and have borne various symbolic meanings over the years. Synonymous with love and purity for the elite, these birds also signify metamorphosis and death. In the Middle Ages, swans embodied hypocrisy as well, with their black skin concealed beneath their white plumage. Richard Slee relates a distant memory of swans painted on the ceilings of the Sintra National Palace. Early on in the making of the *Swans*, he heard in the media about illegal swan shootings: "Who could possibly do such a thing?". He then remembered, as a child, hitting a bird with a catapult, an act about which he'd felt guilty ever since.

Aren't Richard Slee's swans also real jokers? They hide behind their rubber beaks that remind us of grotesque noses worn for parties, or even of clowns' noses. "[My swans] are not real, they are symbols, ironic ones at that for me as 'royal birds', being a life long republican anti-monarchist." A playful and complex world thus underlies Richard Slee's *Swans* and, as is often the case, their provocative air is accompanied by a sensitive discourse. He expresses in his series of swans a "gentle and subtle counterfeit of grace".

The *Swans* reveal Richard Slee's singular technical mastery. Their bodies are thrown on the wheel in different sections, which are subsequently modified and assembled. Their long, sinuous necks are extruded through a die, while their heads are moulded. Finally, these glazed earthenware swans are equipped with red latex beaks.

This artist has always liked making things. What ties Richard Slee to ceramics is that he never ceases learning from contact with this complex artistic medium in which, furthermore, he excels. "People often think my work is industrially moulded, an aesthetic, moreover, that sometimes displeases the more conservative. But it's up to me to decide whether or not I leave the traces of production or the construction method visible." Indeed, his sculptures don't overly highlight the ceramic material, nor do they particularly emphasise the artistic gesture. While refining them to the highest degree, their creator doesn't seem obsessed with technical questions – a clear indication of his very great mastery.

## Everyday tools ?

The second group presented by Richard Slee at the Ariana is highly colourful. These pieces were produced using a range of processes: throwing, press moulding and hand building. Here again, there's no visible trace of the artist's manual work. He's never been attracted, for that matter, to the more rustic aspects of certain ceramic styles that exploit what was previously considered a defect, to such an extent that some may reproach him of denying his material. However, taking Slee's sophisticated approach to technique into consideration puts this assertion into perspective.

The colours chosen by the artist and the gleaming perfection of the glazes evoke works by artists of the L.A. Look group (or West Coast Minimalism) of the 1960s California art scene. They created colourful, shiny objects with clean lines, while blurring the boundaries between painting and sculpture and between handcrafted and industrially produced objects. The works of American ceramists Ken Price (1935-2012) and Ron Nagle (1939) are linked to the Finish Fetish style. How can you define it? "As looking very modern; fetish in the sense that it's sexy, bright, shiny and alluring..." (Richard Slee). For the past fifteen years, Richard Slee has simplified his use of colour, moving towards the bright single colours of Pop and abandoning his more complex textures and sophisticated gradations. He's particularly interested in yellow, blue and red. These shades were considered provocative at the time when he was studying and are still rather the exception today in the field of ceramics.

Richard Slee is one of a small number of ceramicists working in a Pop art language. The appearance of some of his pieces makes reference to the industrial design of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Angle Axe* (2018), for example, is based on the Anglepoise desk lamp of 1985.



**Richard Slee** (1946)  
***Angle Axe***, 2018  
Moulded earthenware,  
glaze, wood  
H. 44 cm; W. 76 cm

He finds inspiration in Pop art for his liberating use of colour, drawing on this movement as one would from a picture book. Richard Slee's discourse, not lacking in humour, is of course also reminiscent, through the associations of ideas it suggests, of Surrealism. The artist speaks of this as a mentor movement for him. In an offbeat spirit made up of associations that appear spontaneous at first glance, he finds his references in all forms of art. His reappropriation of industrially produced objects or components that he subsequently diverts, or to which he gives a new function, is clearly reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968): "Duchamp [inspires me] with regard to the found object and the simple object that becomes complex". The artist nevertheless avoids second-hand items. He only uses new elements and shows no interest in nostalgia or romanticism. Richard Slee scours numerous hardware stores in search of exactly the right hammer or axe handles, saw blades or chisels, buckets or watering cans, to which he then gives ceramic heads, handles, brushes and other containers, all spectacular for their saturated colours and glazes. He selects accessories useful for indoor and outdoor domestic activities.



**Richard Slee** (1946)  
***Pan and Brush***, 2018  
Moulded earthenware,  
glaze, metal  
H. 19 cm; W. 40 cm  
H. 13 cm; W. 36 cm

**Richard Slee** (1946)  
*Ruskin's axe*, 2018  
Moulded earthenware,  
glaze, wood  
H. 33.5 cm; W. 48.5 cm



**Richard Slee** (1946)  
*Shovel*, 2019  
Moulded earthenware,  
glaze, plastic  
H. 110 cm; W. 25 cm

Paradoxically, this artist not working in the field of utilitarian ceramics creates pieces that replicate tools with purely utilitarian functions that are only rarely, if ever, decorative. Richard Slee's axes, saws, hammers and chisels become, through the presence of clay, totally inadequate for their purpose. Clay "renders them useless by making them precious" (Richard Slee). The tools lose their primary aim and are displayed in all their ironic fragility. Perfectly ordinary industrial items become unique and extraordinary in Richard Slee's hands. It's then left up to the viewer's imagination to assign them a purpose. Indeed, each piece prompts the spectator to visualise a new function, a surrealist imaginary world that oscillates between the comic and the absurd.

## On Pop culture

Along the same lines of thought, the artist is very interested in the theme of forced recreation. When he's not wandering around DIY stores, the artist can be found in party supplies shops. He's amazed by the idea that there exist products specifically for partying. For Richard Slee, these shops are curiously charged with nostalgia: "The very idea of a party is nostalgic - it makes you wonder if the parties actually take place."

The flowers in *Nose Bouquet* (2015) and *Daffodils* (2018) are thus made of rubber noses and their ceramic moulded forms, evoking characters from the world of Daffy Duck or Tex Avery. The irony is that all these noses are suggestive of scent and flowers, but here once again, they've been rendered perfectly incompetent.



**Richard Slee** (1946)  
*Daffodils*, 2018  
Moulded earthenware, glaze,  
found latex noses, steel bucket  
H. 40 cm

On the theme of cartoons, several of the creations on display also make direct reference to them: the brush in *Pan and Brush* (2018), which would scratch the parquet flooring rather than clean it, and the handle of *Shovel* (2019), whose plastic spade would be best suited to building a sandcastle or snowman, and would break straightaway if it came into contact with even an ounce of soil.

*Pickaxe* (2010) and *Crosscut Saw* (2012), in addition to being unusable, are a practical joke on the theme of materials and offer several different levels of interpretation. Historically, ceramists have shown great interest in the theme of trompe-l'oeil, seeking to reproduce the preciousness of lapis lazuli, gold and marble, as well as wood. These two works by the artist replicate in ceramics a three-dimensional, plastic imitation of cartoon motifs representing wood. More specifically, the pickaxe head and the handles of the crosscut saw resemble a gnarled tree trunk with thick bark. Through the fragility of the earthenware, this interplay of textures generates a tension that the observer rapidly senses. The material used to create these objects initially challenges us, then we visualise pretty rapidly what would result from their use and finally, we consider their status as a work of art. The whole is underpinned by a layer of humour unique to Richard Slee.



**Richard Slee** (1946)  
**Crosscut Saw**, 2012  
Moulded earthenware,  
glaze, metal blade  
W. 70 cm; H. 36 cm

Through his colourful Pop proposals with their dynamic and tense lines, Richard Slee deconstructs all preconceptions, standards or conventions, whether material, cultural or artistic. The materials he chooses in his constant search for a new language with which to express his intentions further increases the blurring of boundaries between art and craft.

In his works, we can see a critique of the consumer society or of one that has stopped thinking, satiated with too much choice, absurdity, uselessness and invented needs. But the artist isn't very fond of definitions or any other overly rigid interpretations. He's always interested in mind games and in viewers' individual and personal responses to his sculptures.

## Robert Dawson and Richard Slee: problem pieces?

Through their careers and artistic approaches, Robert Dawson and Richard Slee have been outsiders. Looking at the world in a critical but sensitive and original way, their vision tinged with humour highlights elements that one tends to overlook. The two artists destabilise and repeatedly challenge those viewing their works.

The works of Slee and Dawson share a questioning that goes to the very essence of ceramics. Clay for them is no longer merely a creative medium, thus freeing ceramics from the traditional associations attributed to it. Neither of them wishes to be defined by a material. Nevertheless, the mere choice of ceramics, a medium with exacting requirements, speaks volumes about the positioning of these artists. What's more, the phase of creation is still of primordial importance to them. This can be seen in their sophisticated technical processes and the attention given to know-how. The refinement of their artistic research and the richness of their references and themes make them actors in the realm of contemporary art. Yet ultimately, this issue is probably secondary today, if not irrelevant or outdated.

What is certain, however, is that these two artists constantly question the world around them, reconsidering the obvious and shaking up conventions. Their art is indeed totally rooted in the contemporary debate. Robert Dawson and Richard Slee tease visitors about their preconceived ideas and the position of ceramics in art and society. Their way of working through open questioning, leaving viewers free to react as they wish, is a highly postmodern position. For Robert Dawson, we're all filled with doubts: "It goes without saying that if we weren't all in this precarious position, life wouldn't be so much fun. Heaven would be hell".

Through their offbeat perspective, Robert Dawson and Richard Slee thus offer us a unique viewpoint on objects or notions we thought certain. Out of the saw and the hammer, which one is easier to read and interpret? What can a floor have to offer of interest? Richard Slee presents perfect and highly technical ceramic objects that have apparently lost any connection with their material or function. Robert Dawson, meanwhile, paints ceramic canvases in which the only remaining ceramic elements are the slip and the motif, treated in a totally subversive way, which, by showcasing a ventilation grid and a 15<sup>th</sup> century Spanish earthenware tile, cancel out any aesthetic hierarchy. Both artists propose a fundamental intermingling of motifs, materials and themes.

The highly singular creations that the two artists wished to combine in a joint exhibition initially destabilised even the exhibition curator herself. How could these two proposals so aesthetically different from each other be brought together in the same space? The Musée Ariana's Contemporary Creation galleries are themselves far from neutral, with their important historical significance for Geneva. Could this proposal by Richard Slee and Robert Dawson be an invitation to reinvent or even to perform a strange reworking of the museum? Do they not open wide the doors to the questioning of certitudes as to the functions and objectives of an institution and its collections? The "Problem Pieces" created by Robert Dawson and Richard Slee can be interpreted as an invitation to reconsider the status of the artwork and more specifically that of ceramics, or to take a fresh look at the institution of the museum and why not even the world around us. At the very least, they have the potential to stimulate reflection on contemporary realities and artistic production. "Of course, each individual will have their own feelings and thoughts and we welcome these as their own creations."

"We have no argument to make. Our project aims more to offer visitors a captivating exhibition that provokes reflection. We'd be happy for viewers to experience our proposal as they would an unfamiliar piece of music with unusual syncopation and surprising key changes. That would make us happy."

(Robert Dawson and Richard Slee)

| *Sophie Wirth Brentini*  
| *Exhibition Curator*

## Robert Dawson: career

Robert Dawson is a British artist with an atypical career. In the early 1990s, in addition to ceramics, he was also interested in painting and video. The artist soon turned his attention to the industrial screen printed ceramic transfer process, using manufactured tiles and plates as the substrate. He drew inspiration from traditional motifs from the history of ceramics, such as the Willow Pattern which he distorts, crops and transforms before applying it to china plates, achieving results considered innovative at the time. Later he was one of the pioneers in exploiting laser-printed transfers, creating large-scale architectural murals with the iron-oxide in fired black laser-printed toner.

Since 2015, he's been working with raw clay on canvas. Initially he used unfired clay on his canvases because of its relevance with regard to the motifs taken from the historic ceramic ware he was using. Since then, he continues to use the clay because, as well as the relevance, he has come to like many aspects of the medium, like cracking, when used on canvas. His works take as their starting point the photographic image, subverting it in order to question the notion of viewpoint, transforming the familiar into the exotic. Robert Dawson thus offers a subverted way of looking at the world, an approach he's called "aesthetic sabotage" since the early 1990s.

[www.aestheticsabotage.com](http://www.aestheticsabotage.com)

*Robert Dawson was born in New York City in 1953 and spent his childhood in Geneva. At the age of nineteen, he attended art school for a year, then left to study telecommunications. He subsequently worked for ten years as a radio officer on merchant ships. After the merchant shipping, he studied painting and ceramics at Camberwell College of Arts and completed a Master's degree at the Royal College of Art. He now lives in London.*

*He has designed and produced a number of major public art installations on architectural facades. Another facet of Dawson's practice involves collaborations with the ceramic industry, such as Ceramica Bardelli in Milan and Josiah Wedgwood & Sons in Stoke-on-Trent. In 2015, he began working with raw clay on canvas. The Victoria & Albert Museum (London), the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool), the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston) and the British Council are among the many collections that have acquired works by Robert Dawson.*

## Richard Slee: career

Though Richard Slee discovered ceramics by accident, “because I didn’t know what else to do”, he’s since become one of the most important British artists in contemporary ceramics. On finding the field of industrial design studies too limited, he changed course and moved to the ceramics department of the Central School of Art and Design in London, considered more progressive.

Today, Richard Slee combines the ceramic material with industrial components and broadens his reflection to the point of presenting objects that no longer contain any ceramic element. Yet he’s never stopped developing and exploring ceramic techniques. His mastery of glazes and the peculiarities of clay pastes have earned him the nickname “the Great Wizard of Ceramics” from the Curator of the ceramics collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum. His proposals and the concepts underlying his sculptures shun the traditional boundaries between contemporary ceramics and fine arts.

His principal sources of inspiration are Surrealism, Pop art for its iconic images and liberating use of colour, and finally Marcel Duchamp for found objects and the “simple rendered complex”.

*Richard Slee (born Cumbria, United Kingdom, 1946) studied at Carlisle College of Art & Design (1964-65), then ceramics at the Central School of Art & Design (1965-1970). He completed his studies with a Master's degree from the Royal College of Art (1988). Slee lives and works in London and is Professor Emeritus at The University of the Arts, London.*

*Selection of exhibitions and group exhibitions: Studio Voltaire (UK), Tate St. Ives (UK), Tramway (Scotland), Hales Gallery (UK), Danish Museum of Art and Design (Denmark), National Museum (Sweden), Victoria & Albert Museum (UK), World Ceramic Center, Icheon, (Korea) and the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art (Gifu, Japan). His works were included in the successful exhibition “Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970–1990” (2011–12) at the Victoria & Albert Museum (London). His oeuvre is represented in numerous collections around the world, including the British Council (UK), the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.*

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**ariana** 

Avenue de la Paix 10  
1202 Genève  
T + 41 (0)22 418 54 50  
ariana@ville-ge.ch  
www.musee-ariana.ch

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