

STEVEN CLAYDON ART AND ARTEFACTS

VAULT stops by the studio of Steven Claydon, the polymathic London artist whose sculptures and assemblages decipher the material history of objects and the complex lives of inanimate things.

FEATURE *by* PETER HILL



STEVEN CLAYDON
Oyster, 2016
steel, chemically
chromed resin, acrylic,
wood, Formica
132 x 55 x 30 cm
Photo: Robert Glowacki

Opposite
STEVEN CLAYDON
*The world digests the
earth*, 2017
gold-plated blister packs,
cold cast aluminium,
cold cast iron, laminated
wood, furnace slag
140 x 65 x 15 cm
Photo: Mark Blower

Courtesy the artist and
David Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles



I meet Steven Claydon at his studio on Dalston Lane, East London. The journey there from Kings Cross is a mix of underground and overground, through Highbury & Islington to Dalston Junction. On the way, I read through my notes. Who is Steven Claydon? Born in London in 1969. Trained at Chelsea College of Arts. A painter turned sculptor – he still lectures in painting at London's Royal College of Art. He's had exhibitions at Tate Modern, Art Basel and Portikus in Frankfurt. Intriguingly, he was a member of the electronica band Add N to (X) and made a movie appearance in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as one member of the band The Weird Sisters.

And now, here he is before me, picking up his mail from the reception desk of the hipster enclave that houses his studio amid several floors of start-up creatives.

"The rent's higher than I would like," he says, as I follow him out the front door, through the side entrance and down stairs that lead to a warren of studios. "But this prize is going to help, especially with next year's show in Los Angeles. It's worth more than double the Turner Prize, and the great thing is they pay you in instalments over three years. It means you can really plan long-term, especially with studio rent."

The prize he is referring to is from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. "It's very democratic. The five finalists all receive the same amount of money: £60,000 (\$100,000)."

By now we have reached his studio and he pushes open the door to reveal what is really a parking lot for projects that have been completed, and those that are waiting to take off. There is a small office. We are surrounded by objects. Big, small, coloured,

monochrome, mouldy grey. It's as if an archaeological dig had unearthed a museum from a distant time, or perhaps from the future. It's confusing. But delightfully so. And it's all about objects. And the objectness of things. In Claydon's sculptures and installations it is often difficult to tell where plinths and vitrines end and where the artworks begin. The objects are three-dimensional collages akin to gold-plated gas cylinders, repurposed figurative busts, vertical and horizontal beams that quarter the gallery spaces and defy easy categorisation. One minute he is deeply philosophical, name-checking the Three Fs as he calls them – Buckminster Fuller, Gustav Flaubert and Richard Feynman. Then he is very practical.

"Pick up these two pieces separately," he challenges me. "And see which one is heavier." They look like mummified babies, or totems from Timor-Leste. One has the darkness of teak. The other is a golden yellow. Otherwise they are identical. Strange twins.

The first one I lift is quite light, and feels roughly like I thought it would. The second is incredibly heavy, and although I manage to lift it, it does take some effort.

At this point I get a sense of the complexity of Claydon's projects, and how much work you, as spectator, have to do to complete the cycle of knowledge kickstarted by the artist. These twin artefacts – and it emerges later that Claydon himself is an identical twin – bring together a recent residency on Scotland's Isle of Bute with altered objects from the Pacific island regions of Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, plus two other agencies: The Common Guild in Glasgow, and a company



Top to bottom
Installation view
STEVEN CLAYDON
The Archipelago of Contented Peoples: Introduced Species, 2017
Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute
Photo: Keith Hunter

Installation view
STEVEN CLAYDON
The Hepworth Prize for Sculpture, 2016
Hepworth Wakefield, West Yorkshire
Photo: Plastiques Photography Limited

Opposite
STEVEN CLAYDON
Chalkos, 2017
electroplated copper on resin, pennies, and laminated wood
149.2 x 22.2 x 22.2 cm
Photo: Lee Thompson

Courtesy the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, Massimo, De Carlo, Milan, London, and Hong Kong, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute



"I see myself not so much as an artist but as a conductor, a collaborator with materials. I very much enjoyed foundation year at art school when we could experiment with everything."

in Aberdeen called JFD, a world leader in depth pressure testing. JFD's largest work chamber, I later discover through Martin Robb, Head of Commercial Services, "is used on a daily basis to perform pressure testing on subsea equipment to ensure functionality, safety and integrity at great depths, prior to mobilisation. It is capable of simulating depths of up to 1000 metres. For Claydon's project, two large wooden totem-like sculptures arrived at the National Hyperbaric Centre in April 2017 and were carefully secured within its large work chamber by on-site technicians. The chamber was flooded with water and highly pressurised. The process was recorded using underwater cameras within the chamber and a photographer took detailed photos of the objects before and after the test for the art installation project."

Slowly, I am beginning to understand. One of the totems I'd lifted (the very heavy one) had been part of the pair subjected to pressures equivalent to being on the seabed; the other one had not. These went on to form part of his exhibition *The Archipelago of Contented Peoples: Endurance Groups*, at Glasgow art space Common Guild.

Later, they joined Claydon for his residency in Bute, where they were placed within the landscape to form a new link between Scotland and the Pacific. Many marriages took place between high-ranking Scottish families and the Hawaiian royal family, especially in the years before American colonisation. According to notes supplied by Bute's Mount Stuart Trust, "The last heir to the Hawaiian throne, Princess Ka'iulani, was half-Scottish on the side of her father, Archibald Cleghorn. The princess spent considerable time in Scotland and the islands before and after Hawaii was annexed by the USA. Claydon draws upon this historical coincidence – a fusion of dynastic and commercial interests – as a metaphor for his use of analogous (yet historically divergent) materials, aesthetics and techniques."

At this point, we move downstairs to the building's basement where we order coffees in a low-ceilinged room randomly scattered with armchairs, sofas, tables and what look like old school chairs. We switch from the particular to the general as we look through a recently published, and quite hefty, monograph on his work from Mousse Publishing. The titles of his exhibitions over the past few years reflect the breadth of historical knowledge and the mastery of material culture that Claydon brings to his art. I flick through the pages. *Analogues, Methods, Monsters, Machines*, at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (2015); *Golden Times*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2010); *The Ancient Set and The Fictional Pixel*, Serpentine Pavilion, London (2008). His playful approach to language is reflected in the title of



a show he co-curated with Martin Clark in 2015, *The Noing Uv It*, at Bergen Kunsthall in Norway, as well as *The Thingliness of Things I (Potatoes In The Cellar)*, a discrete assemblage which takes its inspiration from Heidegger's writings on art.

In 2007 he curated the exhibition *Strange Events Permit Themselves The Luxury of Occurring* at Camden Arts Centre. The title is taken from a quote by the fictional 1930s detective Charlie Chan. True to form, the exhibition was about "objects and things" and examined the relationship between art objects and the institutions that display them. He selected works by an intriguing range of artists including Jenny Holzer, Sidney Nolan, John Stezaker, Francis Picabia, Anna and Bernhard Blume, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Rachel Fenner, Franz West, Elisabeth Frink, and himself.

His interest in "the dual nature of things" probably owes much to being an identical twin and to being aware of the differences as well as the similarities between himself and his sibling. His brother is also an artist, but they do not work together in the same way as Jane and Louise Wilson, or Doug and Mike Starn. "Although for a while we did share a studio one day a week and I really enjoyed that," he says. "Maybe we should do it more often."

A bigger influence, one that certainly allows a deeper glimpse into his nature and methodology, comes when he tells me: "I see myself not so much as an artist but as a conductor, a collaborator with materials. I very much enjoyed foundation year at art school when we could experiment with everything."

"I didn't like the specialisation that was enforced afterwards," he continues. "Rather, than going on immediately to do a master's degree, I took a job as an attendant at one of London's biggest museums. I really wanted to approach the visitors and engage them in conversation about the objects they were looking at. But we were not allowed to do that. So for months I just roamed around the museum at will, behind the scenes, in the storage areas and the archives. I learned a lot."

He's not ready to talk about his future show in Los Angeles. This isn't due to secretiveness but because he doesn't yet know what form it will take.

"Perhaps there will be some paintings," he says. **V**

Steven Claydon is represented by David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles and Sadie Coles, London.

davidkordanskygallery.com

sadiccoles.com

Installation view
STEVEN CLAYDON
Analogues, Methods, Monsters, Machines, 2015
Centre D'Art Contemporain,
Geneva, Switzerland,
Photo: Annik Wetter

Courtesy the artist, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, Massimo, De Carlo, Milan, London, and Hong Kong, Sadie Coles HQ, London and Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute