

BARTLE

RICHARD BARTLE

DEITIES AT THE BOTTOM
OF THE GARDEN

*For the gods
and their earthly representatives
and for my family & friends
for their support and encouragement.*

PLATES

fig. I	BAHA'I
fig. II	BUDDHIST
fig. III	CATHOLIC
fig. IV	HINDU
fig. V	ISLAMIC
fig. VI	JEWISH
fig. VII	ORTHODOX
fig. VIII	PAGAN
fig. IX	PROTESTANT
fig. X	SHINTO
fig. XI	SIKH
fig. XII	TAOIST





fig. 1





fig. II





fig. III





fig. IV





fig. V





fig. VI





fig. VII





fig. VIII





fig. IX





fig. X





fig. XI



道可道 非常道



fig. XII

TEXTS

BEING AND ESSAY ON
THE SUBJECT OF
DEITIES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN

WRITTEN BY
HELEN COCKER

+ AND +

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTIST
RICHARD BARTLE

WRITTEN BY
DOMINIC MASON

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INTRODUCTION

Sheffield has a proud history of craftsmanship and making, from the cutlery industry that flourished from the 14th century onwards, when self-employed craftsmen or 'little mesters' rented spaces to live, work and manufacture, through to today's specialist steel makers and accomplished silversmiths.

Throughout the ages man has needed a place that can be called 'sacred' – a special, silent space in which to converse with his god and make known his innermost thoughts. Such spaces can be found amongst many peoples, taking the form of temple, church or mosque. For the artist Richard Bartle the form

and function of religious architecture has been the subject of a three-year personal pilgrimage and now, emerging from the arduous passage of artistic production, he invites us into an exhibition that exposes the spiritual need and utopian dreams of man.

Deities At The Bottom Of The Garden is an ambitious sculpture series consisting of twelve miniature sheds housing twelve religious

temples. Reminiscent of a clock face or a series of pagan stones, the sheds sit in a circle alluding to the mysteries of time. Hidden inside are a variety of miniature icons, paintings and objects, each one lovingly hand-made by the artist. The uniform quality of the sheds lend a democratic quality to their status, emphasised by their circular placement, and we are invited to view each one on equal terms. However, the individual nature of their interiority cannot be denied. No two sheds are the same and we might soon find ourselves favouring one over the other with a preference for pattern rather than simplicity, or rugs instead of chairs.

The temptation to touch is frustrating in any gallery, but more so here. Inhibited by the small dimensions of a tiny world we are, like Alice in her adventures, trapped on the wrong side of the looking glass. The place we long to visit is beyond our reach and there is no potion to alter our over-sized bodies. Childishly we imagine ourselves in each room, lighting the candles, sitting on the chairs, kneeling by the icons before which we come to pray. But standing hunched over the doorway our body is fixed to the floor, unable to fully enter the world in which our mind is currently roaming free. We are forced into two halves: mind versus matter. Perhaps, as Descartes proposed

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during the 17th century, there is a cognitive existence beyond the reach of the body. Bartle's sheds beckon to us, and through the delightful imaginative process we are invited to enter into a playful dialogue with the work. Physically, however, we remain on the outside, looking in.

Richard Bartle works from his studio and workshop in the former home of Granton Ragg Ltd, a knife and medical instrument maker with over 400 years of history in the city. Like most remaining manufacturers in the area, the firm has now moved to premises away from the city centre, leaving former industrial areas to be repopulated by creative industries, hi-tech offices and new-build apartments. Now the building is home to Bloc, a sprawling studio complex that Richard has built up over the past 16 years. In the heart of Sheffield's creative community, the building houses the workplaces of over 60 artists and is home to Bloc Projects, a contemporary gallery space with a national reputation for exhibiting work by emerging artists.

Walking amongst the twelve sheds we are confronted not only with what we see but what others can see of us. Our faces are pressed up against the doorway and our limbs are left to roam freely in space. Like an ostrich with its head stuck in the sand we seek refuge in our mind's eye, but how long before we forget to step back outside? There is an unnerving quality to this work, one that warns of the dangers of a sheltered mind, a mind that separates itself from the body. Hovering amongst the deities at the bottom of the garden we find ourselves wrestling with weightier things than flowers.

Since the days of the Enlightenment religion has moved from the imposition of public presumption to a matter of personal, private choice. We might say that it has re-located from the town temple to the garden shed. Religion has not been occluded from public discussion; it has simply been ushered into the private sphere of personal choice: a place where public

acceptance rests on the understanding that every man is free to build a temple in his outhouse, but the neighbours are not obliged to visit. A significant shift has occurred in the Western world's attitude toward religious expression. Pottering about in our personal worlds we claim the right to plant whatever we like, whether that be an imitation marble statue or a simple candle. Our treasure trove is our own affair. But as we busy ourselves behind closed doors, tinkering with the truths of the universe, are we in fact building a temple only of our own rhetoric?

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Richard's work stems from an engagement with culture, world politics, philosophy, society and the environment. Past works include paintings portraying kaleidoscopic repeated images: houses, industrial machinery, astronauts and tower blocks, hovering within semi-abstract landscapes, between visible layers of the atmosphere and the strata and sediment of the earth. He has produced stainless-steel doves that sit atop buildings in Sheffield centre, referencing Pablo Picasso's visit to the Second World Peace Congress in 1950, signposted a ramshackle fantasy sea-life centre in a city subway, and created installations populated by images of conflict, turmoil, religious iconography, and political power. Despite the often-fractured nature of his subjects and imagery, at the heart of Richard's work is a desire for harmony; a utopian belief, perhaps, that despite the conflict and discord in the world, there are solutions available to those who truly seek them.

Boris Groys recently wrote:

The legitimacy of personal faith is based not on the degree of its power of persuasion, but on the sovereign right of the individual to be committed to this faith.[†] Commitment to a personal faith is a comforting thought in times of need, but as we potter about at the back of the garden shed are we in danger of accidentally locking the door? Behind the allure of these twelve small sheds sits the anxiety of a deeper social conscience, one in which our personal faith finds itself squashed up against the plant pots and pitchforks of our often padlocked minds.

Deities At The Bottom Of The Garden sustains an inquisitive tension between the microcosm of our individual beliefs and the macrocosm of our worldly inheritance. Moving as tourists from one attraction to another we find ourselves navigating the significance of human creativity and ritual practice. Art meets tradition in the garden shed and our early ancestral practices are revealed. *Art, after all, was borne out of a kind of adoration for the world around it and has its roots, as Walter Benjamin writes, in the service of the ritual.*^{††}

For Bartle, ritual is closely linked to the artistic process of reproduction and repetition. This is a process that demands his full attention. It is not enough to interpret a venerated image belonging to an unnamed cult; each object must be thoroughly researched, dutifully copied and made exact by the artist's own hand. Fettered to the craftsman's desk he attentively masters the reproduction of each chosen article.

In our current culture reproduction is a currency in which we regularly trade. In fact, culture itself is reproducible

†. Groys, Boris, *Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, E-flux Journal 2009: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/religion-in-the-age-of-digital-reproduction>

††. Benjamin, Walter, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Illuminations. London Fontana 1973: p.217

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For artists to be dedicated to their materials and to study the world around them diligently is far from uncommon, although more than often dedication in art tends to focus on the singular or the minutiae – a landscape from a favoured fixed viewpoint, the mastery of drawing a single human form, or the study of a contained series of objects within a still-life. Bartle's work in comparison strives to encompass the global, to quantify a whole, in a quest to get the measure of the world around him.

through commodity, technology and art. The dissemination of previously isolated sacred entities in a globalised and profane market leaves us saturated with replicable imagery. So when faced with the labour intensive products of a handmade artefact, how do we extract or infer meaning?

One word that comes to mind here is scarcity. The handmade object is a rare and fragile thing. Scarcity makes precious that which might otherwise be mundane. In a world of excess where we litter our lives with 'things' (isn't the garden shed a dumping ground for unused tools and unknown objects after all?) the individual production of an artwork marks out a code of

practice not dissimilar to the codes by which many religions operate: those of devotion, communication and celebration.

Woollen rugs, glass beads, murals, stained glass windows and fruit baskets are just some of the contents filling the twelve sheds that the artist has painstakingly produced, and each one bears the birthmark of time.

In the midst of a maker's madness Bartle has been known to describe his all-consuming dedication to the reconstruction of each worship space as the practice of a 'method artist'.

And there is much method here. Each spiritual shed reveals the rigour, detail and precision attributed to the dying art of highly skilled craftsmen.

Softly exuding the somewhat Proustian memory of childhood play, where tinkering in the garden with found scraps of materials

Richard first worked with 20-21 Visual Arts Centre in 2008 when he exhibited *Pow-Wow*, a large-scale work documenting every world leader serving during the duration of George Bush's US presidency. Like his current project it was an epic and ambitious undertaking, with 196 individual canvas panels portraying each of the world's leaders. Evolving as each leader was replaced and each panel reworked, *Pow-Wow* demonstrated a coming together of material process and depiction of social-political history through time, something that has continued in his current body of work.

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In the summers of 2008 and 2012, supported by a research and development grant from Arts Council England, Richard undertook two residencies in Istanbul, the first facilitated by Platform Garanti, and the second coinciding with his invitation to produce work for the Mardin Biennial. Living and working amongst the diverse amalgamation of religions and cultures in the city, the experience marked a move towards making a work from a truly global perspective. For Mardin Richard produced a series of beautifully crafted scale modeled chairs, cataloguing the history and traditions of civilizations from the Mardin region, from the Romans to the modern republic. As in his current work, painstaking research into the historical, social and political context of his sculptures was mirrored in his dedication to materials, process and making.

formed the basis of a pleasant afternoon, each shed contributes an individual aroma to the precious object-world in which it resides. Formed from materials as diverse as pinewood, brass, beeswax, zinc and rice, the action of making is firmly impressed upon every surface and recorded in every object. To make is to create, which throws up the curious question of what it is to bring about life.

The habit of poets and ancient dreamers to project their own aliveness onto non-alive things itself suggests that it is the basic work of creation to bring about the very projection of aliveness.^{†††}

The 'method artist' is engaged in a curious act of meditation, seeking understanding in the silent foothills of his creations. Devotion has long fostered a belief that objects or books can speak from God, or that God can speak through them. It is not unfamiliar to think that life resides in something other than the 'alive'. For the artist, the practice of thinking and doing might produce a space in which the work begins to speak back from elsewhere. An utterance is made of an action and the artist is transformed from

his role as creator to that of receiver. In this symbolic exchange of information between the maker and his craft we witness the complex unfolding of an alternative conversation: it is the quest for another (higher) language, one that can reach beyond the common tongue.

The temples hidden in Bartle's potting sheds are as varied as the religious practices they represent. Placed deliberately upon a carpeted landscape they sit like devotional offerings on precious prayer mats, each one peculiar to its own traits. Simplicity and geometry frame the Islamic house, Taoism perches on a hilltop, Shinto runs freely down a waterfall whilst

†††. Scarry, Elaine. *The Interior Structure of the Artifact, The Body in Pain*. New York Oxford University Press, 1985

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Hinduism ebbs and flows by the riverside. The plush elegance of Islamic tiles matches the gilded offerings of a Hindu shrine and untouchable Sikh artefacts rival the simple wooden furniture of Protestantism's modest interiors. But as we traverse this rich, visual landscape we might also find ourselves subsumed by its scriptural silence. Though holy books can be found beneath shrouds of cloth, the untouchable artefacts present us with a mute wall behind which we are forced to stand and stare.

Deities At The Bottom Of The Garden is Richard's largest and most ambitious work to date, the culmination of over three years of painstaking research, development, manufacture and devotion. It has been a pleasure seeing the work develop over this time and seeing an artist showing real pride and dedication to his work. On regularly passing by Richard's studio, I'd often hear the sound of machinery coming from his workshop and imagine him turning a miniature candlestick, polishing a scale model artefact or carving the decoration on a Lilliputian pew or chair-back.

Religion is not built on the practice of intuition; if a man makes a sacrifice at the temple of his god it is not by spiritual revelation alone: belief often seeks the support of language, of scripture. Bartle may play out the role of a distanced devotee, humbly preparing for us an altar full of objects from which we can derive our own meaning, but we will still look to the provision of his language for revelation. In the absence of the author's word we find ourselves swimming in a pool of symbolic reference points. The image, or the object, presents itself in its muteness as a limit to our understanding and personal interpretation fills the gap. The practice of a ritual imbues the object with purpose and meaning, but ritual is predominantly imposed upon the object by instruction, often in the form

of text or command. Language steps in to speak out in the silence, but even this text falls victim to the infinite network of signs all clamouring to shed light on the matter. Caught between language and practice we find ourselves on the threshold again, our minds tunnelling through time whilst our bodies remain fixed in space.

Deities At The Bottom Of The Garden wants us to enter the quiet domain of its own private existence. Here we come not to find answers to the numerous questions posed by our world but to gaze upon the histories that have brought them into being. Here we are allowed to be still, silent and to enjoy the visual

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solitude of occupying a small garden shed with nothing but our own quiet thoughts to accompany us. Through the peepholes of this unusual diorama we find our inner country and are reminded that the world outside is a hub of activity from which we can occasionally retreat.

For an artist to show such a dedication to the skilled act of making is all the more pertinent in our current age of mass production, as is the work of an artist that seeks to unravel the driving forces behind current global tensions, in the face of overseas conflict, the fall-out from the Arab Spring and ongoing Western involvement overseas. As visitors to the exhibition are seduced by these beautiful interiors, I hope that they take time to ponder the meaning of devotion, whether it is to religion, art, vocation, or to the people and objects that they themselves, or others around them hold dear. I'd also like to think that like Richard, they might have a little more faith that despite our differences, we share sufficient common ground to strive towards mutual understanding of those whose beliefs differ from our own.

Dominic Mason
20-21 Visual Arts Centre

Bartle's otherworldly sheds open up a complex and confessional space through which we might journey as pilgrims guided by the hand of the artist as we find refuge between the temples. It is a voyeuristic journey in time, excavating our own preconceptions, tantalising us with the forbidden fruits of childish dreams and reminding us that the production and discovery of art is nothing less than a personal adventure.

Helen Cocker

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