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## Richard Wilson: in the studio



Artist Richard Wilson CREDIT: HARRY BORDEN

by Lucy Davies

The British artist Richard Wilson RA is best known for large sculptures which draw on the methods of engineering and which, when installed, parley with their architectural environment. Now 63, he has twice been nominated for the Turner Prize, in 1988 and 1989. His piece *A Slice of Reality* (2000), a nine-metre section through a former sand dredger, which was commissioned for the Millennium, sits on the riverbank at North Greenwich. *Slipstream* (2014), which was commissioned for the renovation of Terminal 2 at Heathrow airport, was inspired by watching airshow stunt planes. This year, Wilson acted as co-ordinator for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

I get up at 7.00 or 7.30am – it's a hangover from 11 years of doing the school run, whatever condition I was in. I have a light breakfast, a cup of tea, and then I go straight to the office, which is a room in my house. I check emails and, after that, there's usually a bit of procrastinating where I tidy up or pay some bills.

I'm fastidious about keeping a paper diary, and attending to that is an important moment in my day. I've done it for years, because, although I'm quite efficient, when I have many things on the go I can be forgetful. My friends use various electronic devices to do the same thing, but I avoid all that kit. I have a phone for phoning and nothing else.

My drawing space is on the first floor of my house in Rotherhithe – I've lived here for 40 years. It has a large table sandwiched between the two front windows. I can't draw at my sculpture studio because it's too damp. I used to have a proper drawing studio in Greenwich, but my son uses it now for his music.



Wheelhouse, maquette proposal, 2016 CREDIT: RICHARD WILSON

My sculpture studio is in a railway arch, about three minutes from my home. I've been there since the mid-Eighties, when it was really run down, with people breaking into cars and even a guy knocking out forged one pound coins. Now it's all microbreweries and olive oil distributors. The planet's certainly changed in this neck of the woods.

Being a sculptor, the space is filled with a considerable amount of machinery and clutter. I keep one side for metal, the other for woodwork. I have a circular saw, welding equipment, a donkey hacksaw, and great big bench. Added to all that is storage for some smaller works, and a few what I call "luxury items" – my drums and a couple of motorbikes, both of which I'm really getting a bit old for, really.

The nice thing about drumming is, that sometimes conscious thought can be too slow, but when you're playing, it's so fast that you can't think about it. It's also good for me physically, especially as it works different muscles in the upper part of my body. I do suffer aches and pains from the years of sculpting. Regardless, I just love playing. My son's a guitarist and sometimes I play with him either at his place, or on the circuit with friends. I was in a performance band for 11 years.

My studio can be messy, but every now and again I tidy up and take stuff to the dump. It's important it doesn't get too scruffy – it can affect your state of mind. It's also a health and safety thing – you don't want to be tripping over and falling into a machine.

Once upon a time I would make the component parts of my sculptures myself. Now, various fabrication set ups will do the large manufacture, and my studio is more of a think tank for testing ideas. Slipstream was 77 tonnes – I couldn't do that on my own! I think 83 people were involved from start to finish.

I like my personal space. I employ an agent, an account, an archivist and someone who looks after the website, but they all work off site. If you have people working with you it becomes more of a nine-to-five thing. I have more freedom on my own.

Once I've started working, I find it such a drag to stop, I tend to work without a break until about 4pm, when I start thinking I need a sugar hit. Being abstemious just means that when I get home, I completely pig out. My eating habits are very bad.



The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, which Wilson has co-ordinated this year.

I have a radio in the studio but I don't often turn it on, because I find myself standing there listening. I prefer to keep my thinking clear. I've also really damaged my ears over the years, and I find the quiet enables me to do battle with my tinnitus. It was partly drumming, partly the machinery, but mainly the years I spent in the Bow Gamelan ensemble (1982-1992). We made our own instruments and ways of making sounds, which included pyrotechnical sounds – a lot of whistles and explosions. I deafened myself for half a day once.

I don't keep anything on the walls at the studio. It's really the grubby end of the business. At home in my drawing studio I have lots of things, though – postcards, photos, memorabilia, a broken record, a tube map.

I keep scrapbooks. If I see something unusual, I tear it out and stick it in. It might generate something – it's like using cookbooks to cook a meal.

I use a sketchbook every day. Many years ago, a late friend of mine told me he made sure to make three sketches every day, and I thought: what a clever thing to do, to get into the habit of generating ideas. Some days it's hard, other days you can easily produce 10 or 15 pages.

I often have a few artworks on the go at the same time. I actually work much better under pressure – I don't like it when there's nothing to work for. I don't feel the same motivation.

I feed my inspiration by reading books, going out, having conversations, just maintaining an intensity with the world. You have to be a sponge, and every time you open the front door, you must begin absorbing.

I also like drifting around on the internet – you can see odd things, such as ships being launched, train wrecking, people moving whole houses on great big loaders. I get a confidence from seeing those kinds of things. I think: if they can do it, so can I, and I can make it into an artwork.

Whether a piece is finished or not has something to do with when it looks right. You have an intention; you aim to make something that will meet the idea in your head. If you keep the execution tight, you'll get to a moment where you know your idea has been achieved. The problem comes when you're working on large commissions which will go to a fabricator. Once the idea on paper leaves your studio, there is very little margin for change. You have to be sure everything is right before the piece is actually finished. I tend to get to a point of clarity and then hold it for a day or two before I give it the final sign off, to be sure.

All of my ideas are blocked by doubt. I mistrust them, and therefore I have to investigate each one intensely – I take it for a damn long walk and torture it before I begin work on it. That means my turn out is very slow.

Spring is a fantastically productive time of year for me. As everything is waking up, I find I wake up, too. During the winter I tend to slow down and there are some days and weeks where I don't work at all, but I think it's important not to keep making art every day. I don't understand artists who work 365 days a year – you need to get out and do other things to inform yourself. Travelling, holidays, pastimes, they're all distractions but they help to fend off mental block.

I stop work physically between 6.00 and 7.00pm, but my mind never stops. I can even ponder an idea in my sleep. I have woken sometimes early in the morning and thought, "god, that's not going to work and this is why".

I relax in front of my computer screen. I like to check things on YouTube, and buy bits of kit for my drums or my motorcycles. Last night it was clutch plates for my Yamaha TTR250. My partner and I also have a place in France which we are restoring, and that is relaxing, too. I can take my motorbikes off road and ride for miles. The idea of watching TV disgusts me – there are so many channels but with nothing on that I want to watch. I particularly loathe reality TV. I prefer to watch films.

I go to bed extremely late, around 2.00am. I don't feel tired in the morning, but sometimes in the afternoon I think, "I must go to bed earlier". Having said that, I usually get distracted when the evening comes around again.



Slipstream, maquette of the proposed work at T2 Heathrow, 2014 CREDIT: RICHARD WILSON