

Michael Dean

Kicking Die (To Scale With a Ladder)

1 May – 8 June 2025

Herald St is pleased to announce *Kicking Die (To Scale With a Ladder)*, Michael Dean's sixth solo exhibition with the gallery. This presentation continues Dean's two-decade-long exploration of transposing language and experimental forms of typography into three-dimensional sculpture, often resulting in physical environments and immersive installations. His ideological interrogation inextricably binds symbolic histories and socio-political vicissitudes with his own quotidian narrative and personal history. The artist describes the act of an exhibition as an artifice, theatre, or stage, whereby 'the gallery is a white page; the viewer is a protagonist; and the exhibition becomes a publication.'¹

The exhibition is rooted in *moksha patam*, a Hindu board game thought to have originated as early as the tenth century in which players negotiate cycles of death, rebirth, and spiritual attainment, with serpents and ladders serving as karmic and virtuosic stratagems. Following the arrival of British colonists in India, in 1892 the game was adapted and patented by a London toymaker, becoming the now popularised *Snakes and Ladders*. While the skeletal workings of *Kicking Die (To Scale With a Ladder)* draw upon the game, Dean continues his research in and of language by connoting a Barthesian doctrine, subverting the causal effect of interpretation and play between author and reader, as to invite—albeit at times unwittingly force—us into a dialectical proposition.

As we enter the space, flat concrete sculptures tiled with emblems of ascending and/or descending ladders—alluding to a pixelated, 1980s computer game—simultaneously transfigure, appear, and punctuate. In the second room, again as in early platform games such as *Lazy Jones* (in which one would appear to enter down a ladder, kick a die, and leave up a ladder), hundreds of multicoloured dice lie scattered on floor, ready to be kicked; their marbled, translucent, and solid jewel tones cause a momentary interruption, shifting our perspective to the floor. The dice's upturned facets brim with the mysticism of self-attributed numerology, subsequently asking us to recontextualise the unprecedented amalgamation of signs ahead.

Dean's work embraces the visceral, living parlance of writing, symbolic typographies, and emoticons. In a broader sense, the exhibition continues the artist's interest in animality and 'natural semiotics', previously manifested in *Jungle is Massive* (2022), where black-and-white panda markings were transfigured into letters and words. In *Kicking Die (To Scale With A Ladder)*, slabs of human-scaled sculptures mimic snakeskin, embodying echeloned striations of scaley tiles. Formed by Dean's long-utilised 'democratic ceramic' of concrete, rebar, and a machination of rudimentary building materials, the present series, unlike much of his earlier work with gestural sweeps of poured concrete, evinces a meticulous method of rhythmic and repetitive composition.

The floor is a subject Dean has returned to throughout his oeuvre, in performances such as *The Floor is the Object* (2010); in *Tender Tender* (2017), his installation in the historic courtyard of Skulptur Projekte Münster, where paving stones resembling tongues spelt out a street-like cursive that could be traversed by visitors; in heart-shaped protrusions gridded in rows in the manner of blister pavements on crossings to assist the visually impaired; and in a series of customised concrete shoe prints. Ever imbuing life into his monoliths, Dean began the sculptures by laying out hand-made tiles in his garden, building the works horizontally and allowing them to soak in the grasses and weeds as they hardened. His visceral romanticism and subtle irony of sentiments² play throughout, reimagining cultural gestures and phrases to form his own composite, and in turn challenging the notion of authorship. In one work, an aperture is encased by a black gutter grill, recalling a line from Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*: 'we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.' For the artist, being confronted with the floor is a nadir with the violence of hitting rock-bottom, and it is in these moments identities are deepened and resolves strengthened.

Dean revels in 'the delicious sense of adding something unrelated', and among the strips of laddered scales hangs a cobweb, its triangulated slices reading, 'Not to be young, not to grow old'. These words are taken from a 1983 speech by Neil Kinnock, ahead of Margaret Thatcher's prime ministerial appointment: 'I warn you not to be ordinary, I warn you not to be young, I warn you not to fall ill, and I warn you not to grow old.' Brash politics, patriotism, and nationalism are similarly layered in the red, white, and blue of flags rearranged as viper skins in the sculptures; at the same time the works emulate a shift into domesticity. If life is a game in which we are all implicated, Dean exposes its threats of 'don't step on the crack or you'll break your back', alongside the beauty of negotiating reality in relation to pythons and household tools.

Text by Émilie Streiff

¹ Dean's self-published paperbacks are a longstanding physical, literal, and symbolic device in his works and exhibitions.

² Lifted from known sayings such as the Irish blessing: 'May the road rise to meet you', as well as the cold crisis of lying face down on the hard ground.