

THE INDEPENDENT

In The Studio: Thomas Schütte, sculptor

'Too much money, too much service... It's not good for any artist'

Karen Wright | Saturday 27 October 2012 00:00 |



On the button: Thomas Schütte in his Düsseldorf studio ()

The sculptor Thomas Schütte has lived in Düsseldorf for nearly 40 years, ever since his student days at the Düsseldorf Akademie. One of his teachers was Gerhard Richter who was, he says, "a normal painter at that time. Superstars did not exist in Germany."

Schütte chooses not to teach himself, saying dismissively, "the students only want careers, they are not interested in art, they are only interested in connections." Schütte does not do small talk. His work, like him, is strong and direct, and unafraid of taking risks. "You have to make good mistakes. It is between throwing dice, if you are already good you can use every second or third."

Luise, one of his "one and a half" assistants, brings in the post, a small load today. Schütte does not keep a large studio, preferring to go to work with others as needed. He goes to Munich for ceramics, to Mönchengladbach for steel, to Hanover to make prints and to Wuppertal for model making. Today, he takes me to the foundry, a 10-minute drive by the harbour. Luise drives us there in a decommissioned taxi, its beige-and-red-striped livery still intact.

The foundry is an old-fashioned establishment still using the lost-wax technique, a labour-intensive process carried on by the 25 people employed here. We arrive in a large room, dare I say a studio, which is part storage and workroom containing the materials he will use later on. He is pleased to see that his shelves of materials have been cleaned and sorted. "In an hour you can make such a mess and it takes two hours to clean it up again. The good thing is if I don't come I don't pay."

Back at the flat for more coffee, he returns to the subject of the art world. He prefers to work with smaller galleries: "I don't feel good in these empires because you just have to deliver stuff. It is not good for any artist. Too much money, too much service, all this smeary stuff."

Schütte's current shows at the Serpentine Gallery and Frith Street Gallery focus on portraits. "I forgot the British have their own tradition – the strange portrait gallery, the British Petroleum Award, photography and the history of caricature and Hogarth," he admits. "I did not even think about it."

"We sell feelings, we sell emotions", he says of today's art world. "Museum people are doing it too." Sad, he concludes, as "art can change the view. It can change the mind. Potentially it is enlightenment, not entertainment."

Thomas Schütte: Faces & Figures, Serpentine Gallery, London W2 (020 7402 6075) to 18 November; Thomas Schütte: New Works, Frith Street Gallery, London W1 (020 7494 1550) to 15 November