



Tony Cragg, *Runner*, 2009, Bronze, 55 1/8 x 51 1/8 x 28 3/8 in. (140 x 130 x 72 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy of the artist and Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg, Image Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery. +331 4272 9900, +1 212 977 7160

THE BRILLIANCE *of* TONY CRAGG

BY CAROL KINO

To get a sense of the energy that powers Tony Cragg's very diverse body of work, just try pinning him down for an interview. When I tried to do that earlier this summer, his staff scrambled for over a week to figure out where he was likely to be at any given time, as he ricocheted around Europe between different museums, award ceremonies and press events on a constantly changing schedule. When we finally finished talking, he had just arrived in the UK to work on a major retrospective, his first in his homeland for over a decade. Yet even though it was nearly 2 a.m. his time, he still sounded full of vim and vigor.

In fact, as Cragg frequently observes, dynamism is what he believes sculpture is all about. "When sculptors of the 19th century and earlier made figures," he says, "and they showed in marble the muscles and the veins and the bones or breasts, all they were really doing was showing the energy, the vital form." And even today—now that sculpture has metamorphosed from representation into "a basic study of the material world," as he put it—"the reason we show a form is because of the forces inside of it, the energy."

Cragg rose to prominence in the 1980s along with a wave of new British sculptors, including Richard Deacon and Richard Long. Although many of his early works used found and manufactured objects (stacks of densely layered wood and detritus, for instance, or mosaics made from colorful bits of plastic), he gradually began working with more traditional media, including bronze, plaster and stone.

Today, while Cragg is now the director of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, one of Europe's great art schools, the focus of his life still seems to be his large and productive studio in Wuppertal, the town he moved to in 1977, right after finishing his MA studies at the Royal College of Art. He labors there with a crew of twelve, making work from all manner of materials and using a vast array of methods and techniques. "He's kind of a polymath in this way, and omnivorous," says Jed Morse, who is curating Cragg's upcoming retrospective at the Nasher Sculpture Center, the artist's first in this country for over two decades.



Top: Tony Cragg, *Line of Boxes*, 1972, Paper, © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Photo by Roger Ackling, Courtesy of the artist and Holtermann Fine Art. +44 20 7290 4499 Bottom: Tony Cragg, *Stack*, 1975, Mixed media, 78 ¾ x 78 ¾ x 78 ¾ in. (200 x 200 x 200 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy of the artist and Holtermann Fine Art. +44 20 7290 4499

Cragg's exploratory bent is often ascribed to his early career in science, when he worked at Britain's National Rubber Producers Research Association. "What is fascinating is that his studio looks like a laboratory," said Paul Schimmel, chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. "He has different teams of people working on different projects, each with very distinctive iconography and materials. And Tony, who is just one of these extraordinarily energetic people—he's really like a bunny running all over the place—seems to be so in his element, scampering back and forth from one project to the next." (Schimmel organized Cragg's last major museum show in North America, which originated at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach, California.)

In contrast to many other contemporary sculptors, Cragg also fabricates all his own work—apart from the bronzes—with his crew on site. "He essentially puts his eyes and mind and hands on everything," says Morse. "He says that oftentimes he doesn't know who's leading, him or the material."

Although Cragg certainly is passionate when it comes to talking about material ("I'm a materialist," he enthuses, "I think material is infinitely complicated and sublime!"), he seems considerably less attached to his career achievements. Take his recent show at the Louvre, where earlier this year he became the first artist to have a piece displayed beneath I.M. Pei's glass pyramid [*Versus*, 2010]. "There have been other great things in the last ten years that have been really interesting to do," Cragg says, sounding a bit blasé.

But, as he soon explains, that's only because he shifts his energy and attention elsewhere once a work is complete. "By the time I finish one work, I'm thinking about what the next one will look like," Cragg says. "My point of view is that when the work in my studio is finished and moving towards the door, it's already in a state of decay."

THE ART ECONOMIST INTERVIEW: TONY CRAGG

AE The story that's usually told about your career is that your background in science led to you becoming an artist. Is that how it happened?

TC Yeah, well, that's not really true. I mean, I do have a background in science, and as a schoolboy, I was more interested in science and definitely not interested in art. After school, I went to work as a lowly laboratory assistant in a research establishment. But I became more interested in drawing while the experiments were running than in the experiments themselves. So that was it, really, and in 1969 I went to art school [at the Gloucestershire College of Art in Cheltenham].

My intention was to draw and paint. Then one day they said, "You're going to make a sculpture." I was quite resistant to the idea, but I found it was really fantastic. With every move, the material had a different emotion and a different set of associations about it. But I didn't pursue it immediately.

In 1970, I went to the Wimbledon School of Art in London on a painting course. I had to finance my own studies, so I worked that summer in a big industrial foundry on a night shift. It was really dynamic, exciting work, and I got very physically fit doing it. There'd be these enormous piles of material and we had to do stuff with it. It was very primeval. You had this big, black, really enormous industrial hall, and there were teams pouring metal into the molds, and it'd disappear up the hallway as it cooled down. It looked really spectacular.

Then I was back at art school: thirty people behind an easel in a small studio, and I thought, "I was doing something really exciting a couple of weeks ago." That's when I started to make sculpture.

AE Was it the physicality or the alchemical transformation that you found so exciting?

TC I don't know if it's alchemical—that sounds like you're trying to make a mystery of it. It's like when you write, you see the graphite or the pigment on the paper and you see the form of the words. And you notice if you change them around, it means something different. In some ways, that's quite similar to making sculpture. You're thinking with material.

AE You've often talked about sculpture changing the world. How does it do that?

TC I think sculpture has a bigger influence on the material world than one would imagine for a very minor human activity. We use ma-



Tony Cragg, *Versus*, 2010, Wood, 104 3/8 x 116 1/8 x 39 3/8 in. (265 x 295 x 100 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy of the artist and Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg. +331 4272 9900

terial for everything. We sit on it. We wear it and live in it and eat it. Without material, we don't have anything to support our existence. So the quality of what you've got around you is very important.

The manmade world is made up of pretty mediocre forms, because that's the way industrial production systems work. It's basically all squares, blocks and cylinders. If you take one square meter of forest, it's full of a hundred thousand different materials and objects. But when humans design a forest, like most of the forests in Europe, it's a really boring and inferior forest. All the animals have gone, all the undergrowth is gone, everything dangerous is gone.

AE So how does sculpture change that?

TC The great advantage of sculpture is that it's not utilitarian. When you make a chair or table, you know its function. But there's a myriad of forms between the chair and the table, and that myriad of forms can give us more language to think with. That's how sculpture changes things—it gives us more language.

AE You've also talked quite a bit about the history of sculpture vs. the history of your work. Can you tell me more about that?

TC Sculpture at the end of the 19th century was entirely figurative and limited to a few materials. Since then, many artists have discovered new materials and objects to use in art.

In modernism, one of the things you identify a sculptor by is the material used, whether it's a rabbit's foot or a fluorescent light bulb or a soup can. That's part of the Duchampian process of nominating all the non-art materials as possible art materials. But it's a finite process. I think we're all a bit tired of seeing industrial objects

dragged into the museum and shown as art. It's time to make more autonomous forms, forms that have to fight for meaning, forms that aren't intellectually planned, that can only be made by working with material, so that sculpture-making becomes a process where there are hundreds or thousands of decisions going on, rather than just sitting there, trying to figure out what the art world needs or what would be the next clever move.

AE But didn't you start out by using found and readymade objects yourself? What made you change?

TC As a student in the '60s in Britain, the best material was stuff you could find or steal. The work I made in the mid-'70s, like *Stack* [he produced five *Stack* pieces between 1975 and 1985], was part of the challenge to go and find new materials. I started to exhibit at the end of the '70s in a lot of big survey shows. For a few years, I traveled a lot and was working almost performatively, finding the material, developing a theme for the exhibitions and so on. I sometimes did ten shows a year. Other than being quite exhausting, I often thought, "Pity I have to do it in this way." So in 1982, I went back to Wuppertal and got a couple of assistants and a studio, and we learned how to really make the sculpture. [He now employs a staff of twenty, including twelve technicians who help him make the work.]

AE How did things change after that?

TC Radically. Lots of works used materials that were found, but in combination with objects that I made. In about 1984, I started to cast things. By the time I did the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1988, I had established several different kinds of work, some based



Clockwise from top left: **Tony Cragg, *Can-Can*, 2000**, Bronze, 36 1/4 x 90 1/8 x 51 1/8 in. (92 x 229 x 130 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. +1 212 977 7160 **Tony Cragg, *Elbow*, 2008**, Wood, ca. 126 x 42 1/4 x 155 1/2 in. (320 x 115 x 395 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Photo by Michael Richter, Courtesy of the artist. **Tony Cragg, *Ferryman*, 2001**, Bronze, 151 5/8 x 74 7/8 x 47 1/4 in. (385 x 190 x 120 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Photo by Charles Duprat, Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York. +1 212 977 7160. **Tony Cragg, *Outspan*, 2008**, Bronze, 74 7/8 x 78 3/4 x 48 7/8 in. (190 x 200 x 124 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Photo by Charles Duprat, Courtesy of the artist.

on stackings, some based on morphologizing certain forms, others on penetrating into the surface of the material to make new structures.

Most things can be seen as having a particular quality, whether it's atoms, molecules, cells, stars, grains of sand. After that, you get stratifications, whether geological or our skin or the atmosphere. Then you have a two-dimensional extension that can go around on itself and form something like a bubble or a vessel, with an inside and outside. But if this bubble wants to interact with the outside world, it has to have articulations—so then you get involved in articulating these forms. These were the systems I had developed that I felt were relevant to sculpture.

AE I was going to ask what you meant by “morphologizing,” but I think you’ve just explained it.

TC The morphologizing has more to do with the idea—the vessel as metaphor. Vessels for archaeologists are the main indicators of how far a civilization developed.

AE You tend to work in what you call “families.” Give me some idea of how we’ll see them in the Nasher show.

TC One of the biggest groups is *Early Forms*, which started in the mid-'80s. The notion behind it is that the physical objects we're seeing

now are the tip of the iceberg. There could be billions of completely alternative arrangements of the physical world, but we deal with very few of them because we're hamstrung by our production methods.

The other group is *Rational Beings*, which started more or less at the same time. I had been making work with found cylinders and disks—flat, circular objects—stacking them up in a column [like *Adontoid Pegs*, 1986]. I called them *Minsters* [an honorific bestowed upon some British churches]. They weren't glued or welded. They were just stacked and they diminished as they went up.

But everybody kept asking, “Is this thing fixed?” and then shaking it. So, I finally was forced by museums to fix them in place. Once I did that, I realized that they didn't have to be straight, so I started to build forms using circular cross-sections. A circular cross-section is an enormous body of form in the natural world. It's tree trunks. It's our limbs. It's veins. It's intestines and nerve-endings. I was getting away from the found material, making the material myself, and then changing the geometries from circles into ellipses, and making more complicated three-dimensional forms [like *Elbow*, 2008].

AE Tell me more about the *Early Forms*. Don't they each begin with a vessel shape, which you then seem to extrude and turn in on itself?

TC Exactly. The first *Early Forms* [like *Mortar and Pestle*, (1987-88)] are very simple. They're based on chemical flasks [and other laboratory equipment], which have nice, beautiful rational forms. Pulling them into one another made them really alchemistic, and animalistic. They started to look like bodies and even erotic body parts [like *Early Form (Meander)*, 1997]. After that, I made them more complicated and they became even baroque, [like *Box*, 1999] because they had so much energy.

After that, I packed the sculpture into a very tight form, because I wanted to stop that kind of bellowing. Something like *Sinbad* (2000) results from really compressing the form. And having made *Sinbad*, I realized that there's a lot of inferred space inside it—what really happens you can't see. So then I made works like *Can-Can* (2000)—more or less two or three sculptures inside of one another. Then I made work that was perforated [like *Ferryman*, 2001] so that you could see what was going on inside. After 2000, I started to make work that makes new claims in space [like *Outspan*, 2008]. The work has also moved away from chemical flasks and classical forms into very commercial forms, like *McCormack* (2007), which finds its origins in commercial plastic objects.

AE Yet many of your *Rational Forms*, like *Elbow*, look quite figurative.

TC I started using ellipses because they have two axes, and I wanted to place them so that when you move into the line of axis, you see something recognizable. We're very good at recognizing something that's anthropomorphic. But the idea is when you move off the axis, the face starts to grimace and move. Suddenly it becomes a very free new sculptural volume, and a new experience.

AE Where do some of the other pieces fit in? *Eroded Landscape* (1998) is apparently made with found materials, like glass bottles and cups.

TC That goes back to stacking principles and vessels. Matting up the surface suddenly makes the vessels into objects. You can't see through them, so you perceive it as a thing in space.

AE It changes your experience of the volume.

TC Very much. One of the biggest works in the show is *Congregation* (1999). The objects in it are basically found, although some of the big wooden slabs we cut out ourselves with a chainsaw. Every object is covered with hooks, which work like Velcro. Works with hooks, works covered with dice [like *Secretions*, 1998], works with holes—it's this attempt to give material what I call “valency” [i.e., akin to the valence value of an atom], to give it surface value. I'm going back to the idea of finding everyday objects and trying to give them a different function so that we see them in a different light.

Duchamp did a very valuable and important thing in introducing manmade objects into the world of art. That provided us with an



Tony Cragg, *Eroded Landscape*, 1998, Glass, 99 1/4 x 59 x 59 in. (252 x 150 x 150 cm), © 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, Photo by Simone Gänshelmer, Courtesy of the artist.

enormous vocabulary of new materials but, more importantly, it made us realize that we do not have to change the object if we can change the terms around it. That made the world into two different kinds of species, with every object having two facets, one being its physical qualities, and the other being its metaphysical qualities. It's not the soup can on the shelf, but the soup can we all have in our heads.

So when you're asking how does a sculptor change the world, that's what we're doing. Whether you change the material or not, you're changing things in your head. You give people new forms, and suddenly they see the world differently. □

UPCOMING TONY CRAGG SHOWS: • **TONY CRAGG: SEEING THINGS**, NASHER SCULPTURE CENTER, SEP. 10, 2011 TO JAN. 8, 2012. • **VERSUS**, LOUVRE, THROUGH OCT. 24, 2011. • **TONY CRAGG: SCULPTURES AND DRAWINGS**, SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART IN EDINBURGH THROUGH NOV. 6.

CAROL KINO CONTRIBUTES REGULARLY TO THE CULTURE PAGES OF *THE NEW YORK TIMES*. HER BYLINE ALSO HAS APPEARED FREQUENTLY IN *SLATE*, *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, *ABU DHABI'S THE NATIONAL*, *ART IN AMERICA* AND *TOWN & COUNTRY*, AMONG OTHERS, AS WELL AS *ART + AUCTION*, WHERE SHE IS A LONGTIME CONTRIBUTING EDITOR. SHE WAS NAMED A USC ANNENBERG/GETTY ARTS JOURNALISM FELLOW IN 2007.