

[INTERVIEW



TONY CRAGG AND HIS « IN-BETWEEN » FORMS

A sculptor born in 1949 in Liverpool, Tony Cragg has lived and worked for nearly forty years in Wuppertal, Germany. He took part in documenta 7 and 8, then represented Great Britain at the 1988 Venice Biennale, the year in which he was awarded the Turner Prize. His sculptures, in impressive formats and made of wood, bronze, steel or marble, are currently on show at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in Pantin, where the artist met with Art Media Agency (“Sculptures”, until 9 July). His work is simultaneously being displayed at the Von-der-Heydt Museum in Wuppertal (“Parts of the World”, until 14 August).

How did you develop this exhibition at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery?

We started talking about it two or three months ago. When you make sculptures, especially in my huge dimensions, there’s always the problem of how to get them through doorways, of not making them too heavy for floors, of dealing with overly low ceilings or a lack of light...

This is a situation in many galleries or museums, but the space in the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery is more on the scale of my studio. So I have to say that this fascinated me. At the same time, there was an even bigger challenge because it wasn’t a matter of resolving these size-related issues but instead, understanding which works would work with one another or which periods would answer one another. There were even some sculptures whose design started some twenty months before but that were only finished up a week before the opening.

Which, for you, are the exhibition’s most emblematic works?

Mean Average, a bronze from 2014, which is the biggest sculpture, standing 5.70 metres high. This is a play of interweaving columns that is in line with one of the most important aspects of my work in the last eight years. It can be read as a geometrical figure but it can also give the impression of being organic or even morphing. I’m interested in defining underlying form and structure. What meets the eye is only the result of what has been constructed underneath, a little like skin.

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Exhibition view, « Sculptures »

Tony Cragg

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

Photo: Charles Duprat

Mean Average (2014)

Tony Cragg

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

Photo: Charles Duprat



There's the inside and the outside, a duality that also symbolises our intellect versus our emotions. Already, these two facets of human nature existed in classic Greek mythology. My research for *Mean Average* started off with a small sculpture, that then developed into something incredibly big, almost out of my control... This sculpture also hasn't been burnished, its surface hasn't been polished; we can see black lines on its surface that are traces of welding carried out in several sections. This reflects the idea of moulting and a different approach to structure.

I could also mention *Contradiction*, a bronze from 2014, made from sections of wood and worked into columns placed on top of one another or against one another. These construct a dynamic and a type of ambiguity or duality, through their torsion.

How does this work fit into your work more generally?

It sums up what we've done at the studio in the last twenty months while referring to an old, long history, namely the series that I called *Lost in Thought*. This last series associates figurative elements that, while not exactly being realistic figures, are still a metaphor of what we all do. The last thing that we want to do is to say to just anyone what we think and feel.

How do you start a sculpture series?

It depends, but it might be about a material that I work on without any model, going further and further without stopping. I keep an average of one-third of what I make. So you have to picture my studio filled with piles of materials that I manipulate, then leave aside before getting back to them, very freely.

Some start off from a wooden handmade model, but you can't overlook the fact that everything starts with sketches because initially, all my projects are drawn. Like these elliptical spirals, before they're woven together, then resized on different scales.

So when you start drawing, you don't imagine the final size of the work?

No, I know very little at the outset because I'm not a conceptual artist but someone who believes and thinks through materials. Our imagination is actually rather limited and even if it's possible to sit down and anticipate what might happen, it's far more interesting to draw and observe the production as it happens.

Like when you write and other words and sentences come that change the substance of the text, or even its plan or conclusion. In the end, what you write is much more interesting than what you initially planned and this is one of the processes of creation that corresponds to the way in which I want to work. I think that I know where I'm going, but generally I end up somewhere else!

Is this also why your works seem very fluid and are marked by a certain rhythm?

We're all very influenced by nature, and I try to make works that reproduce a similar effect on me —the view of a landscape, an animal or more globally, the complexity and energy of natural elements. The shapes created by human beings are a little bit boring and when you walk in the street, you see repetitive, utilitarian figures.

Sculpture, if we had to define it, does not have this utility and even comes with an absence of any need to be useful. It should not be related to common denominators or pre-established rules, unlike most of the world that we construct that flows from the production systems around us.

The industrial world produces flat, boring things whereas sculpture allows space to be employed differently. But at the same time, when you've decided to free yourself from these restrictions, taking the example of drawing, there's still a never-ending race involving possible elaborations between two points.

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Runner (2013)

Tony Cragg

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

Photo: Charles Duprat

Contradiction (2014)

Tony Cragg

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

Photo: Charles Duprat





So there's a type of infinity, as much on the leaf, the space, as the universe. When you pound a lump of clay or any type of material, the same thing happens, and your mind starts moving, so the problem is finding links and correlation points. This moment when feeling becomes significant and important is, for me, the basis of creation.

You mentioned, at the start of the interview, working on the underlying structure of works. Can you say a bit more about this?

We see things thanks to the light that hits them and we like to touch materials; but what really interests us is knowing what lies behind the surface. We are already endowed with this fantastic ability to look behind the appearance of faces, and emotional states are also what we can read from sculptural forms. We don't want to just grasp the surface, but what lurks behind, which was something already dealt with in classical sculpture.

Even in Ancient Greece, showing muscles and signs symbolising strength or fertility allowed intrinsic qualities or hidden virtues to be exalted. I'm not an artist who freezes his materials or tries to create beautiful effects. I focus on the internal structure of things, then I look to see what emotional changes I can attain, by simplifying modifying these compositions. This is mainly what my work talks about.

What are your latest works?

I'm continuing my *Early Form* series, whose first work was produced in 1984, but that is constantly evolving. The general idea of this work is that, until the 19th century, sculpture was related to anatomy, and it took considerable time and energy from many sculptors to manage to get out of this approach to the body and its imitation. Artists like Medardo Rosso, with his focus on the surface, Aristide Maillol, when he decided to stop copying figures to introduce the geometry surrounding them, and obviously Auguste Rodin, with his psychological approach to the subject that should no longer resemble what it was, but show a given emotion, were among the first to break with this. Then, in the 20th century, Constantin Brâncuși introduced geometry more openly, namely through Byzantine influences and African art, before constructivism took off.

After this period that only goes back 120 years, we've stopped being limited to copying nature. So what became exciting — and what artists started producing — was what was missing. I myself am much more interested in these "in-between" forms... the ones that don't exist. I wanted to make this "in-between" space visible, with interwoven, morphing constructions, even if in the history of art, the Rocaille period had already exposed slightly crazy organic assemblies...



Hardliner (2013)

Tony Cragg

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

Photo: Charles Duprat