

# Tony Cragg is Happiest in his Studio: “Sculpture is at the cutting edge of material investigation.”

November 1, 2017 Jan Garden Castro <https://blog.sculpture.org/2017/11/01/tony-cragg/>



Thicket, 2016. Rusted steel. No. 20280. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery

Why is Tony Cragg’s art unlike anything anyone has ever seen? What does it “say” to a range of viewers in Teheran, London, Moscow, Berlin, and New York (solo show Marian Goodman, closed October 14, 2017)? Cragg is modest about his global platform, his knighthood, and whatever else takes him out of his studio, where he is bent on his theory of materiality – creating art that enlarges our mindsets by inventing new forms, processes, and uses of materials. In October, 2017, his traveling exhibit opened at Teheran’s Museum of Contemporary Art, one of the largest contemporary museums in the world. In May, 2018, New York visitors and regulars will find Cragg’s monumental sculpture on Park Avenue. How did Cragg’s vision boost his practice from early temporary spaces – one in a Jehovah’s Witness basement — to his present studio complex in a former army base in Wuppertal, Germany? Read on, and also see <http://www.tony-cragg.com/> and [www.mariangoodman.com/artist/tony-cragg](http://www.mariangoodman.com/artist/tony-cragg).

After spending the weekend supervising the crane-hoisting of his megaton works through the fourth story windows of the Marian Goodman Gallery on 57th Street, Cragg graciously gave Sculpture an exclusive interview on the Monday before a preview for his 14th solo New York show’s opening.

Jan Garden Castro: Today is September 11. Should sculpture relate to what’s happening in the world? Your work has become more and more complex...

Tony Cragg: Basically, I’m not sure sculpture is capable of reflecting what’s happening in the world. I’ve never tried to make anything represent something in another material. What I’m interested in is what material does and what material means to us. I started to work as a student just by moving the material, in relation to the thoughts and feelings I had. I didn’t have to make that material represent something. I make works that are entities in themselves but, on the same hand, they should deal with what I think are important issues. Some of those issues are, obviously, to do with the way we make things. Human beings have survival strategies to extend ourselves into the material, and we do that in a very pragmatic way, a very economic way, and in doing that, we end up making a very simple material world. This room would be a good example: flat surfaces, bland, empty, straight-edged, geometric, right angles. Because our production systems are rational and economic, we tend to produce very, very simple forms.



Sail, 2017 Onyx. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.

In the long term, this results in our producing a world impoverished in form. We take down a forest because we need a field. After a few years, we turn the field into a car park. There's a steady process of impoverishing the form in the world. That's not an environmental problem. The problem has more to do with the way we think and the way we converse with each other. We couch our thoughts in certain terms that are grounded in the material world. So if the material world around us is becoming impoverished and weaker in terms of its richness, we are also in a sense destroying the possibilities of our thoughts, our emotions, and our vocabulary. Sculpture is one of the only uses of material that is not utilitarian. It doesn't have to use lowest common denominator criteria for its existence, and it actually produces new forms in material. These new forms give us new thoughts and new emotions to expand our vocabulary. That's one very important function of sculpture, of art in general, which is not an easy or placative thing. It affects the way we feel and the way we think.

Another important function of sculpture is we see the world around us by looking at the surfaces of things: through light that touches the surface and comes into our eye. We only know the surface. But surfaces are, if you like, portals to the material behind. So even when we look at each other, we look at the surface – the light reflected from the surfaces of our faces and bodies, but we want to know what's behind that surface. I believe there is always a psychological pressure to see beyond the surface, and the sculpture I'm interested in says something about the forces behind the surface – the forces that create the forms we see in front of us. And this, in another sense, feeds into another important area: the world is becoming invisible in front of us. We have so much information now about chemistry, wave forms, energy forms, math theorems, cosmic movements, viruses. It is not visual, perceivable information. There is an enormous gap between what we know and what we're basing our lives on and the experience we have of that

materiality. An oak tree 100 years ago looked more or less like the oak tree we see today. We could fill this building with the information about the oak tree today. This is an area that sculpture deals with in a certain manner.

The relationship between mankind and nature is one that you have to include in terms of human existence – how much we still are a part of nature. What we do and what we make could be perceived as being natural if you like, or are we in a post-natural or post-human phase as some suggest?

An important other thing is that sculpture and art in general isn't a science. We live in a world where science dominates our existence, and quite rightly so, because we have a lot of benefits from that. So it uplifts, in a sense, what we're very vain about – our intelligence. We see it as our advantage over other beings. The fact of the matter is, 95%, if not more, of our decisions about what we do – why we get dressed like this, how we're behaving, what we had for breakfast, how you address people, how you position your body – all of these things are based on an emotional situation, not intellectual or rational.



Conversion, 2017. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.

Art feeds into the quality of the decisions we make about what we do, what we say, how we see the world. That chain of things – we act based on what we believe we know. A great part of our lives is based on beliefs. We live in a world which at present is struggling on so many levels with different people with different beliefs. Personally, I'm astounded that any people believe the same things. Beyond the horizon of what we know, we all have to believe these speculations for which we have no images. Historically, a lot of religious art is about finding images for the things beyond knowledge in the area of belief. That's very important.

Also, one can say there's a sense of our limitness – restrictions on us. What we see is a very, very small part of reality. There are many more things that do not exist than things that do exist. Sculpture and art are ways of looking at – trying to touch into some of the things that do not exist. There are other things, but those are some of my ontological concerns about what is essential and important in sculpture-making. Sculpture is at the cutting edge of material investigation. Art may be amusing, it may be strange, but I really feel it has a very serious function as well.

Castro: I'm interested in the range of materials and processes in your present show.

Cragg: These works are highly structured and extremely complicated and require some rigidity of materials. I used bronze is because it's fluid at a relatively low temperature and capable of making polymorphic forms. The steel sculpture I cut and carved initially using polyurethane blocks slightly softer than wood. Then I cast it in steel; this allowed me to make something complicated in its form, lyrical, and nearer to the idea I have of a hedge, which relates to a childhood memory of playing in the hedges at my grandfather's farm. Usually steel sculpture is clumpy, lumpy, and, if you like, masculine.



Upright, 2016. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.

Castro: How did you rust the steel? Did you use salt?

Cragg: Salt burns into the work and pits it badly. Rust is the best protection against rust. It may have spent a day or two in the rain.

Castro: The onyx piece is outstanding.

Cragg: We made that in cooperation with craftsmen in Italy; they seemed to be the only people who had a hand on it. The wooden Atlantis relates to the work I've been making in the last year;

elliptical columns run through the whole of the work. One can argue that it's organic/emotional on one side yet very rational. That reflects two facets of our own human nature from Greek philosophy forward. The Sail, the onyx work, is a version of that; it has its own geometry but the quality of it, I hope, is an emotional one. The onyx adds to that emotional quality, I think.

Castro: Do you have a theme for your upcoming Park Avenue Malls outdoor exhibition?

Cragg: Two works are ready. The first is a stainless steel column, 18 feet high; it's a geometric form that looks organic. It sounds like a contradiction but belongs to a category of works that I call Rational Beings. It demonstrates clearly this balance between geometry and organic form. The next one that is ready is super-complicated and a forerunner to these works. It's called Mean Average. This large work, 18 feet high, consists of many columns. Basically, we're making five large sculptures that develop that theme of rational beings.

Castro: I love the muted hues in this exhibition.

Cragg: It's been great fun to do that. I got tired of the patina. The patina is a limited thing. I've been putting on the color. The aluminum works are large and colorful with several coats; they have materiality and structure.

Castro: And so much energy.

Cragg: They should have. In the center is a rational building block, like an I-beam. These articulations or gesticulations are sprouting out of a geometric form. The turn of events indicates some movement growing out of that.

Castro: How do audiences all over the world differ and receive the work?

Cragg: My activity is studio-based. I'm happiest in my studios in Germany and Sweden. I want to follow the themes and motifs of my work in a concentrated manner. I'm happy when I'm invited to do things. I always feel when it moves toward the door, it's already in a state of decay. I'm happy that these themes and interests are pertinent to people's lives. I'm a radical materialist. We're made of material and surrounded by material. Intelligence and love are sublime, complicated qualities of material. We can be self-reflecting intelligences; we forget that so easily. Everyone's lost in their moribund lives of existence and work and relationships whereas every minute of our lives we should be celebrating the fact that we're all here (laughs).



Manipulations, 2017. Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery.

Scene changes from interview to Craig's comments to Artsy audience in Marian Goodman Gallery. Cragg's comments to the Artsy audience on September 11:

*The hardware with which we change our environment and modify it for our own needs is in our hands. The answers don't all lie in 3-dimensional printing. Quick review of sculpture in the last 150 years: in the 19th Century, figurative sculpture dominated Europe. It took ages for sculpture to get away from the figure. Maillol and Rodin, for totally different reasons, left exact representation of the anatomy. Immediately after that, Brancusi, being fascinated by smooth industrial forms, moved away from the figure; then Duchamp made a big contribution – he opened up everything – every object and every material from gold to blood – the entire vocabulary of materials. Early in the 20th Century, after the pissoir, we had the soup can — bringing all these things that didn't belong in the art world into the art world – changing the context or syntax. When I was a student in 1969, this was a prime motivation: we were still running around looking for new objects and new materials. Sculpture is a dynamic, dramatic discipline ...*

*Today there are new tools you can use. My students make these fantastic awful things. I personally don't generate art using computers for purely selfish reasons – it would destroy my fun, but in the last years, I also use some of these things. Computer programs are useful for enlarging the small things I like to make. The second function I love is putting things inside of things – the skin of the interior. Sail [created first in wood, then in onyx] is based on 68 drawings scanned in elliptical columns put inside each other. The problem is, even if it's a new tool, you still need an artistic impulse. If the artistic idea is there – don't think about the artifact; think about the artistic quality of what is being made. One confusion is that sculpture is not just a craft-based activity and but mainly an artistic activity. It's the human spirit that drives it, not human needs.*

By [Jan Garden Castro](#)

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All quotes from Cragg comments on September 11, 2017 are used with permission. The last comments are from Artsy's OnSite event at the Marian Goodman Gallery, hosted by Matthew

Israel. Thank you to Tony Cragg, Marian Goodman, Linda Pelligrini, Sylvia Rupani-Smith, and [Artsy](#).