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Material world: Tony Cragg at Yorkshire Sculpture Park

By Jane Ure-Smith (March 8, 2017)



One of the most revealing moments in Yorkshire Sculpture Park’s exhilarating Tony Cragg exhibition comes near the end: a magic moment in a film when we see the artist drawing. Taking a blank sheet, he sketches a nose, a mouth and an eye. Then, suddenly, the pencil marks proliferate and the drawing explodes into life as a pair of richly layered, slightly skewed human profiles, one male, one female.

“I have no idea where a drawing might lead,” Cragg tells us. “It’s a journey — an adventure.”

As the highlight of its 40th anniversary year, YSP has mounted what it calls a “thoughtful survey” of Cragg’s oeuvre. With displays in both the indoor galleries and the gardens surrounding them, the show focuses mainly on work made since 1990 — and much thought has indeed been devoted to the siting of the outdoor work. The ragged, toothlike, bronze “Caldera” (2008) stands sentinel at the gate, inviting the visitor to peer through its “roots” to the landscape beyond.

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But the real stroke of genius is the placing of the three pale bronze pillars “Points of View” (2013) on the sloping lawn above the Underground Galleries. These twirling, swirling, tottering columns don’t look like they should stand up at all: on this terrain it’s a miracle.

Cragg calls himself a “radical materialist”. Since the 1990s, when he stopped making sculpture from found objects, he has delighted in materials. The world is a giant storehouse offering endless possibilities to the artist, he says. Over the years, he has created different “families” of work, moving on from one to another with the door still ajar, in case he wants to come back. YSP’s show seeks connections between these different series, delving into the artist’s experimental approach, his relationship with his materials, and the handmade nature of his work. Cragg’s pieces may look like machine-made perfection, but he doesn’t outsource them to fabricators: everything is made in the studio by himself and his team.

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The show also connects Cragg's sculpture to his drawings, many of which are on display. Drawings are often the starting point for pieces, notably drawings of human faces, such as we see in the film. If one worries that finding physical references in an abstract work is a little unsophisticated, it's both a revelation and a comfort to learn that works such as "Versus" (2011), on the terrace, and "Mean Average" (2013), opposite the Underground Galleries, are full of buried faces. Part of a family of sculptures entitled "Rational Beings", they hark back to the idea of portrait busts, and specifically to a futurist sculpture of Mussolini's head from 1933. Cragg has created profiles, then manipulated them beyond recognition, so that only the ghost of their humanness remains.

Working in his teens as a lab technician, Cragg, now 67, began doodling to stave off boredom, then rapidly escaped to the art world, graduating from the Royal College of Art in 1977. He moved immediately to Wuppertal, Germany, and a year later began teaching at nearby Düsseldorf's Kunstakademie — formerly the haunt of Joseph Beuys — eventually becoming its director. He has lived in Germany ever since.

"New Figuration" (1985), the joyous, looped body of an impossibly tall man, is the only sign in this show of the artist who in the 1980s made brightly coloured collages from plastic objects washed up along the Rhine. By the end of that decade Cragg was eager to swap found objects for traditional materials (though the spectre of Henry Moore loomed large, prompting him to cast initially in iron rather than bronze).

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The only other piece in the show made from found objects is “Minster” (1992), five surprisingly delicate spires built from heavy-duty industrial junk. Positioned in the foyer of the Underground Galleries it serves to focus our minds on materials — the steel, bronze, stone, wood (and, over in the Garden Gallery, exquisite glass) to come.

The more you look, the more you see variety. The play of inside-outside is also revealing. The bronze “Runner” (2013), in the formal garden, for example, has a later counterpart indoors, “Runner” (2015), which is bright red, slightly taller and made from wood. Both have huge dynamism, but shoehorning the latter into a gallery seems to compress its energy and add to its power. The indoor works invite you to dwell on the texture of what Cragg might call their “skin”: particularly striking are “Secretions” (1998), a collection of soft-bottle-like shapes, covered entirely in dice, and “Spring” (2016), painstakingly constructed from layered plywood and suggesting a fountain, a fern, a controlled explosion.

That spread of possibilities gives a clue to Cragg’s originality. Driven by delight in his materials, for more than 25 years he has flitted between the abstract and the figurative, creating shapes that speak to our humanity yet lie just out of reach of language. Like his drawing, his sculpture is an adventure.

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