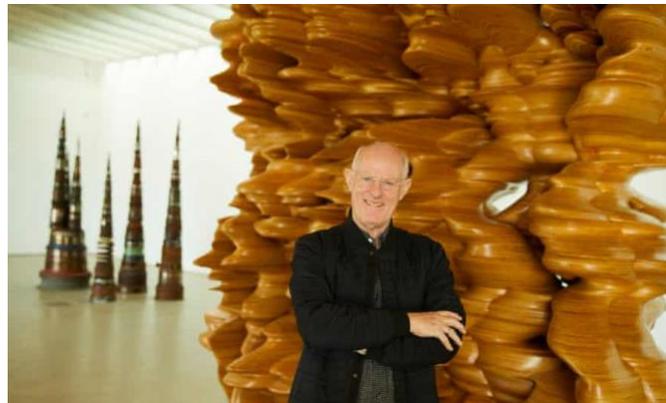


the guardian

Tony Cragg: 'I'm most interested in the emotional qualities of things'

The Liverpool-born sculptor on how nature complicates art, and what he's learned from teaching and living in Europe

by Kate Kellaway (March 5, 2017)



'Sculpture is the opposite of boring and repetitive forms': Tony Cragg with two of his exhibits at Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Photograph by Christopher Thomond for the Observer

You've called your exhibition at Yorkshire Sculpture Park A Rare Category of Objects. Why?

Sculptures are rare. It's not as if you walk down pavements dodging sculptures, do you? Sculpture is a rare use of materials. We're in the industrial north here, where billions of tons of material are being used to make cars, pottery, books, textiles, chemicals – but how many kilos of sculpture are made today? The non-utilitarian use of material is important. Utility means limitation in the forms produced. Expedient industrial production systems produce simple geometries – a world of boring and repetitive forms. Sculpture is the opposite of that.

The park is a tremendous setting for your work...

It is a magnificent institution. I don't know anywhere else like it. This exhibition is extensive – with 14 large sculptures [made within the last 10 years] outside, 35 indoors and 80 works on paper. Today, it is dramatic here in Yorkshire: there is snow on the hills, beautiful blue skies, the sun is shining, and Atlantic clouds are scudding about. Sculpture is not only measuring itself against nature; changes in climate, time of day – all these have an effect. People can make anything, but nature has had a long time to make things complicated. If you live in nature, you have a richer vocabulary of forms in your mind.

Could you compare two works from the show – one old, one new?

Minster (1990) is stacked circular objects that go three metres high, with little pinnacles. The circles used to be stacked straight, but at some point I had to fix the piece for security reasons, and realised gravity was no longer the glue. There are weldings and rods inside the structure, and the geometries took off into space. A larger work, *Points of View* (2013), is three – seven metres tall – columns. These are stacked, horizontal ellipses. Along their tangents are drawings. There is more than 20 years between these pieces, but what they share is a geometry that takes on an emotional quality.

Am I right in thinking that, as a little boy, you wanted to be a scientist – and does your life as a sculptor resemble a life in science?

Actually, as a small boy, I wanted to work on my grandfather's farm. I was always interested in geology. As a seven-year-old, I found a fossil that fascinated me – I still have it. My brother and I moved to a council estate in Welwyn Garden City and were given a job, by Dad, to make a path with pebbles. We found an amazing heart-shaped, flint echinoid. We thought it must have fallen from outer space. I was never a scientist, although my father was an electrical engineer who worked on Concorde. When I left school, I worked as a lowly assistant in an establishment researching rubber. Art is different from science. Science influences our lives, dictates the forms of materials around us. But science means nothing without art. Art gives everything meaning and value.

You once said: “You only learn about art by making it” ...

People who write will know what this means. They might think, “I’ll change that word”, or “this needs a new ending” and, eventually, they’ll write something more powerful than their original thought. If you make something with your hands, every change in line, volume, surface, silhouette, gives you a different thought or emotion. After several moves, you’re in unknown territory. Although I change material with my hands, the material itself changes my mind. It is a dialogue in which the material always has the last word.

What is most important in teaching art?

I taught at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf from 1978. The level of engagement is important. I tried to get people to find out what they really had to do. I’m glad I studied in the 60s, when you went to art school for idealistic reasons. Art has been such an enormous success over the last 30 or 40 years that today’s students, instead of following a personal path, often strategise about the best way to become successful.

What was the turning point in your career?

I was at the Royal College in 1977 and invited to exhibit in the Queen’s Jubilee exhibition. I was over the moon. I’ve had a lucky life. I pinch myself regularly. But every time a work turns out that I feel excited about, that’s the real reward.

How important are your titles – *Sinbad, Manipulation, Can-Can...*?

They're not frivolous – although my assistant will sometimes say of a piece, “That ugly thing in the corner” – and that's what we'll call it.



Migrant, by Tony Cragg.
Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

In conversation at the American Academy in Berlin, you said everything in our heads comes from the outside world. Is there any spiritual element in your work?

This is what philosophers like Heidegger talk about. Everything is material. But the material is so complicated. We've no idea what absolute reality looks like. I find that sublime and uplifting. It has a spiritual quality. I'm most interested in the emotional qualities of things. Every emotion has a material basis – run by hormones and nerves. But isn't that magnificent?

You are based in Wuppertal in Germany – how did that come about?

I met my first wife studying at the Royal College in London. She was from Wuppertal. I moved there with the idea of staying a year. We had a couple of kids, a divorce and I married again. I have four kids and never thought of leaving them. But I'm British, and so is my sense of humour. I'm not a nationalist. Working in France, in 1974, opened my eyes. I come from a family that did not have much opportunity to travel. I found the French dress well, have nice family relationships, eat well... There's a hell of a lot to learn from other people. When I first went to Germany, my colleagues were people like Joseph Beuys and Gerhard Richter – we had great conversations, with much existential bantering, over lunch.

Drawing remains essential to you – why?

There are endless ways of joining two spots on paper. Once you move the pencil, it becomes the most complicated, fantastic journey. It's like modelling with clay where you could – if you were God or good enough – make limitless forms.

M A R I A N G O O D M A N G A L L E R Y

You talk about art as a defence against mediocrity?

We use materials to impoverish form. We cut down a forest, make it into a field and, after a while, a car park. We screw up landscapes – everything has been changed by us. But sculpture? Art takes on space, makes new forms, ideas, emotions, languages, freedom. An increasing number of people have a better quality of life because art is in their life. Just think about that.

A Rare Category of Objects is now at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, until 3 September 2017.