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## *Thinking About Things We Can't See*

by Jan Garden Castro (November 2012)

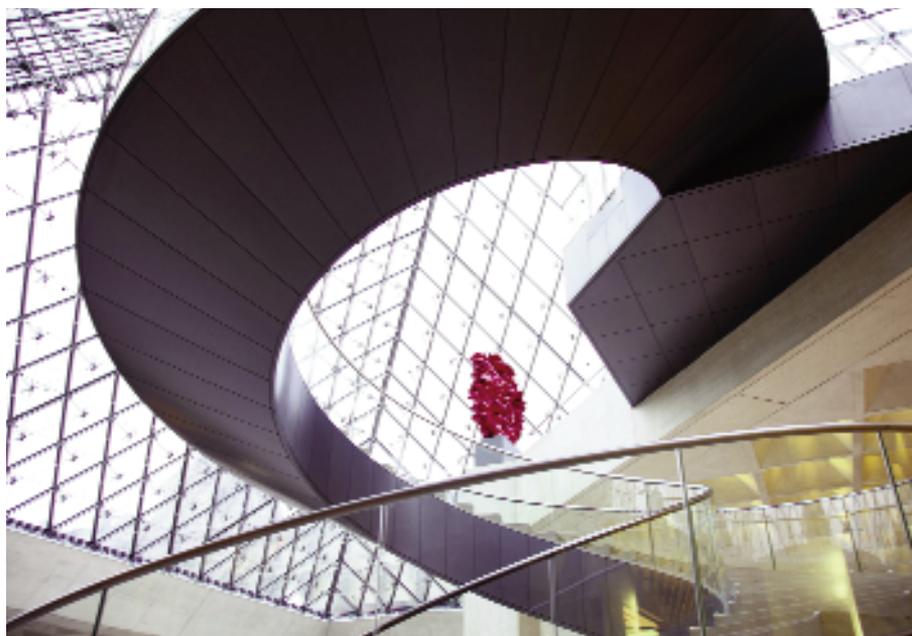


Photo by Cathy Carver. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, NY.

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# Thinking About Things We Can't See



A Conversation with

## Tony Cragg

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Opposite: *Lost in Thought*, 2011. Wood, 124.5 x 45.25 x 46.5 in. This page: *Versus*, 2010. Wood, 280 x 295 x 100 cm. View of work installed at the Louvre, Paris.

From plastic bits of detritus orchestrated into almost-geometric form to meticulously choreographed, shifting compositions rendered in wood and bronze, Tony Cragg has turned sculpture on its ear. His work has pushed the medium in new directions, and his experiments with materials continue to evolve, expanding notions of sculpture's unseen, inner energies and values. The linear dimensions inside a sculpture, in its silhouette and shadows, play an increasingly significant part in his explorations. Works like the "Figures of Thought" series use plywood layers to create lines that disappear into the interior of each piece. Cragg's recent show at Marian Goodman in New York featured large to monumental shapes that had to be hoisted in through a fourth-floor window. Four more pieces—one much too tall for the gallery—graced the atrium at 590 Madison Avenue.

**Jan Garden Castro:** *How does a piece like Lost in Thought evolve? What is the beginning of the process?*

**Tony Cragg:** In 2006–07, I made a series of works that were more or less columns. They were elliptical in cross-section, the ellipse being a useful formal device because it gives you two axes, and I put different drawings along the tangents of the axes. That enabled a quite radical change of view as you walked around the sculpture, more or less like Rodin's comment: "Sculpture is silhouette, silhouette, silhouette," changing from things that one recognizes or might consider as profiles, then disappearing into abstract sculptural volumes that one has to read for oneself.

One of those columns, though maybe more complicated, is at the center of *Lost in Thought*. In a sense, there is a figurative base to the sculpture. You very rarely see a human figure in its entirety, and you never experience a candid or open way to read what people are thinking or feeling. We have learned so many socially accepted conventions and mannerisms—whatever happens, nobody finds out what we're really thinking or feeling. *Lost in Thought* is partly about the strategies that we hide behind and use to represent ourselves.

I began with a central figure in wood—loosely fixed together, but in a way that didn't involve any jointing. Once I'd established how the outer shells or parts should be, I wanted to have a flowing, complete figure that had a certain integrity, without strange foreign parts. It's quite a complicated work because any changes that I make—even small ones—require the whole sculpture to be taken apart into its constituent parts from the top to the bottom. The whole thing is an enjoyable but taxing process of looking at it, assessing it, finding out what I feel about it, thinking about what I'm actually seeing, what my ideas about it are, and, based on those decisions, making the next step. It's a long chain of decisions. There is a starting point in my mind, but it's not where I'm going to end up. Making the sculpture is more exciting and intelligent than trying to figure out what it's going to look like. In doing it, it leads me on—it's a dialogue with the material.

**JGC:** *How is it constructed?*

**TC:** The layers are about an inch thick but made so that they are sculpturally integral to the work. These interconnections have a point. The work is, in a sense, being constructed out of many layers of wood into one solid thing. During the making, they are all numbered. It's been taken apart dozens of times. After the final decision, it has to be taken apart and then glued and screwed together in a consecutive sequence. We've developed great tools to get around and into a piece.

**JGC:** *Such as?*

**TC:** There's a company called Würt. They're always helping us find new solutions. They have developed



Above: *Elbow*, 2011. Wood, 300 x 102 x 398 cm. Below: *Red Figure*, 2011. Wood, 236 x 240 x 68 cm. View of work installed at the Louvre.



TOP: JOHN BERENS, COURTESY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NY. / BOTTOM: CHARLES DUPRAT, COURTESY MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY, NY.



**Manipulation, 2008. Bronze, 250 x 220 x 220 cm. View of work installed at the Louvre.**

grinders and cutters and saws on long arms that go around corners if you want to use them that way.

**JGC:** *How many versions of Lost in Thought are there?*

**TC:** At this point, there are four successive versions, each one getting larger. The first was for myself. Then I made one that I was very happy with in Berlin. There are two in New York, which are tower-like, and I'm in the middle of trying to make two others that extend almost horizontally.

**JGC:** *Could you talk about your early work from the '70s using crushed rubble and stacks of objects?*

**TC:** I think that any sculptor's life has two histories. One is the time that you're born into and you work into, and the other is one's own personal history. They're obviously interconnected. In the late '60s, I went to art school in Britain thinking I was going to paint, but I found that I was more interested in drawing and making things. One innovation from the time particularly interested me, and that was making direct, primary contact with the material—getting a piece of string and tying knots in it, digging a hole in the ground, piling up earth, stacking materials, finding materials, categorizing materials, using materials that nobody else had thought of using. There was the sense that you could make something interesting with the materials of urban and industrial reality. I was only 20 years old, but those works were very, very important to me. As a student, I was influenced, ironically perhaps, by Arte Povera, Minimalism, and conceptual art.

At some point, I realized that all of this belonged to another generation and it wasn't my direction. I started to break out of process-making, making things that had images in them and working with discarded material that had neither the grace of nature nor of use. I recuperated material to make things that were somewhat geometric; but because of the material, it was impossible to make them perfect. Stacking material up into a cube that was never going

to be a cube was a self-defeating thing. Everyone thought it was an ironic use of plastic; actually, plastic's a beautiful, remarkable material. Britain in the 1950s was a dour place—everything was broken and rusting. A plastic toy looked remarkably fresh, bright, and colorful; it didn't break down or rust like traditional toys. Even a plastic bucket looked like something from outer space. I grew up in that time, and it stuck with me for a bit. It wasn't meant at all ironically.

After a while, I didn't feel that I had to go on making material gestures. I wanted to have just primary steps—*particular* things spread around and arranged, then layering up, making geological strata, layers of skin, like molecules, grains of sand. Then, having made things that started as skin—a two-dimensional surface spreading out—I ended up with a bubble—a thing that joins up on itself, making a vessel. By the early '80s, vessels as objects were very important for me. My works always had an interior and an exterior, though maybe something different happens on the inside and the outside. I went on to articulate those neutral forms in a series called "Early Forms," which I started in 1984. It was a simple concept—an object moving in space and morphing into another form. It's about considering, not the things we can see, but all the things we can't see. Our industrial systems don't allow us to do that.

Those works are still going on. I thought it would be a simple thing, then I realized that if you move something in a curve, it isn't too transparent, and if



Left: *Accurate Figure*, 2010. Bronze, 188 x 76 x 81 cm. Above: 2 views of *Red Figure*, 2008. Bronze, 207.96 x 209.86 x 41.91 cm.

you throw a bubble around, then turn and twist, suddenly you're cutting through the same reality twice. It was quite difficult to realize that sculpturally. I ended up making works that you couldn't see inside; the surface was hermetic. So, I started making works with holes in them called *Envelope* or *Thin Skins*. I realized that bronze is a kind of a blind—a substitute for another material. You see it and think, "That's a bone" or "That's a figure." Then you bang on it, and it rings hollow—I won't say fake. It still has a reference to the early works in its truthfulness: you can see the inside and the outside and the entry from the outside—the moment of going into the sculpture. That interested me and continues to interest me.

With *Lost in Thought*, the stratification is still there, the desire to lead into the

volumes. When we walk through the world, I think there's a force in our minds. The light that comes into our eyes is always rebounding off the surface of the world around us. There is a mental pressure of some kind that we would like to see beyond. Have you ever seen how kids have to find their balance when they start to walk? Because they're not sure, they walk like we walk on ice. They touch things to see if their hands will go into them. We would like to know what's underneath the surface we're looking at. It may sound a bit cheeky, but I think it's important. It's a keyhole to thinking about the structure of materials, to thinking about the eternal problem of sculpture: Why does the surface look like that? What internal forces are behind it? When you see a Roman or Greek figure with its bulging muscles and veins, it shows that the material is supported with some energy. The form gives the impression that there's a living force under the skin of the stone—it's the same in Henry Moore—the bulges are a sign of vitality, a sign of human life. Things are erect because the material cooks up an energy. That's how everything works. If you lay down on the floor, first of all, you're a nuisance, but after a while, if you don't show any energy, you will turn into dust and disappear into the surface. Ultimately, the internal structure of the material gives it its form.

**JGC:** *In relation to energy, how did you decide what to show at the Louvre?*

**TC:** The Louvre is full of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century marble masterpieces. You can read each form as a story, but a figure extending an arm or carrying a spear also implies the

*Runner*, 2011. Bronze, 156 x 107.3 x 80 cm.

enormous pressure on this shoulder over the centuries. The piece is demonstrating a vital force. I don't make figurative sculpture, but by stacking something up, you invest the stack with potential energy. I thought it might be interesting to show *Elbow*, which hangs out there; that's his pose for, as far as I'm concerned, eternity. All of the works for the Louvre were chosen for that purpose; the very big *Versus* also derives from elliptical figures—lots and lots of columns placed inside each other. In a similar way, we can think of the sun as a three-dimensional volume in space by grace of its internal explosions. It's cooking, making itself and giving itself its form. My hands have their shape because every cell in my body is working to give them that shape. If you change the shape of the cells, you get a hybrid, a different being. The Louvre works are all related to that idea. *Versus* is an object that is boiling; *Elbow* is part of the inside of that sculpture, as are *Runner* and *Red Figure*. Other works—such as *Manipulation*, which is a bronze molded negatively—show that every point on a surface is a value. I'm interested in thinking about—and varying—the internal structure of a thing in the knowledge that this will change the outside. That's the principle of my work. For the best chess players, after you've made a chain of decisions, you're a long way from your original intention. In art, you've got something you've never seen before. That's what I enjoy—it's a great journey.

**JGC:** *What about the role of science? Some of your works are named after cells, and I know that you have worked in research.*

**TC:** I always say that when I was 19, I worked in a biochemistry laboratory, but that doesn't make me a scientist. I was a lowly lab assistant. Science is primarily a great observation system. Some people don't take the time to find out how a light switch works, how the world functions on a simple level. I'm not interested in making art out of science—it always looks appalling, pious, and pretentious. But I think that art gives science value and makes sense of it. Art can give meaning and value to the reality around us, maybe even to our lives.



**JGC:** *You have been quoted as saying that all artifacts are extensions of ourselves.*

**TC:** They certainly are. That's because in the household of nature, we're a body living in an existential framework. Every organism exists in a biological niche. Most simple organisms can't control their environment; they have no conscience about it. We are different. We're aware of all these things, so there has to be some mitigation between the landscape and our body, the two big categories. Just standing or sitting on the naked earth, we've found, is not a good way to survive. It's much better to have a pair of shoes or something to sit on. Our predicate for survival is to use extensions of the material world around us—from picking up a rock to driving a Mercedes down Madison Avenue.

**JGC:** *I overheard a collector talking about seeing phallic imagery in your work. There are intimacies in your sculptures that turn objects into subjects with which people interact.*

**TC:** That has to do with the making process. When I talk about my emotional responses to a form, I never think about anybody else. The fundamental difference between art and design is that a designer always has to think about recipients and does what he can to engage them. With artists, on the other hand, the only person in the room is the artist himself, and what happens later is another story. The minute that the artist starts to



*Mixed Feelings*, 2010. Cast iron, 62 x 63 x 50 cm. View of work installed at the Louvre.

think about the recipient, he's in trouble. Art—sculpture—is extraordinary. Everything else is ordinary. Sculpture is a very rare, human use of material in a very small category of objects. It's the only one that doesn't have a utilitarian-backed function. It can be incredibly, frighteningly free to do anything. Of course, we have to learn to think with it. It's like listening to some weird music that you've never heard before—you've got to pay attention to find the internal structures. In the end, you look at it and understand the structure. I do it for my own enjoyment. I'm assuming that gets written into the material in the same way that a poet writes a poem and knows that of the people who read it, somebody will understand what he's talking about, even if it's not using the standards of utilitarian language.

**JGC:** *As the director of the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, what are your goals for students?*

**TC:** Students have some advantages and some disadvantages. Their great advantage is that they're young, and their great disadvantage is that they're young. I was lucky; when I went to art school, there was no media coverage of contemporary art, fewer journals, museums, and curators. The art world was very, very small. In the last 50 years, it's gotten out of hand, with almost more curators than artists. Today it is easier for artists to do big projects and use museum facilities, but it is not easier to be an art student. Students have all of this stuff around them. Their tendency is *not* to look at botany or zoology, at complicated numbers or social structures—to observe something. That's what I think is important: observe something, get information about it, respond

to it emotionally, and then find a way of interpreting your response into the material. All of that takes a lot of time.

There's a tendency for young artists to be too influenced by the over-commercialization of the art world. When they go into museums, they're confronted by a cast of museum curators and critics. You worry about students seeing what's in the galleries and being too heavily influenced by the enormous attention paid to the art world. They should do something for themselves. For that, they don't need dogmas and indications of *how* to do it; they need time, freedom, encouragement, and help when there are material and formal concerns. That's all you can do. In the end, you can't teach art. They have to do that themselves.

**JGC:** *Some people have compared your work to that of Boccioni and Noguchi.*

**TC:** I don't mind that, but I don't think about other artists. Sculpture has developed



*Group*, 2011. Cast iron, 65 x 56 x 49 cm.

in a dynamic manner over the last 100 years, even over the last 50 years. It has changed from being a power symbol made to represent human beings in their glory into a basic study of the material world. Unlike scientists though, we don't try to find out how the whole thing works. Artists give meaning and value to the material world. Everybody makes their contribution. There's not a sculptor I know whose work is not valid and part of the whole development. In a city like New York, millions of tons of something are made in a day — from pizzas to paper to books. Probably just a few pounds of sculpture get made. It's a rare human activity in the whole picture of human existence.

**JGC:** *I've heard people say that your works create music. Do you think that your work has a synaesthetic effect, triggering senses other than the visual?*

**TC:** That's an interesting question. In music, we've learned to hear structures, and we know how to vary elements like pitch and harmony. With this structure, you compose something in the air. It's abstract by nature. As complicated as the world of sound is, the world of vision is even more so. We experience vision as overwhelming and, at times, chaotic. In fact, stare at it long enough, and you'll find that it has the same repetitive structures that can be varied and used in different ways to produce something almost musical. It's like changing the cells of an organism — you'll have a different organism at the end because the interior structure determines the outside result. As soon as I change the internal, formal construction that I'm using from an ellipse to a circle or a compound form, then the outside form automatically changes. You can change the material to have a resonant feeling. I'm not saying it's music, yet you can almost feel the composition coming out of it. In the future, I believe we'll be able to see into things, to develop a vision to see the material world in a different way.

We simplify the world so terribly. One square meter of forest is as complicated as the whole of New York. Nature has had millions of years to make complicated structures. We've been at it for only a short period of time, and the world is hungry for simple solutions, so that's what we get. Slowly, we're accumulating more knowledge and trying more variations. We've taken this planet over now. We will compose the reality of the future, and we have to be very intelligent about it. Somebody has to be responsible for our fate.

*Art historian Jan Garden Castro is a Contributing Editor for Sculpture.*