

The  
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*Herr Cragg, Der sculptor boss*

**Tony Cragg, a British sculptor, enjoys working in a region committed to contemporary art**

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“The British celebrate one or two flagship artists and otherwise treat contemporary art as a silly joke, whereas the Germans are better informed and more involved,” explains Tony Cragg, a British sculptor, who has lived in Germany since 1977. He is the director of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, a prestigious arts academy, but his studio is a half-hour away in Wuppertal, his first wife's hometown. Mr Cragg has always been impressed by the status of art in the region. North Rhine-Westphalia has a huge number of art clubs, halls, houses and museums (known as Kunstvereine, Kunsthallen, Kunsthäuser and Kunstmuseen). “After World War II, contemporary art was seen as a way of regenerating German society,” says the sculptor, who speaks English with the cadence of a native German speaker. “They were looking for a new perspective and artists gave it to them.”

Mr Cragg's studio was built in the 1920s as a garage for repairing tanks and other military vehicles. Renovated eight years ago by Rudolf Hoppe, a local architect, the studio includes several glorious rooms with a 22-foot-high ceiling and a wall of windows. It also comprises some well-dressed office spaces and a few grim industrial workshops containing large-scale equipment and air-filtration systems for the heavier side of manufacturing sculptures. Echoing the sculptor's appetite for experimenting with materials, the building is made from an eclectic range of stone, wood, steel and glass.

Inside the largest room is a full-scale polystyrene maquette for a complicated sculpture titled “Hedges”, a work that reveals the artist's fascination with the relationship between natural and man-made forms. Several anthropomorphic sculptures stand proudly in a corner, betraying what Mr Cragg calls his “figurative obsessions”. One of these is “Luke”, a brown wooden sculpture destined for the Liverpool Biennial (which opens on September 18th). The artist has made diverse series but he is perhaps best known for the sculptures that evoke facial silhouettes that grimace then melt away. “Art is a material extension of yourself,” declares Mr Cragg with a blue-eyed glint through his rimless glasses. “Whatever your inadequacies, you don't have to tell anyone because you are working on filling them in.”

Mr Cragg makes between three and five unique versions of each sculpture, often differentiating them by their materials. For instance, one work might be made in fibreglass, bronze and stainless steel. Each version feels quite distinct as a result. “Truth to materials” was once a slogan in the art world. Nowadays, he sees the idea as “fogeish” with “slushy-romantic” associations. “Materials won't do what they don't want to do,” he says. “Art is a good way of giving material meaning and value.”

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As Mr Cragg gives a tour of the studio, he notices two of his craftsmen lying on lounge chairs outside in the sun. “Shall I bring you a cocktail?” he hollers. The men laugh. His staff consists of some 20 full-time workers—five administrative assistants and 15 skilled tradesmen, including carpenters, industrial model-makers and ceramists. Mr Cragg concocts the sculptures through drawings and his staff help transform them into three-dimensional objects. “What we do here is very hard work,” he explains. “Tough, loud, dirty work. They can take a break whenever they want.” On the wall of the largest studio hangs a large flat-screen television, installed during the European Cup final two years ago. His international staff likes to bet on the games. The lingua franca of the studio is German; even the Brit converses with the Irishman in Deutsch.

While the men in the studio do most of the heavy physical labour, Mr Cragg tends to send in a woman to complete the job. “The women have patience and determination,” he explains. “Christina, for example, is really great at finishing.” But once polished, many works go into a purgatory of permanent storage. “Most of what you do isn't going to be good,” he explains. “If you are experimenting, you need to go down many paths. And, if the work's not very good, it's important not to exhibit it!”

Mr Cragg's studio is strictly top down. “I wouldn't know what to collaborate on,” he explains. His “left-hand man” is John McCormack. For 16 years Mr McCormack has liaised with the foundries that make the bronze and stainless-steel works and overseen installation in museums and galleries around the world. “I'd have a high regard for his opinion, but I don't want to know it because I don't want to be interfered with on that level,” admits Mr Cragg. “I just want to get on with following my own thoughts.” His staff seems content with this. When asked to name the best thing about working for Mr Cragg, one of the carpenters says in broken English, “We make stuff that no one else can make—the stuff that Tony has growing in his head.” Mr Cragg is adamant that his studio is not a factory. His staff could be making something entirely different in three months. “They have to be adventurers,” he says. “We don't design things!” He produces about a dozen new works a year, worked up from pencil drawings and with minimal help from computer software. “We do as much as we can by hand.” The studio uses only “sensible tools” such as CorelDRAW to plot out the templates for manufacturing the work.

Mr Cragg's dealers, which include Lisson Gallery in London, Marian Goodman in New York, Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf and Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris, handle almost all of his sales. Mr Cragg wouldn't want to be an artist-entrepreneur. “I just make the work and try to concentrate on my job,” he says. He is, however, a curator of his own 30-acre sculpture park in the mature Waldfrieden forest. The park includes an elegant glass exhibition hall, purpose-built for sculpture, and a café called Podest (the Pedestal).

Teaching is good for escaping the problems of the studio. “The opportunity to discuss the students' work clarifies my own,” says Mr Cragg. The sculptor has taught at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie for 30 years and became its director in 2009. But all this time among nascent artists moves him to lament that too many young people are involved in the game of making art about art. “An artist has to be genuinely interested in something other than art,” he says. “It could be botany or complicated numbers or social patterns.” Mr Cragg is not a fan of quick shock tactics or cheap media strategies. “The art that I love—whether it's by Barnett Newman or Tomma Abts—is not shocking,” explains Mr Cragg. “It's art that you want to be involved in, that gives you an emotional experience.”

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