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# Inventing a 'new visual language'

As the Frieze Art Fair  
pushes boundaries in  
London, artists worldwide  
experiment with newer genres  
and transform old ones.

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Tony Cragg's latest show  
demonstrates how much  
sculpture has changed

RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

"We have gone beyond the stage where we can just represent things in sculpture. We have to find new means of expression, a new visual language," said Tony Cragg, as he made the final adjustments to his latest exhibition at the Ca' Pesaro International Gallery of Modern Art on the Grand Canal here.

"During the last hundred years sculpture has been utterly transformed," added Mr. Cragg, a British artist known for his adventurous use of both natural and man-made materials. "It has developed from being almost entirely figurative into a fundamental study of the material world. Sculpture has discovered so many new materials, so many new themes."

The setting for Mr. Cragg's show of more than 30 sculptures in bronze, steel,

wood, stone, glass and plastics and a score of drawings and watercolors from the 1980s to the present day seems custom-made to drive home his point.

At one end of the second-floor hall of Ca' Pesaro, one of the grandest baroque palazzos in the city, a bronze cast of Auguste Rodin's "The Thinker" gravely presides over the scene, while at the other end stands a plaster cast of the French sculptor's "The Burghers of Calais." The walls are adorned with "La Vita Humana" (1907), Giulio Aristide Sartorio's huge Symbolist murals.

In the center of the hall are five of Mr. Cragg's pieces, which in this context look as though they come not so much from another era as another planet.

There are the twin twisting pillars of "Hollow Columns" and striking, bright scarlet zigzag form of "Red Figure"

(both from 2008). Made of thousands of plastic playing-dice, "Secretion" (1995) is an intriguing mass of undulating, serpentine folds, topped with a bowling-pin-like head reminiscent of those of the metaphysical painter Giorgio De Chirico's faceless mannequins. And Bosch meets the sci-fi imagery of the comics and movies of the 1950s in a pair of bulbous, mottled fiberglass compositions: "Distant Cousin" (2003), a mutant life-form; and "Species" (2004), which has the arresting appearance of a winged set of male genitals that has fallen to earth.

Born in Liverpool in 1949, Tony Cragg's first job was as an apprentice at the laboratory of the National Rubber Producers Research Association. When he took up drawing as a diver-

sion, a girlfriend suggested he take time out to do an art course and he soon discovered his vocation as a sculptor. Another girlfriend was responsible for the second great turning point in his life. She was German, and when she went to Wuppertal to finish her studies in 1977, Mr. Cragg followed his wife-to-be. He has lived there ever since.

“When I first went there I was impressed with how seriously the Germans took contemporary art,” he said. “It was a means of breaking with the past and rebuilding the nation’s identity.”

More than 30 years later, Mr. Cragg still has his studio in Wuppertal, where he has created a woodland sculpture park containing 20 of his large works. Having taught regularly at the Kunstakademie in nearby Düsseldorf, in 2009 he was appointed its director. (He now also has a studio on the Swedish island of Tjörn.)

Mr. Cragg first began to exhibit in London, in 1978. His early works were installations made of found materials, like the plastic detritus of domestic goods. “African Cultural Myth” (1994), a striking profile outline of an African woman, composed of these bits and pieces applied to a white wall is a later example of this technique and is on show here.

But in the early ’80s Mr. Cragg more or less abandoned installation art and retired to his studio with the aim of simply “making things.” This was the beginning of his engagement with a wide range of materials, and his constant experimentation with their properties and possibilities has been a hallmark of his career.

His subsequent work in the studio has been, in his words, “based on ideas, feelings, emotions, moods and gestures. A mixture of method and madness. Most of the time I admit I do not know who is leading, me or the sculpture.”

The 1980s was a period when a number of artists had started to design works and rather than making them themselves were having them made by craftsmen or using industrial processes. Mr. Cragg tried this with a couple of pieces, but says he was dissatisfied because he “was not there when the work was created.” Since then he has remained very much hands-on. And even though the sheer number and scale of many of his projects necessitates a

team of assistants, he is closely engaged in every stage of the work.

“If you are not involved in making the sculpture yourself, you cannot feel and think your way through the materials,” he said.

Mr. Cragg has often said that he is not religious, but he seems to have a reverential, almost animistic attitude to the materials he employs. At the heart of his idiosyncratic aesthetic is the desire to reveal the potential of seemingly inert materials to take on a dynamic life of their own, to uncover a kind of unseen, deeper reality contained within them.

His remarkable ability to lend a sense of movement to the materials — as though they are metamorphosing, growing, even gyrating before the viewer’s eyes — is evidenced here by works such as “Hollow Columns” (2006), “Good Face” and “Chain of Events” (both 2007). In the case of “Bent of Mind” (2009), the highly polished, rippling stainless-steel surface of the sculpture reflects and distorts the images of everything around it, seeming to draw the viewer into the vortex.

The constant synthesizing of the figurative and the abstract is a key characteristic of the meta-world of Mr. Cragg’s sculpture. His aim, as stated in a kind of personal manifesto in 1985, is “the creation of objects and images that don’t exist in the natural or functional world but that are able to reflect and transmit information and sensations about the world and its very existence.”

“Red Figure” (2008) and “Elbow” (2010), for example, bring to mind layers of strata in weird geological formations and evoke surreal, dreamlike landscapes, while “Portrait” (2008) and “Woman’s Head” (2007) are formed of multiple, superimposed human profiles, which shift, rearrange and reconstitute themselves as the viewer circles the sculpture.

A playful reference to the theoretical underpinning of Mr. Cragg’s enterprise can perhaps be found in the last room of the show in “Sensory Devices” (2009), a pair of miniature listening stations with satellite dishes, cast in clear glass.

Also made of glass is the most elaborate installation in the exhibition, “Eroded Landscape” (1998). This multi-storied stack of greenish, sand-

blasted glass vases, jugs, bottles, drinking glasses and ornaments has a calm, crystalline monumentality that contrasts with the restless energy of many of Mr. Cragg’s other productions.

The distinctive drawings and watercolors on display are not literal project designs or obviously directly related to the works on show, but are rather free-ranging imaginative exercises in composition and investigations of volumes and patterns in three-dimensional space.

In this sense, although they are more private exercises, these works on paper still share the aims of Mr. Cragg’s sculptures, which he describes as “eminently useless” but not ultimately lacking in significance.

“The difference between art and design is that design has an intended recipient,” he said. “Sculpture takes the liberty of having no specific destination.”

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**Tony Cragg in 4D: From Flux to Stability.**  
Ca’ Pesaro International Gallery of Modern Art, Venice. *Until Jan. 9.* Kunst Meran, Meran, South Tirol. *Feb. 4 - May 29.*

**“If you are not involved in making the sculpture yourself, you cannot feel and think your way through the materials.”**



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The artist Tony Cragg says his works are “based on ideas, feelings, emotions, moods and gestures.” Far left, “Red Figure”; left, “Eroded Landscape”; and above, “Good Face,” an example of how Mr. Cragg lends a sense of movement to solid structures. The fiberglass composition “Distant Cousin,” below, resembles a mutant life-form.