

## Presenting: Tony Cragg, Sculptor

### Creator of two works in the new sculpture garden: Sinbad and The Runner

#### Biography

Tony Cragg was born in Liverpool, England in 1949. As a boy, he worked on his grandfather's farm where he discovered the fossil remains of a prehistoric sea animal. This fascinated him and was the spark for his interest in fossils and geology.

As a young man he worked for a short period as a laboratory technician at a Natural Rubber Research Assoc. From this he gained a familiarity with common objects used in science exploration. These will show up later in his work.

His real love was art and particularly sculpture. He attended Gloucestershire College of Art then earned a BA from Wimbledon College of Art and a MA from the Royal College of Art. In the late 1970's he moved to Wuppertal, Germany where he still lives and has his studio and sculpture garden.

He has had major exhibitions at:

The Tate, Liverpool – 2000

The Louvre – 2011

The Hermitage in St. Petersburg – 2016

He represented Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1988 and was awarded the Turner Prize for modern sculpture by the Tate in the same year.

His works are held by such important museums as MOMA, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and, of course, NOMA.

#### Philosophy of Art, Sculpture, Materiality

Emphatically, he states that sculpture and art in general is not a science. In his opinion, science dominates our existence in terms of everyday living – the stuff we use. But he claims that 95% of our decisions – how we dress, behave, eat – are based on emotional situations and not rational decisions. Art feeds into the quality of the decisions about what we do, say and view the world. Art may sometimes be amazing and strange but it serves a very serious function. When asked where his ideas come from, he answered: "I don't think ideas are useful in making art." But certain themes have fascinated him since childhood: natural history, rocks, fossils, geology, landscapes.

There is a certain parallel here with Barbara Hepworth, the sculptor of River Forms, who was also inspired by landscapes. Her sculpture is described as creating a landscape within the object that invites you to imagine yourself inside.

Cragg describes himself as an "absolute materialist". For him, material is exciting and sublime. His choice of material determines the form – different materials give different emotional experiences. As opposed to the boring, repetitive, inferior shapes of the built world, he wants to make forms that are crazy, fantasy, playful.

Quote from Cragg: "Humans have a pragmatic, economic simple way of transforming the physical world: flat surfaces, empty spaces, straight edges, right angles. Taken together this produces an impoverished world. If the material world is impoverished, we are destroying the

possibilities of our experiences and vocabularies. We screw up the landscape! Everything is changed by us. Sculpture produces forms that are not utilitarian. It enriches our thoughts and expands our vocabulary. It affects the way we feel and think. That is ART.”

#### Formative Stage of his career as a sculptor

The process of creating his sculptures has always started with an artist’s sketch. Some of these works on paper were exhibited at the Malmö kunsthall (art exhibition hall) in Sweden. These sketches reveal how his sculptures arose not just from the materials used, but by the planning and experimentation of the artist.

Two Slides of artist sketches: These sketches will appear and reappear in Cragg’s later series of works entitled “Rational Beings.” The Runner at NOMA is a member of this series.

Slide of Lab Glassware: Literally drawing from his experience as a lab technician, Cragg elevates the humble vessels used in routine lab work into a formal study in black and white. These vessels will also appear in another later series entitled “Early Forms.” Sinbad is a member of that series.

Slide of found plastic objects: Some of his earliest exhibition pieces were really quirky installations using assorted colored found objects to create a larger image. He used both the floor and the wall to display these objects arranged sometimes by color and sometimes by shape.

Slide of Britain from the north: The best known of these installations was entitled Britain Seen from the North which depicts the island of Great Britain oriented sideways with a cartoon of Cragg looking onward from the north. This was a rare example of his trying to make a political statement regarding the government at the time.

Slide of The Stack: His first major mature piece was entitled The Stack. As the name implies, it is a stack of various wooden pieces arranged to resemble the natural strata in geological formations. This piece pays homage to his interest in landscape and geology.

Slide of Blue Containers: Cragg’s interest shifted to surface quality and how this could be manipulated through a juxtaposition of materials including metal, plastic, rubber, glass and plaster. These works developed into a series of fabricated vessels – Early Forms – in which the container is a metaphor for the body.

#### Early Forms - Created starting around 1990

Slide Mortar and Pestle: Early Form refers to the primitive origins of these vessels, such as the mortar and pestle, which are amongst the earliest surviving man-made forms and are significant culture markers. The basic form and use of the mortar and pestle has not changed in millennia.

Slide Assortment of Bottles: The Early Form series of cast works began in the late 1980’s and was derived from a diverse range of vessels such as jam jars, test tubes, ancient flasks, and detergent bottles.

Slide Laboratory Flasks: These containers are clearly inspired by his early experience as a laboratory technician. In a sense, he is using the “repetitive, inferior shapes of the built world” to create works that are “crazy, fantasy and playful” but never boring.

Three Slides of Twisted Flasks: The sculptures in the next three slides derive their profiles and contours from simple, thick walled vessels such as chemistry flasks in which the surface of the initial object is twisted and pulled to create radically new shapes. The objects develop new lines and contours, curving surfaces and volumes with deep recessing folds.

The slides show a progression of this process starting with a flask in which one side is pulled to form a bulge, to the second slide in which the bulge is enlarged and becomes the dominant form, then to the final slide in which the bottle on the far left is barely recognizable. I have chosen these slides as they provide a visual segue way into the shape and inclusion of the NOMA sculpture, Sinbad, within the Early Forms series.

Slides Sinbad, 2000 from two sides: Cragg's interest in container and void, inner and outer spaces can be seen in the sculpture Sinbad. I am uncertain as to his naming choice other than a possible reference to the well-known story of Sinbad the Sailor – who is forever going to sea on amazing adventures. It is reasonable to see a connection as the slit-like openings in Sinbad invite the visitor to move around to experience it. This slit creates complicated structures both inside and out.

This sculpture was one of Cragg's later works when he was becoming interested in geometric forms. It was also produced at a time when Cragg began painting the Early Forms. Sinbad has been treated with a matte paint finish giving the piece a patina similar to the surface of cast iron.

Rational Beings – Created starting around 2000 to present

Slide Luke, 2008: Rational Beings is a series of three-dimensional sculptures created by vertically superimposing thick, circular or oval discs onto each other and then fastening them together. It is concerned not with static form but with dynamic movement.

Rational Beings examine the relationship between two apparently different aesthetic descriptions of the world – the organic and the geometric. Geometric forms arise from a rational, mathematical based construction. Organic forms, such as the human body, are far more complicated and evoke human emotions. Cragg explores the creation of organic forms, such as the human profile, from the assemblage of varying geometric shapes – oval, circles, spheres. In Rational Beings, the human profile emerges and disappears depending upon the position at which they are viewed similar to those seen in his early sketches.

Slide Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: Here Today, Gone Tomorrow represents an evolution toward Cragg's Rational Being series. It appears to have been subjected to the forces of wind and water producing the illusion of erosion. This eroded form and the title of this work symbolize the temporality found in nature and human life. Cragg's use of natural stone compliments his desire to portray organic forms.

Slides of Profile Columns: The following two slides are good examples of the relationship between geometric and organic. As Cragg notes, the human form is obviously organic but there are many geometries in it – our organs, bones, cells, right down to the very molecules of life – DNA.

Slide of Red Runner: Extrapolating on that idea, Cragg created this piece in which two columns are wound together in a manner very similar to that of the double helix of DNA. In this particular case, the choice of material – painted bronze – allows the details of the sculpture to be easily discernable.

Slides of The Runner 2017: I encountered the problem of observing the details of the sculpture when I attempted to photograph The Runner in the sculpture garden. Try as I might, it always appeared to dissolve into the surroundings. When I focused on smaller portions of the sculpture the problem became clearer. There is no one sculpture. Looking at the sculpture, the viewer is met with a reflection of themselves and the constantly changing surroundings. Sun, clouds, blue sky, grass – all contribute to the kaleidoscopic effect. That, in effect, is the beauty of the sculpture and what attracted me to it in the first place.

Slide of The Runner cream background: To obtain a clearer image of the sculpture I erased the background and substituted a uniform cream color. This trick of photography allows the undulating surfaces to be seen but undermines the ephemerality of the work – delicate and fleeting. What had been dynamic is now just a static shadow of itself.

### New and Noteworthy

Slide Terris Novalis: No presentation of Tony Cragg's work would be complete without a slide showing one of his best-known works: Terris Novalis created in 1997. Technically, it could be considered part of his Early Forms series, but, to me, it deserves to stand on its own. Essentially, it is an enormous, steel sculpture of engineering and astronomical instruments. At first, it appears to be a normal telescope – but look closely at the feet. Each foot of the instruments is from a different living creature – a hoof, a claw and a human hand. I can only guess what the fourth foot would be.

Three slides of new work: The final three slides are images of some of his latest work which don't fit neatly into either of his earlier series. They are examples of an increased interest in a variety of materials such as steel, stone, wood and glass.

Manipulations is described as a “cheeky” play on the Latin word for Hand – manus. Hands upon hands upon hands.

Spring can be seen as a representation of the exuberant growth of spring or the physical action of a mechanical spring. It is a favored work that has appeared in many recent exhibitions.

Lastly, Willow is noteworthy in its resemblance to a work by the Japanese potter Fujikasa Satoko entitled “Seisei: Plant Growth.” Curator Lisa Rotondo-McCord describes it as a “visual reminder between permanence and change capturing a single moment in time while simultaneously conveying a sense of ceaseless motion.”

I think this description most aptly describes the sculpture of Tony Cragg.