

Carnivals

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

AYK: What was your reaction to the presidential election?

AA: Initially, I felt as if I were in a period of mourning.

AYK: And now?

AA: Once Trump became president, I was ready, as were tens of thousands of others, to break out from that feeling of paralysis.

AYK: What do you think Middle Eastern artists living in the US need to do about this?

AA: All artists have a role to play, but it's not by virtue of being an artist that you're automatically going to have a political position.

AYK: Has your art changed as a result?

AA: I've shifted from inanimate architecture to, all of sudden, people. Figures are entering my work.

AYK: What does this mean?

AA: I think it represents the proximity of what's happening, right here, in my city. So that's a shift that's been very real for me.

AYK: Have you thought about moving elsewhere?

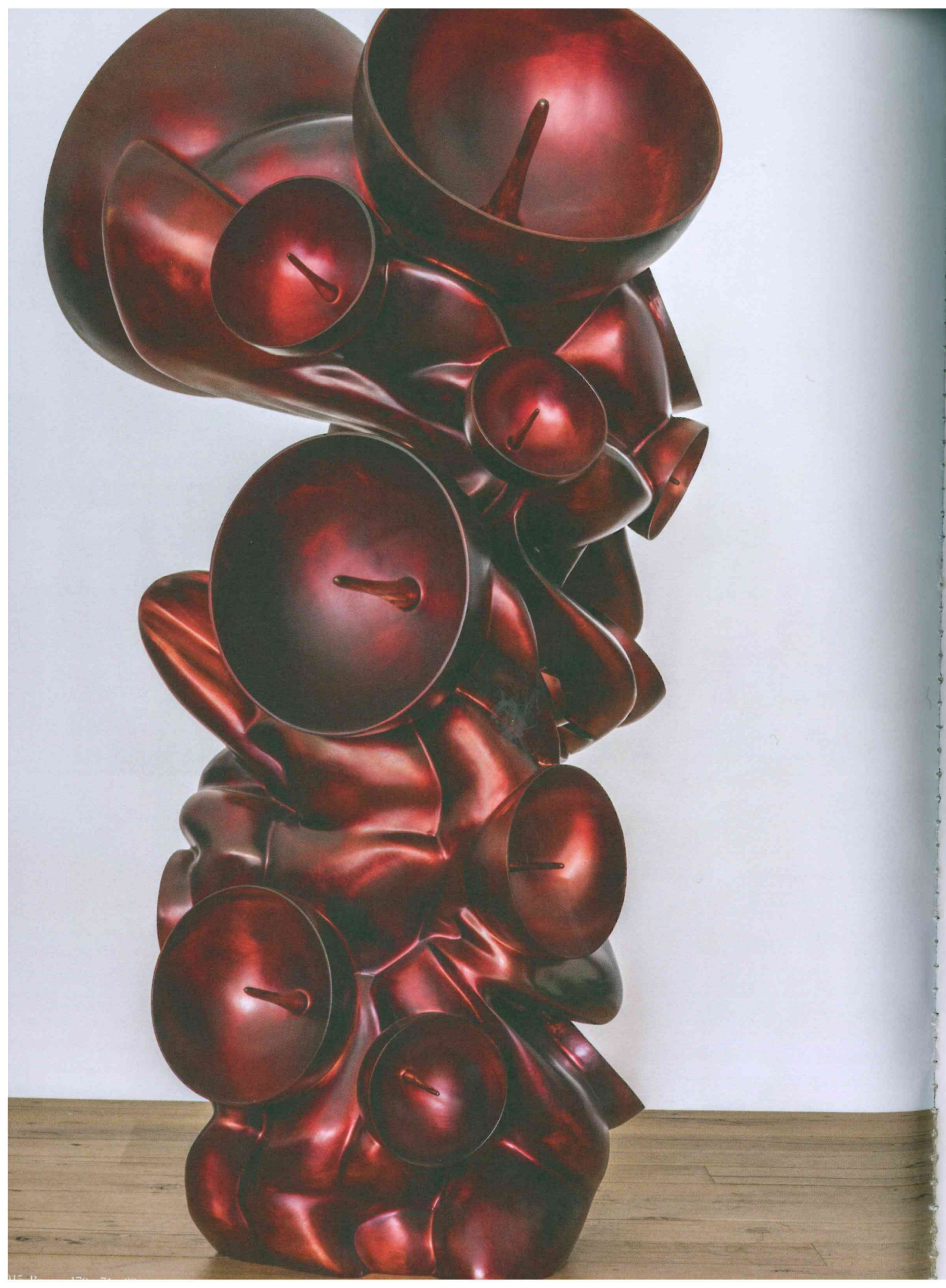
AA: No. I feel an obligation to change things where I am, and where I'm from.



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BACK TO THE *BEGINNING*

Katrina Kufer notes how Tony Cragg's first UAE solo show at the Leila Heller Gallery introduces a new public to his world of philosophy and material fixation.

Tony Cragg *Sculptures* marks the latest venture into playing with the 'Big Boys' in Dubai's foray, where art spaces such as Leila Heller Gallery, Custot Gallery and the Jean-Paul Najar Foundation have blazed the trail. This new show by the leading British sculptor resonates with the spacious environment of the New York transplant to the Gulf. The scale of the space surely spawned the idea for this exhibition – "It is made for sculpture!" exclaimed Xenia Geroulanos, director of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Cragg's Parisian representatives, who forged a working relationship with Leila Heller Gallery late last year – and underlines the latter's ability to put on large-scale, museum-standard exhibitions. Representing a return to a more humble artistic approach and a respect for material integrity, this solo show is really all about what Cragg does, in essence.

A relatively new name in the region, Cragg is renowned for his innovative (and in some ways, reactionary) responses and manipulations of materials. There is a broad range of the latter in this mini-retrospective of recent works, as well as a deep-rooted link to the artist's monumental forms; despite being fully abstracted, viewers can see faces, sometimes instruments, or maybe recollections, all brought forth by the twisting objects. *Willow* (2016) is sensorially satisfying, a downward curvature of grey-white stone that looks as malleable as the clay that children's hands bend in half, whereas *We* (2015) appears to be a copper pineapple until you get closer and realise that the protrusions are actually moulds of the artist's own face. A few circumventions of any of the works will reveal new facets not easily noticed at first glance.

This spread: (Left) *Migrant* 2015
Bronze, 220 x 150 x 147 cm.

(Right) *A Head, I Thought* 2011
Wood, 230 x 160 x 140 cm.



As Cragg remarks, the titles, colours and shapes are merely “a door into seeing what is beneath the surface.”

Viewers are provided with several potential access points to the sculptures, lending a material focus to an evocative mix of layers but Cragg does not necessarily elaborate on what those particular energies or associated emotions might be. That is down to the discretion of the viewer, whether they take it at face value, wonder at the abandonment of a material’s supposed physical constraints, or become awash in the overwhelming impression that these works seem carefully formed by time and nature. One sculpture standing alone has an abstract, organic sensation to it, but the 18 pieces together, in a mix of metallic, darkened or lurid hues (*Hardliner*, 2013, is an aggressive orange), turns the effect somewhat prehistoric. Suddenly, you stand surrounded by the fossilised remains of something, in the midst of a moment depicting hundreds of years of movement frozen and displayed in a clinical white cube. The contrast is sharp, and the effect of Cragg’s anthropomorphic works makes you question if it is you who doesn’t belong there, or the artworks imbued containing more life energy than you might be ready for.

The tone of the exhibition isn’t frantic or imposing: each gentle curve of the material seems as if it were sculpted with copious effort; there are few sharp angles, sudden changes or dissonant elements. These sculptures could have easily been formed by hundreds of years’ worth of gusts of wind and streams of water, instead of a man, his hands and his mind – abstract and physics-defying enough to be surreal, but not so unfamiliar that it all seems an impossible reality. *Pair* (2014), a set of twisted wood formations that tower well above the viewer, exemplifies this most clearly. Perhaps a nod to Cragg’s Land Art influences, or an art historical contextualisation of Futurism (*Spring*, 2015, a metallic red sculpture that seems halted mid-spin), his 45-year-long practice shares certain visual cues, but the artist also explains that referencing art history is only for the sake of discussion. His self-awareness of how his practice relates to his predecessors and contemporaries acknowledges that each has their niche in the scope of sculptural contribution but “one of the biggest mistakes of the times is that artists look at what is happening,” he says. “I don’t want to make art about art. Reacting to history is a waste of time. I don’t think about it when I am making art.”



Hardliner 2013. Bronze. 115.1 x 140 x 97 cm
All images courtesy the artist and Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai.

"The show introduces the philosophical principles guiding his art-making," says Leila Heller, the gallery's director and president. The relationship the artist has to the materials he uses in his works is deeply felt, and a mere few minutes spent with either Cragg or his works is enough to comprehend this give-and-take dynamic. He engages and learns from the nature of the material, in continuous evolution, instead of imposing artistic ideals onto it, seemingly observing the substance of his sculptures with the kind of respect usually reserved for something with rather more obvious verve, quipping, "The first material I really loved was my mother! That's the first material we are in contact with." This is because there is only material, which is a philosophical tenet that is an undercurrent of a broader perspective. "Everything is material and the most amazing material is our own being, our abilities, bodies, minds," he says. It is from this material that humans exist and are able to conceive, manipulate and create other materials – everything is imbued with meaning due to the sheer fact that it is activated by perception and reflection. Considering his sculptures with this perspective, it becomes clear how glass can resemble a liquid splatter (*Compound*, 2015), bronze

look as though it were frozen in mid-undulation (*Migrant*, 2015) or wood described with adjectives like 'languid' or 'fleshy' (*A Head, I Thought*, 2011). "Sculptors have proven over the last 150 years that there isn't a material you can't change the terms of," Cragg remarks. "Every material has a range of possibilities and expressions."

Through this excitement and fixation on the intrinsic qualities and possibilities of materials, his artistic intentions and ideas manifest themselves in everything from plastics (a favourite since childhood and one of the first materials he experimented with) through to the recent glass works he created after a stint in Murano. But while primarily a visual language that Cragg says is best experienced with your eyes or in a haptic manner, the sculptures are inevitably richer. When asked one more time how he might describe the energy of the works, he playfully begins to onomatopoeically sing: "I don't know if you can sing sculpture, but you would need to find deeper tones, fast tones, or dis-join-ted to-nes with cer-tain rhy-thms..." 🎤

Tony Cragg Sculptures runs until 6 March at Leila Heller Gallery, Dubai. For more information, visit www.leilahellergallery.com