

LEILA HELLER GALLERY.

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Inventing a new language

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1-87, Alserkal Avenue Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE | 568 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001 USA

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By Jyoti Kalsi- Special to Weekend Review

Tony Cragg is one of the world's leading contemporary sculptors and has been honoured with the most prestigious awards in the art world. He received the Turner Prize in 1988, and the Praemium Imperiale in 2007. He was made a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 1992, and a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in 2002. The British artist, who lives in Wuppertal, Germany has taught at the Berlin Academy of Art and the Dusseldorf Academy of Art where he became rector in

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2009. His work has been exhibited at important venues across the world, including the Tate Gallery, London, the Louvre in Paris, The Venice Biennale, and the Hermitage museum in St Petersburg.

In his first solo show in the region, Sculptures, Cragg is presenting 18 new works in bronze, stone, wood and glass. The exhibition showcases his mastery over his medium and the new vocabulary of form, movement, energy and emotion he has created through his experiments with diverse materials.

Cragg's approach to his work is philosophical, but the most important element in his creative process is the material. "For me material is not just a medium, it is what we are. The word material comes from the Latin word for mother, because that is what shapes and nurtures us. Everything around us is material and even our thoughts come from the outside material world into our head. Our ideas, notions, sensibilities and words are based on the information we gather from our material world. My interest in sculpture is a material interest. I find it exciting to move materials around and see the change in volume, line, form, texture and contours. But while I am changing the material, it is also changing me, so most of my ideas come from playing with the materials till I find something that is meaningful for me. Beginning a new piece is always a great adventure with infinite possibilities," he says.

The artist takes inspiration from nature and the human figure, but he is not interested in reproducing or representing nature, because he sees no point in copying what nature has already made so magnificently. His sculptures are infused with movement, energy and emotion, but the forms are unfamiliar and difficult to describe in words. And that is exactly what he wishes to achieve.

"I want to create forms that do not exist yet, that we do not have words for, that are not associated with any ideas and emotions in our minds. As an artist, I want to give value and meaning to material by allowing material to grow in various ways, thus discovering new, complex forms that are associated with new words and emotions, thereby expanding our imagination and vision," Cragg says.

He often uses techniques such as stacking, layering and heaping different types of materials and everyday objects to arrive at unexpected interpretations. Pair, featuring two towering wood sculptures is an example of how that process has evolved from simple, stacks of circular objects dictated by the logic of size and balance, to complex, seemingly unstable structures.

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In the late 1980s Cragg began working on a series of cast works based on a diverse range of vessels, ranging from ancient flasks to test-tubes, jam jars and detergent bottles that were twisted and fused together to make new forms. He calls the series Early Forms because vessels are among the simplest and earliest surviving man-made objects and hence important markers of culture. In his recent works, such as Migrant, he has increased the elasticity and dynamics of the composition to push the limits of the shape of the vessels.

“We see the world by the light that is reflected from the surface, but we are always curious to know what lies beyond that surface. The sun looks like a huge ball, but there are billion atomic explosions happening inside it, just as there are trillions of chemical reactions happening every second underneath our skin. I am interested in seeing the internal structure and energy of the material. I began using vessels in my work because they have an inside and outside, and allow me to explore the surface and the interior spaces,” he says.

In recent years, heads and faces have become a recurring motif in his work. He begins with simple drawings of faces, but these are then twisted and distorted until they are unrecognisable and become abstracted into columns and new forms. This can be seen in A Head, I Thought, a wood sculpture from his Rational Being series, where faces are mutated to create new forms, while also mapping vacant spaces. The title of the work refers to the exterior physical human form as well as the interior thoughts.

In other bronze works, such as, We and 3-D Incident, heads are arranged in geometric patterns, or a clearly discernible face on one side transforms into a rocky cliff on the other side. “Although we think of geometric and organic forms as being different, the fact is that there is an inherent geometry in every molecule, cell and organ of a living being. So these are just two facets of the same object. I am interested in seeing at what stage a geometric form takes on an emotional quality,” he says.

Cragg has developed a method for casting bronze works that appear to be molten, with patinas ranging from chocolate brown to gold. Through these works he explores formal compression and elongation techniques of abstraction, such as depicting a sunrise in Spring, and water cascading down a rocky surface in Luke.

Contrasting sharply with his solid, large scale wood, stone and bronze works, is a new body of small, delicate, transparent, glass sculptures, created in collaboration with skilled glass blowers in Murano, Venice. He likes working with this material because it is transparent, allowing him to easily explore the exterior and the interior.

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His glass sculptures include stacks of transparent cubes. He has also returned to using vessels, and is showing an amorphous piece made from hundreds of transparent glass containers of various shapes and sizes fused together, aptly titled Visible Man.

Sculptures will run at Leila Heller Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz, Dubai until March 6.