

SELECTIONS

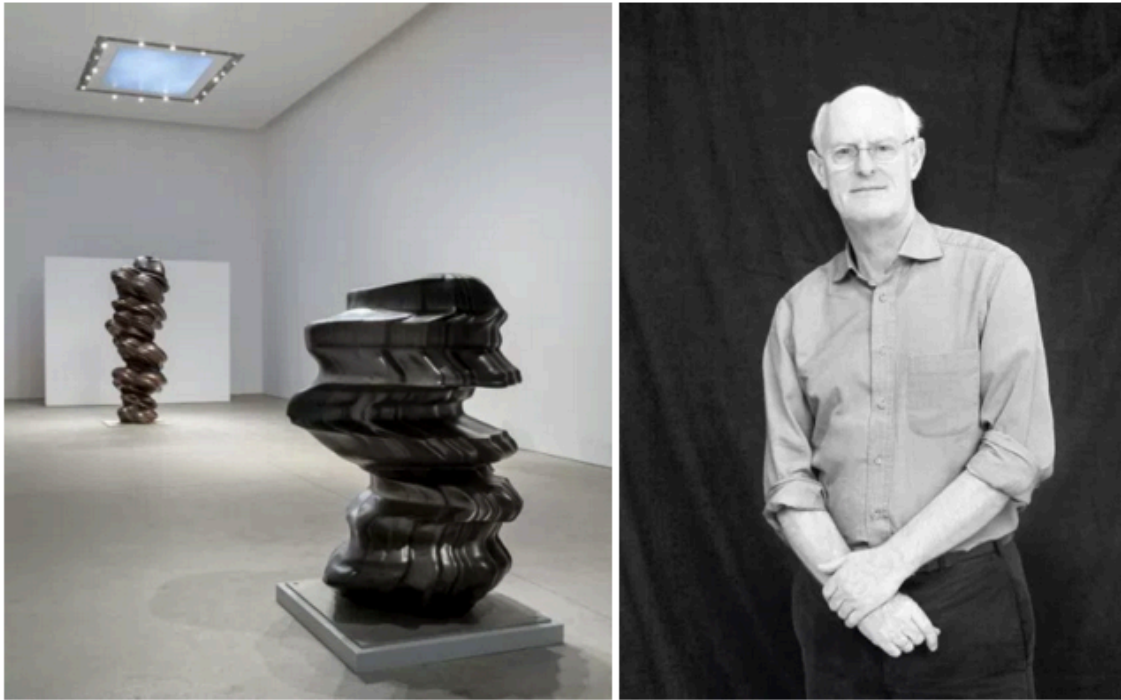
Mind over Matter

written by Rajesh Punj



British sculptor Tony Cragg tells Selections why sculpture is a vital science and how he has had enough of breaking plates

Tony Cragg's new works appear like attractive alien interventions, as much suited to the set of a science fiction film as they are "sculptures as stage," as he describes them. Brightly coloured contortions of wood, metal and glass, perfectly manipulated by man and machine, represent for Cragg a kind of beauty that is as close to nature and as far removed from man's modernist ideals as his practice allows. Reacting to the atmosphere, every single twist and turn of the organic and artificial elements of his works are regarded by the celebrated British sculptor as a moral mutiny against the hardened line and fixed edge that defines everything else.



Cragg's new sculptures challenge our understanding of the physical constitution of an object, with its inner workings concealed by its encasing. Focusing on the foundation of a form, Cragg invites us to scrutinise the anatomy of our living and working environment and acknowledge that we are surrounded by technological apparatus that are operative yet unobtrusive. Slick simplicity often renders an object's complexity invisible.

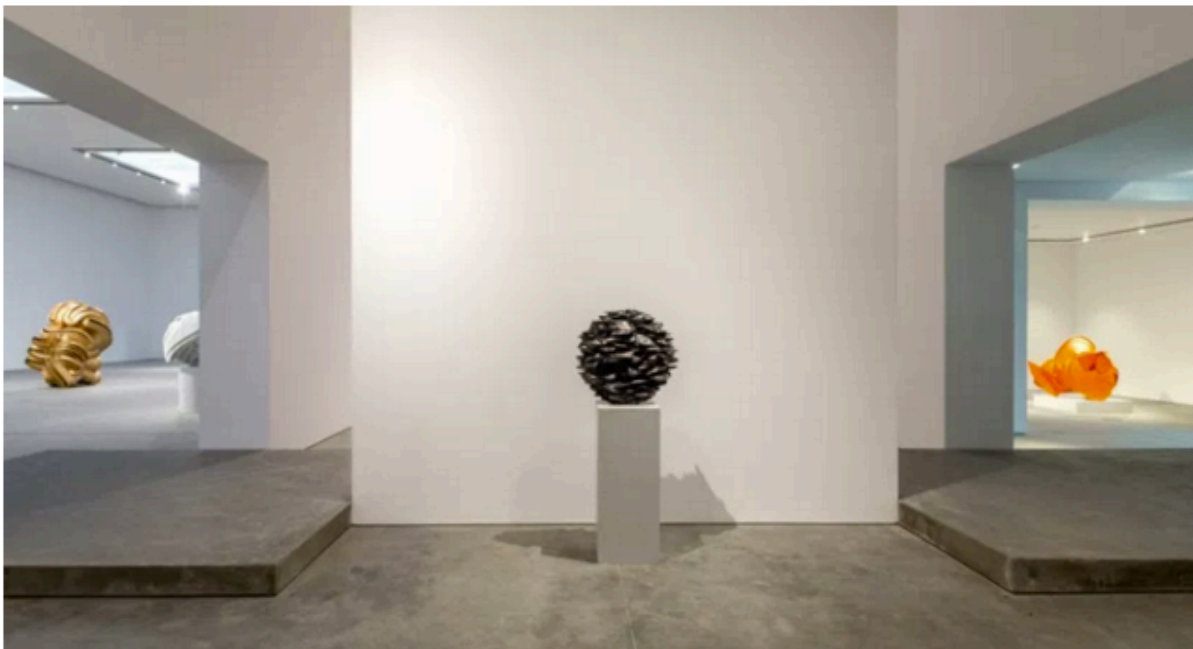
Cragg's contemporary works are aesthetically appealing objects as much as they are objects of new technology. His is a concern for the "sub stance" of something, as he explains it – he intends that we see within materials the anatomical structure of a more impressive world.



His wish is to examine the natural energy of an object's existence, as much as the physical form itself. "Anything that resists gravity requires energy," he explains. "So trees and people grow up, and with our own body we fight for the entire length of our lives, and the day we stop fighting we just get absorbed by it. That is why

gravity is called gravity, because it pulls you into its grave. It takes your energy, your living energy to a zero state.” It is in this context that Cragg sees sculpture as “a vital extension of us, a vital science, and a sign of vitality of our own existence.”

Having organised and ordered everything for much of his adult life, his art stacked, shelved, packed and placed, Cragg has recently begun to absorb new technology as a means of making works that are impossible to accomplish by hand alone. It is either an irony or an evolution that sees his sculptures being applauded now for their visual sophistication, when his approach in the 1970s and '80s was much more elemental, by virtue of his selecting and intentionally rearranging a series of domestic readymades into creative configurations.



He speaks determinedly of replacing the rudimentary with something more rigorous. “With my work I am not interested in chaotic gestures,” he says. “I am no longer interested in throwing colour at the wall or breaking plates. I have gone a long way from that. I don’t really want to do those things, even though I know they produce nice effects. I want to keep my hands on the reins of the formal structure inside the work, and by doing that I can influence the outside appearance and my relationship to it. I am not really that happy when things change without my controlling them.”