



Bazaar

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ART DUBAI | DANA AWARTANI | SHARJAH BIENNIAL | KAMROOZ ARAM

Large anamorphous sculptures have taken over Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai. At once momentous and otherworldly, these works by acclaimed British artist Tony Cragg, made in wood, stone, bronze as well as glass, are awe-inspiring—turning the gallery space into a fantasy world of narrative forms. They are part of the artist's first exhibition in the UAE which presents 18 sculptures, including newer works in glass. The body of work reflects Cragg's influences from English landscape art and 20th century Futurist artists such as Constantin Brancusi, Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla. Most recently, his sculptures have even been likened to those of fellow countryman: the late Henry Moore.

They've also earned him time as a professor at the famed Kunstakademie Dusseldorf, where artists such as Joseph Beuys also taught. A Turner Prize, Venice Biennale and Hermitage Museum exhibitor, Cragg has been pushing the boundary between material and intent for decades. The set of sculptures on display gives a broad survey of the sculptor's work as well as offers a clear vision of his use of material, space and form.

When Cragg first encountered sculpture, he wasn't keen on the idea of being a sculptor. The more he worked with it, the more he saw the stones become infused with emotion. This captivated him. Every line, shape and fold has with it its own emotional landscape. "98 percent of our decisions are emotional decisions," says the artist. "When we do anything, like choose what you eat, the way you do your hair, what car you drive, we do it because we feel like it. When I started making sculpture, what I became passionate about was how different materials affect me emotionally, what processes, what forms." The emotional quality of the work is an aspect of Cragg's sculpture that makes it easy to talk about the situations surrounding the pieces, but hard to describe the art itself for the ineffable qualities that they possess.

Key to Cragg's practice is the notion of sculpture as a wholly material practice. In creation, process, and development, this idea of materialism is central to the work. For him, even thought and creativity is a result of material processes like biology, chemistry and physics. Therefore, the process of perception (a material being seeing the world), ideation (that being meditating on that information and forming a concept), and

EXCITED MATTER

*A selection works by acclaimed contemporary sculptor Tony Cragg inhabit Leila Heller Gallery Dubai. **Patrick Martin** Lichty probes their myriad meanings*

fabrication of art—are all different aspects of material in a process of self-actualisation. For Cragg, the act of creation is a process of material's processes, self-perception, and recreating itself, or as he put concisely: "The process consists of image, material and object."

Works such as *Early Forms* are based on the artist's explorations of shapes and vessels, such as plastic containers, test tubes and other found items in context of the early vessels in history. By stacking, folding, repeating, rotating and duplicating these shapes, he creates, as he terms, "New words, new taxonomies, new emotions." His Turner Prize solo exhibition at the Tate included *Britain as Seen from the North*, an assemblage of found and raw matter to create an

emotional connection between humanity and its everyday conditions. However, by the 80s, he became disappointed in plastic as a 'poor material' due to its willingness to be formed and lack of presence. Works like *Part of Life I & II* and *Hardliner* show the process of formal construction that as one might imagine comprise assemblages of stamped metal or intricately folded plastic shapes. These processes expand exquisitely into pieces like *Migrant* that lyrically plays with shapes from his early work at grand scales, connecting his sculptures over time. Other pieces like *Lost in Thought* show this deep affective quality. These pieces are reminiscent of huge molecules, bent packaging, tissue folds, and weathered stone, creating a dialogue



Installation view of Tony Cragg's exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai



Left: installation view of Tony Cragg's exhibition at Leila Heller Gallery Dubai, showing *Versus*, 2013 (centre)



From left to right:
False Idols. 2012.
Bronze. *A Head, I Thought*. 2011. Wood.
Migrant. 2015. Bronze.



between objective reality and the imaginary itself.

Yet taking these forms into new contexts and materials represents the creation of new emotional landscapes that are not outside of reality. This is because for Cragg, “There are no holes in our reality, at least ones that we can perceive, that is. And that’s what is wonderful about looking at complicated geometry.” This deep material reality extends into finishes and patinas that often have the slightest roughness to them and which lend an additional level of detail when seen closely. Cragg and I discussed the Japanese notion of *wabi-sabi*, or imperfection, and he said that leaving a trace of the process here and there leave clues and surprises about the work that one may not expect.

The other major body of work that Cragg is recognised for is his *Rational Beings* sculptures, represented in the Sculptures presented here in wood, stone and bronze, while other pieces exist in carbon, plaster and steel. Meters in height, these columnal pieces reveal faces

as one walks around them, appearing and disappearing in profile. They are created from an intensive process of drawing and design, with the stacking of elliptical cross-sections and laboriously forming the material into the massive final profiles. Works like *Accurate Figure* and *Wild Relatives* stretch the boundaries between abstraction and figuration, creating tensions of representation that have intent but are as abstract as seeing faces in the clouds.

Other works on display at Leila Heller include a series of glass works Cragg has been working on in Murano, Italy. While the works in stone, bronze and wood have been about exploring the deeper mysteries of material form typically in media where one cannot see the inner structures of the piece, working in glass offers added insights into the inner life of the work. “In working with glass, one sees inner facets of the works that one simply can’t see with wood, marble or bronze,” says Cragg. “Glass is a process, it’s not a geometry, and that’s what fascinates me about it. It’s like

water—it adheres to itself; it always wants to drop, it wants to move.”

For Cragg, the practice of art is one of the highest aspirations a human being can aspire to. “Art is one of the greatest ways I know for discovering meaning in life, for giving existence meaning,” says the artist. Craggs states how he believes we often think about humanity’s use of space as just a place to inhabit or do our work and how such an idea can be dehumanising. “I think that sculpture is one of the only things that goes against the sad industrial thumbprint of square houses and white walls,” adds Cragg; “It’s something that truly inspires the human enterprise.” He goes on to reflect on how sculpture reveals a sense of a greater reality and this is something he aspires to. “The sublime quality of material is unimaginable for us, and that is something that inspires me,” he says. “Art is a little piece of yourself that doesn’t go away.” ■

Tony Cragg: Sculptures runs until 6 March at Leila Heller Gallery in Dubai.
leilahellergallery.com

Leila Heller, Alexander Heller, Marjan Fateh, and Ebrahim Melamed



Tony Cragg and Leila Heller



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On 23 January, Leila Heller Gallery celebrated the opening of Tony Cragg's first solo exhibition in the UAE. *Sculptures* features 18 works by the renowned British artist. A respect for the material is central to Cragg's nature inspired works, be it bronze, stone, wood or, more recently, glass, leilahellergallery.com

Gallery tour with Tony Cragg and Kevin Jones



Paula Al Askari



Marjan Fateh, Ebrahim Melamed, Tony Cragg, and Leila Heller



Lakshmi Gulab, Jaideep Gulab, and Tony Cragg



Mohammed Afkhami and Tony Cragg

