



A Conversation with **Tony Cragg**



Fighting Gravity

BY RAJESH PUNJ

Tony Cragg's new works — contortions of wood, metal, and stone perfectly manipulated by man and machine — represent a kind of beauty as close to nature and as far removed from Modernist ideals as his practice allows. He regards every twist and turn of their organic and artificial elements as a moral mutiny against the hardened lines and fixed edges that define everything else.

Having spent much of his adult life organizing and ordering stacked, shelved, packed, and placed sculptures, Cragg has absorbed new technologies as a way of making works that are impossible to comprehend and accomplish by hand alone. These recent works both extend and break away from his approach in the 1970s and 1980s, when his sculptures were much more elemental, the product of a process of selecting and rearranging readymades into creative configurations. Replacing stacks of broken bricks and furniture with the metamorphic energy inherent in bronze and wood, he sees sculpture as an opportunity to understand perfection, and the object, from the inside out, leading us into a parallel sphere of sculptural rationality, if not reality.

Opposite and above: *Willow III*, 2016.
Wood, 123 x 110 x 110 cm.



Sail, 2015. Onyx, 220 x 114 x 34 cm.

But 95 to 99 percent of our decisions are emotional. So, even a carefully constructed work like *Sail* has an internal structure to the extent that I feel takes on an emotional quality. And that is characteristic of a lot of my work. Sometimes the structures are very different, which means that each surface and each point on the surface is not there by chance. It is there because it has to be there. It can be a few centimeters in, a few centimeters out, but it is exactly where it should be, and it has consequences for the entire form.

Spring (2015) is slightly more complicated. I make a lot of works in plywood initially, because it gives me enormous freedom to change the form. I can build it up, and if I don't like it, take it down, change bits, cut it out again, and keep changing it until I have a sculpture based entirely on my own subjective needs or desires. *Spring* is slightly different because the first one had layers stacked up in a similar vein to an older work, *Stack* (1976). For over 45 years, I have had the bad habit of stacking things up as ecological structures. But the problem with stacking a work like *Spring* is that some passages were much too thin, and they wouldn't easily adhere to each other. So, I scanned it to be able to create cross sections, which become bigger throughout the work, and that way I created greater strength. The sculpture is a lot about how material works.

RP: *There is a real science to what you are doing.*

TC: No, I wouldn't say that. Any living thing that resists gravity requires energy. So, trees and people grow up; with our bodies, 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. That is what it is all about—sculpture is a vital extension of us, a vital science, a sign of the vitality of our own existence, so it has to be well made. If you don't make it well, it will have to be dismantled and put on the dump.

Migrant (2015), another work in that room, is the latest version of a work that

Rajesh Punj: *I am keen to talk about the work in your recent Lisson Gallery exhibition.*

Tony Cragg: It was quite big for a gallery exhibition, with more than 25 works in a dozen different spaces. There is one large space, at a bit of a right angle to the rest of the building, that is not easy to work with. I put four sculptures in there, which are all my latest works. The first one is *Sail* (2015), and maybe the title suggests something. A sail is a very rational thing, because it is full of parabolas and forms that obviously have to do with wind pressure. The work consists of 34 elliptical columns, all inside one another. The intention was to make something that looks quite organic on the surface but is also totally rational, because at any cross section, you can see the series of ellipses running through it. I think that was a good starting point for the exhibition, because it is one of the fundamental aspects that I have concentrated on. I want an internal structure to the thing I am making, which I build up in certain ways.

RP: *So, is there a kind of architecture to how you construct your works? Is that how you would describe it?*

TC: Absolutely, you could say that, but I see it as an "internal structure" that is within everything—like within our own bodies. We are not chaotic. We don't have ears everywhere; we are carefully constructed. Even the most complicated things and materials are well constructed. It is not just chance; it is not wildness and chaos. It is part of our existence; it is about our being human.

We have the potential to be logical, systematic, and rational about things. But on the other hand, we also add a great deal of emotional input into our lives. We pride ourselves on our intellectual abilities—evolutionarily, that is what has given us an advantage.



Installation view of “Tony Cragg” with (left) *Spring*, 2015, wood, 280 x 245 x 74 cm.; (center) *Migrant*, 2015, bronze, 220 x 150 x 147 cm.; and (right) *Lost in Thought*, 2015, wood, 340 x 70 x 70 cm.

I first made in 1984, whereby I took a known thing, a vessel, and moved it through space to create another form. I have never been interested in copying a natural model. I never made the figure; it just doesn't interest me. It is there already, so I could only ever make an inferior model of it. This is the sadness of 19th-century art. There is something terribly melancholic about it, because they were doing their absolute best to make sculpture that resembled a person, and it didn't. If they could have had a hologram, then they would have had a copy of what they wanted; nature is more complicated. At the same time, their obsession with copying anatomy led them to use specific materials best for copying. This became an idea that still exists—of a skill attached to making sculpture. But most of us now realize that sculpture is not about copying nature; in its essence, it is about how material and material form affect us. And that has an enormous effect, because everything we have in our heads has come from the material world.

We have seen, heard, felt, smelled, or tasted the whole of the material world. All of the terms we have in our minds—all of the synaptic firings, the patterns we have in our brains—come from our experience of looking at the outside world. With language, every word is grounded in the material world, so human beings make distastefully boring things out of material—flat, white, straight-edged surfaces; rectangular, circular, cylindrical, silly geometries; boring, with no colors. We have to react to an enormous impoverishment of form on this planet. We cut down a forest and make a car park. It is always a disaster, it doesn't matter what we do. We are incapable

because we cannot make anything as complicated as nature. Nature has had a long time to evolve; it has had billions of years to make things, so, of course, it is very complicated. But in the hands of human beings, this planet will become a desert.

RP: *There is a sense that your works are determined as much by detail as they are by abstractions, “emotions,” and “sensations.” Are you constantly moving between what is physical or real and what is mental, or our response to what is in front of us?*

TC: There are always dichotomies and dualities to our nature. The emotional, logical and rational, subjective and spiritual, and corporal are in all of us. I have a fluxing mind, and I assume it is like that for most people. There is never a rock-hard position. We are like Arnold Isenberg's *quondam*; we can never decide where we are at any given moment. We know certain things, a little bit. But beyond the horizon of what we know, we have to believe. We base most of our lives on what we believe.

We are in a time when people are dividing themselves up for what they believe. I am amazed that two people could possibly believe the same thing, because in the area of belief there are no proofs. The idea of the world being on the back of a tortoise, the universe as the tortoise—why not? It doesn't have to be true does it, to believe? What we are actually doing is making things, making art; I mean that art is about being. Who makes the images that you believe in? How do you start to imagine you have a belief system?

We are in a state of belief on millions of different levels at any given moment. But we have to have some basis for it, and some-



Industrial Nature, 2015. Aluminum, 220 x 366 x 190 cm.

how we conjure that up. How do you prove your beliefs? How do you revise them? How do you deepen and intensify them? Who provides images for that? Some religions have always done that, and other religions forbid it because they don't want you to make images that fool around with your beliefs. In a funny way, this is not about sculpture. It is more about the ideal, because it does not belong in the natural world or the industrial world. It is not a practical necessity like everything else that is being made around us disastrously. It is in a category of its own.

RP: *There is something wonderfully contradictory in the notion of your making works of such permanence, when everything is in a constant state of flux.*

TC: Well, every sculpture is just a stage.

RP: *Do you see them as "permanent stations," as you have said?*

TC: They are stations. Look back at history, there were very few pictures. All this painting that has been going on, it will all rot, thank god. If you go back, all the artworks we know are bits of stone and bone. Stuff that could make a form, and most of those forms are about their spiritual relationship to something — fertility, sexuality, nutrition, and survival strategies. These things have acted as the

fundamentals of art. We use practical things as common denominators to make things — that's why they are so awful, so boring and incredibly repetitive, and sculpture is the total opposite of that. There are no lowest common denominators in sculpture. Things are complicated, and they do remain, for better or worse. You walk past Hyde Park and shudder at the awful sculpture there. If ever there was an argument for the ephemeral, it's those sculptures. God, it makes me so angry.

RP: *Are your sculptures a reaction to everything "out there" that you don't approve of?*

TC: Probably. When I started making work in the late 1960s and into the '70s, people living in skyscrapers were dropping bombs on people living in bamboo houses. There were awful things everywhere. When I was growing up, my father designed electrical parts for aircraft in lots of different places, so we kept moving, and I went to several schools. We lived in totally strange places, like council estates that were not built properly, with no road, no pavement, just mud. So, you start to accumulate a sense of dissatisfaction, and you realize that everything is transient, impermanent. Only a couple of hundred years ago, this place where we are now was

Parts of the World, 2015. Aluminum, 197 x 130 x 66 cm.

a field, a meadow with a nice little river running through it.

RP: *You have created a sculpture park in Wuppertal, Germany, where you keep a studio, which raises a question about site. How do you determine a work's location in relationship to the weight of space around it?*

TC: Well, that determines itself. Since the 19th century, there has been an enormous evolution as people realized that sculpture is about the way that all material affects us. Sculpture has become a study of the material world, and that is why it is so relevant and so important. Science tells you how things work, but only art gives material meaning. And it also provides the vision for science in some ways. Artists and poets walked on the moon before scientists got there. There is always something, but when it comes to going outside, there are not that many materials that you can put outdoors. I am convinced that the oldest materials are the best, because they have naturally existed for so long.

Bronze is the best material to put outside. Iron and steel rust; stone you can use, but not a great deal; and plastics rot away in sunlight. The thing about outside is that there is a different kind of convention, because it becomes much more about the form than the material. When you get out there, you are confronted with the form of nature. We are not confronted with nature in this room, but when you step outside, you are confronted with either an urban setting or something more rural. What interests me is the natural confrontation, the being together with the natural being. You notice that nature is very, very good at making.

RP: *Do you have any desire to engage with natural decay and the effect of entropic energy on materials?*

TC: I am not interested in chaotic gestures. I am no longer interested in throwing color at the wall or breaking plates, 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; and that is how I work. I am not really that happy when things



change without my controlling them. It is not a nice way to put it, but when things are in the studio, they are about as good as they are going to get; the minute they start to move to the door, they are in a state of decay.

RP: *Do you seek a state of perfection with your work before you relinquish control?*

TC: That is a very good question, because, of course, that is the point we are at now in our culture. Nobody believes in perfection, do they? They want it to be cruddy. Everyone is afraid of perfection and solemnity. It is the last thing that anybody can cope with. Henry Moore would be unthinkable today, and as a young artist, I really didn't appreciate his work. But when you look at it now, his main idea was that he wanted to make the "best sculpture." What an amazing/crazy idea, a very non-contemporary idea—"I am going to make the best sculpture, the best painting"—which is totally impossible today. It has to be "grungy" or "bleakly physiological" when it isn't that.

RP: *Going back to your Lisson show, can you explain a little more about the aesthetic disorder in works like Industrial Nature and Parts of the World?*

TC: *Hybrid* (2015) and *Migrant* have been through all sorts of phases, some straightforward, others more complicated or baroque, with a lot of internal movements. Reducing everything to simple spaces, simple outer forms, cylinders, blocks resulted in an enormous amount of internal activity, which I wanted to reveal. So, I made sculptures inside of sculptures. Stupidly, you could not see the inner ones, which took a long time to make. That led to sculptures with holes running through them, so you could see more of the inside, leading to a breakthrough, which altered the relationship of the vessels on the ground with space. The sculptures didn't have a natural relationship with the ground; they were in the air, and I produced totally different colored versions of that. They became two hyper-complicated works using technical means.

RP: *Industrial Nature* appears as a freestanding alien structure, made up of a series of manipulated aluminum plates. How does its creative damage relate to the kind of perfection you referred to before?

TC: What happened with the green work, *Parts of the World*—the more important of the two standing works—is that I had previously made *Hardliner* (2013), which I thought was very good. *Hardliner* focused entirely on internal structure, without the nice curves and clean finish. That is very often what I am interested in, in the “sub stance” of the appearance of things. What is the substance? What is carrying the form and the appearance of material? I followed those shapes and decided to leave it open. I thought *Parts of the World* was fantastic. It has a feeling of xylem, cells, and organs, of cross-sections, bio-botany, and biology. The red work, *Industrial Nature*, is exactly the same, but a little bit longer, with a square section and slightly canted; all I did was extend the shape. I literally drew the wings and nuts and leaves on polystyrene, and built them and had them cast and welded onto the block. It took me a long while. It was an incredibly long and expensive journey to have those two works made.

RP: Does completing a work like that trigger more works of a similar nature? It can't be that you stop there.

TC: Everyone asks, “Where do your ideas come from?” There is no direct relationship between good ideas and good art; some people have good ideas and make awful art. I am not so



Left: Installation view of “Tony Cragg” with (left) *Hedge*, 2016, steel, 103 x 100 x 60 cm.; and (right) *Hedge*, 2015, steel, 131 x 90 x 116 cm. Above: Installation view of “Tony Cragg” with (left) *Skull*, 2016, bronze, 59 x 41 x 26.75 cm.; and (right) *Skull*, 2016, bronze, 150 x 104 x 68 cm.

interested in ideas; the most influential thing for me is the work that I have just finished. That is what is in my mind. For the last year or two, I have had a good period in the studio, with lots of things that I feel are moving on and that I am moving through. Once I make progress, I feel like I have understood something and will see how that develops.

I am in love with the skulls. They are the best things I have made. I am looking forward to going back to the studio because of them and the hedges. A hedge looks like a thing from the outside, like a blob, but when you get inside, it is a world within itself, of nests and insects. That was the idea behind the hedges. The skulls, the



hedges, and the industrial forms all provide an incredible energy for me to move on.

RP: *How do you see your works in relation to one another, and how do you “curate” them together into a space? Do they infringe on each other, or do they combine to give a better understanding of your practice as a whole?*

TC: Yes, they do infringe, but this show was a rare coming together. They have never been like this before, and they will never be seen like this again, because the exhibition was, with minor exceptions, exactly the plan I sent to the gallery months and months beforehand. But the works group up anyway. It is a competition, with congruity and some little contradictions; so tensions are building. Like everything else, I am subjective, art is subjective, the exhibitions I make are subjective. There is no ultimate logic to anything.

RP: *With your desire for greater control over the creative process, how do you encapsulate movement within your work?*

TC: It is very simple. There are three trillion cells sitting in your chair, every one of them in a constant state of movement; and in each cell, thousands of chemical exchanges are going on in an instant. Things can be very still while movement and energy envelop them.

The sun is a ball of energy in the sky with a billion atomic explosions. Anything that assumes a form is carried by complicated energy; it is never static. It requires incredible energy to do that. We send a message through our body to our spine eight times a second so that we don't topple over. If the message doesn't come through, if you have had too much to drink, or you are tired, or you die, you are on your way down, and you give in to gravity. Gravity is taking your energy away, and the ground is very pleased, that's it. These things are very natural.

RP: *Which makes me think it is about how we see things.*

TC: It is. We make everything happen in our heads; there is nothing else. We couldn't cope with ultimate reality; we have no idea what ultimate reality looks like. It may not look like anything. The image we have of each other is something we have just made up. If you understand the psychology of perception, you are aware of how much the brain is doing to make that image. From every surface, you are just getting the light reflected off of it, and with that information, you can make something of it. But again, that is not a constant. You can change with your experience. That's why it is important to make a material world and use nature, because that is what makes our heads, what makes our thoughts and emotions. It is the stuff around you. You know that material affects you, so why be horrible about it, why make such stupid decisions because of the economy? Of course, we are forced into it because of survival strategies, but we have to work against that. It is not about aims of perfection, because that is something else, that is way down the line.

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