

Tony Cragg interviewed by Jon Wood

Jon Wood met up with Tony Cragg in Sweden this summer to talk with him about the exhibition and about some of the thinking behind his recent sculpture.

Tony Cragg: We've been planning this exhibition for about two or three years and, at the beginning, I thought I'd do a whole show about *Rational Beings*. But more recently, since the work has developed in the last eighteen months, I decided it would be much more interesting to show the ways in which *Rational Beings* have been approached via *Early Forms*. So that's the main function of the exhibition really for me: to show the synthetic relationship between these bodies of work. I realised that that would be quite a lot for one room but, it should function especially in such a large, well-proportioned room, which gives the work a great deal of monumentality. And so my idea was to populate this space with these sculptures.

Jon Wood: *I want to ask you about this fascination of yours with grouping bodies of work into family units and seeing familial connections between them. Can you elaborate upon this and say why you choose this kind of language to describe them?*

TC: I think it probably began when I was an art student, when most of my attitudes to sculpture making first developed. I have always had an aversion to the idea of making series of things. It's just one of those terms that never appealed to me. It has some negative connotations that have something to do with unnecessary repetitiveness. You can't start with 'point zero' every time you make a work, you start from the point you left off through the last work, on the whole...and you may, in fact, start at another point that goes back a few works earlier. But generally you use the information you've gleaned out of recent sculpture making activities, and transfer it into the new works, so there's a sort of 'stepping forward' going on as well. It is a bit like following a thread, almost like a melody in the form, so that sculptures not only have some highly synthetic quality, but they would also become more synchronic.

Over time, however, there are passages in the work that need to be distinguished from one another. It becomes necessary for me to keep them apart in my mind, and so every now and again, without forcing it, a mental tag crops up in my mind (as

indicated with *Early Forms* and *Rational Beings*). These become 'species' of work and so we get sculptures belonging to a certain family, and then there are other families, and then there are relationships between these families etc..., and I think this has happened quite naturally. Firstly, it's convenient for me and, secondly, it's possibly the way the world just developed biologically anyway: from simple cells developing into more complicated, specialised forms.

JW: *What happens when it comes to bronze casts? Do you see them as an edition, a kind of series, or as another version altogether?*

TC: They're versions. Bronze casting is a making technique that is very valuable because it solidifies forms making them permanent, or relatively permanent. It is a good way of fixing forms in bronze and a good way of reproducing them, but they're never quite the same. There are versions that are very different in terms of their patina and through the ways their surfaces have been worked on. I've never made a group of more than six sculptures anyway, and they were smaller works. There's not been a necessity to make a lot of versions of the same sculpture.

JW: *Although they end up in bronze, where does the process of making an 'Early Form' begin?*

TC: *Early Forms* start with vessels that will then transform into one another. I start with a cross-sectional image of the vessel, made in wood, and then I place these image-templates next to each other and so they seem to move through into one another. The volumes between the templates have to be filled out with a material like polystyrene or plaster and then the form has to be carved so that the form and the migrations of the volumes become clear. Then the surfaces have to be worked, and the ends finished, so that the vessel ends in a half volume of itself.

JW: *What kind of vessels do you like to use?*

TC: The first *Early Forms* I made were based on chemical flasks, which I found interesting because they were very pragmatic, rational forms which had been developed out of their alchemical origins. In the sculptures I made, all the vessels

were either standing or lying on the floor (they aren't flying, or up in the air or anything) and so they had clear relationship to the floor. Then after these early pieces it was a case of looking for different vessels to see what they could do, and then of mixing up industrial vessels with archaic ones - mixing ancient forms with functional forms like jam jars - so that somehow the forms also seemed to mix up time, in a sense. In the first works the vessels tended to be of a similar size, but in other works, some templates were much bigger than others, so the final thing looked very organic, with bulbous growth or with entrails protruding. This development became overly organic from my point of view, so I decided to cut it right back down so that there would be an exterior volume, like a cylinder or rod, and then fit the movements of the vessels into that arrangement, as is the case with *Rod* and *Cancan*.

JW: *Are the transformations between vessels you've described conducted intuitively by hand or do you also use computers?*

TC: These works are not realities, they're fictions. They're my own fantasy and the basis for them is my emotion about the form I'm making. When I started making them in the middle of the 1980s, it probably wouldn't have been possible to compute them. In fact, it was a man called Charles Hirsch from the university in Brussels, who actually offered to try and compute them, and there wasn't then an adequate programme to compute the morphology of a form and then to cat-scan the sections in order to manufacture it. Nowadays that's very easy technology, and there are lots of programmes through which you can actually move the form onto the other.

When I started to make the works I call *Rational Beings* there were other reasons for calculating the basic geometric forms which are at the root of these works. Obviously, it was very easy to make circles - you don't need a computer, you can just use a big compass - but I then decided that I was going to use ovals or ellipses. I could see that it was much easier to calculate an ellipse on a computer than it was to work it out in any other way, so it became very valuable. So now I'm using a computer to actually stretch the templates of the work that I'm doing, but at the same time it's really just like using a tool, an adequate tool, to make the thing I want to make. The templates evolve out of drawings and once I have the templates, then I still have a lot of my own subjective work to do: to work out how I feel about the volume or the silhouette, the

outline, the form or the surface etc...and those are things that one couldn't even start to compute.

JW: More generally, do you think that digital imaging has impacted greatly upon sculpture's possibilities?

I think now is actually an interesting point in time because, in a sense, whatever photography was for painting in the middle of the nineteenth century, computers might be for sculpture today. It's worth considering, because all painting after the advent of photography is either based on photography or based on the reaction against photography, so it's as if having a photographic image somehow alleviates the artist of the necessity of having certain skills. In terms of sculpture, it's more difficult to represent things in three dimensions, and it's taken a hundred and fifty years to have an equivalent facility to make, or to facilitate the making of a three-dimensional form. It's so new that one can't talk about it bringing memory with it, because the account of the thing we're looking at still isn't old enough. We're not at the point yet that we're using automatic form-making technology for the sake of memory.

It's definitely going to open up a lot of new possibilities, but the first problem is that in the same way we're talking about photographic imagery in terms of bits and bytes, 35mm, 6mm, black and white, kodachrome, ektachrome and all that sort of stuff and in doing that formatting picture making. We're dealing with a formatted reality, that is already there in picture-making and this is becoming a very dominating phenomenon and this could well apply to sculpture making soon. The dominance of photographic imagery brings with it today the crushing out of the possibility of making new images and impoverishes the visual language. So the quest for me now is to get away from a formatted reality, reality as made by industrial systems, whether it's a two-by-one piece of wood or whether it's a pixel.

If you're looking at welded steel sculpture of the fifties, you're still only looking at works that are made accumulatively out of industrial material and in an industrial format. So you're using that industrial format, which is utilitarian reality. We're back to the same point, of blinding and limiting our reality, and so I wonder if the danger of using sophisticated computer tools for making sculpture is that we might end up with

the same thing. There is a real danger of formatting things like sculpture, because formatisation is an expedient of the utilitarian production systems which produce the whole of the boring sub-standard industrial reality around us.

***JW:** So with this high level of awareness of this pre-formatted reality we all live in, are you a sculptor who has constantly been trying to work beyond the pre-existent?*

TC: Absolutely. I mean, when you walk down the street, and you look at the world around us, everything you see is made from industrial manufacturing systems. Utilitarianism is the biggest censor on our reality because only useful things actually survive.

It's not just a matter of the forms, it's also operative on a layer underneath form, in the substance and it's there that we find the format driving things. Industrial systems have already formatted material to such an enormous degree. The sculptor doesn't want to end up making useful things, because he's trying to make forms that will exist outside of this limited utilitarian censored reality. The sculptor has got to get away from format, and that's one of the great things about using clay. It is a route to setting up a sculptural alternative to the industrial utilitarian reality. If you use plywood you've got to completely pervert it, in a sense, because otherwise it's just going to be like plywood. Obviously you can use those materials, but you have to make them do things they weren't intended to do, and use them for things that they weren't supposed to be doing.

***JW:** So what kinds of things does a sculptor like you want to make?*

TC: Well, when you see a room like this, full of objects, everything you're looking at is a kind of high peak of reality, and there's a word attached to each peak: 'saw', 'hammer', 'chair', 'table', 'bicycle', 'bag' etc...The things we see here in this room are kinds of hybrids of what's necessary, but there are thousands and thousands of other forms that don't yet exist. These could also be valuable, and they are valuable, because they still could provide meaning, they could still be used as metaphors, they could still be used as language, and they could still be used in thoughts and fantasies and dreams, and so on...and those freedoms that they represent are basically still in

our head, and the best way to use our head is to have a great language to work in. And so I think that to improve the visual language that you are working with is what sculptors want to do.

JW: *You have described the visual language of your 'Rational Beings' as having an 'emotional vocabulary', can you elaborate on this?*

TC: By emotional vocabulary I mean how you actually feel about forms: how you look at them and have certain emotions. You can work through forms, and working through the form, you can develop any part of the language as well....and so I started introducing profiles - human profiles, readable profiles - into the silhouette of the works. That was important for me because there's obviously enormous emotional baggage that comes with being able to read that subtle anthropomorphic quality. I always thought that it was erroneous to think of them as portraits, I mean they're not portraits. We have an ability to look at a cloud and see a face, or we look into some vegetation and see a face, because we have this enormous facility to recognise profiles and faces, so it's almost inevitable that when there are no faces to look at, our brain is revving all the time, looking for parameters for two eyes, and a nose, and a mouth, and some ears. Alongside that we can recognise millions of different faces, without ever mixing them up.

However, I would like to think that my *Rational Being* sculpture works in a different way, in the reverse of that, so that you look at the work, and you see a face, and in seeing the face, it leads you to look into the material and then look at the other forms. And, the minute you look back into the form, away from the profile and into the surface of the work, you step away from the normal, axial view of the work and you start to have 'extra-ordinary' experiences of sculptural volumes.

JW: *Perhaps I can end by asking you about such sculptural experiences - for those walking around the sculptures on display in Nuremberg?*

TC: There's an idea that sculpture is something solid and static, and that it's a frozen moment of time, it's like the sculpture is a memory in its own way. Sculpture is relatively solid, for the main part, but so is our everyday material reality.

None of these things were here, in this room last week, we weren't here, an hour ago, and this building wasn't here three years ago, and the road wasn't here twenty years ago, and every year there's been a new crop and new vegetation...and so although the world looks very solid, actually it's incomplete - it's totally flowing the whole time. However, looking at sculpture somehow the world can suddenly fix up again. Yet, what I think is important for me is something different: a sculptural quality that doesn't emulate time. It's not a futurist concern which shows the path of a slice of time or of some emotion. It's not showing motion, but there is a passage in it that's relevant, so that the form has a beginning, and it has an end, and it has an in-between, so there is some sense of passage, there is a sense of flow, there is an intuition of flow in the sculpture.

I do like a certain sense of fluidity in the work and in doing this exhibition, in particular, I would like to achieve the sense that this population of sculptures, which are now moved into the gallery, are also in a kind of fluid state. The way I work and the energy I try to get into making things - making that work and the next and then the next - is to somehow to develop a sense of flow in the wider body of my own work. In a sense, an exhibition is just an opportunity to see what it all looks like from outside, just so that I can see the work flow over the last year, the last five years, the last ten years etc.. and feel the passage of that time. I'd like to use the opportunity of this exhibition to stage a 'family get-together' of *Rational Beings* and the *Early Forms*. Maybe there might be some cross-pollination, perhaps in terms of form and definitely in terms of their content and feeling...

JW: *And for viewers walking around the works, looking across early work and later work, what would you like them to take away with them?*

TC: I just want to give them an alternative: an alternative to looking at nature, and an alternative to looking at a dull-headed industrial utilitarian reality. Every sculptor wants to give you an alternative to looking at nature. You know nature is wonderful and interesting, and will be the source of everything, but ultimately, as sculptors, we have to express ourselves on our own terms.