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Beauty That's No Illusion

By Willard Spiegelman

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If you suggest that artists should create beautiful things, you risk being branded an old fogey. Still, few major artists today make objects as joyously beautiful as the British sculptor Tony Cragg, whose work is having its first U.S. exhibition in two decades at the Nasher Sculpture Center.

Twenty-eight extraordinary pieces in a variety of ordinary substances—stainless steel, stone, bronze, plywood, plexiglass and mixed media—look handsome inside the Nasher's capacious, light-filled bays, and outside as well. These are joined, in a smaller gallery, by Cragg's hypnotizing paper works: sketches, drawings, watercolors, doodles that achieve a charming sublimity. Some of these look like Chuck Close paintings. Up close you see squares and circles, ones and zeroes, or mere jottings. Move farther back: A figure comes clearly into view.



Clockwise from left: 'Elbow' (2008); 'Outspan' (2008); 'Ever After' (2006); 'Ever After' (2010); 'Runner' (2009); 'Early Forms (St. Gallen)' (1997).

KEVIN TODORA

TONY CRAGG: SEEING THINGS

†Nasher Sculpture Center

‡Through Jan. 8

But it's the three-dimensional pieces that take your breath away. Sculpture is about the relationships among materials, shapes and forms, space, and an artist's methods and theories. In Mr. Cragg's case, the relation between surface and depth is equally important. Some of his pieces invite us to peer into cavelike crevasses, one thing embodied within another. Take the handsome "Ferryman," a double figure of perforated bronze that greets visitors at the Nasher's entrance. At first you may think you've encountered an abstract form resembling a seal or walrus, some upright creature. Up close, it's one sculpture within another: The piece is ferrying itself. And the plywood "See You," almost nine feet tall, asks you to squint into an inner space barely visible from afar. Hardness gives way to porousness, drawing you in but also inhibiting entry. Solidity cooperates, rather than competes, with openness.

Mr. Cragg began making art from tossed-out plastic objects decades ago when he started scavenging. In the current show, we have "Eroded Landscape" (1998), a gorgeous stacking of cheap hand-etched and sand-blasted glassware of different sizes and shapes (Morandi in three dimensions!). It embodies an elegant fragility, a random order, the given and the made. Equally playful in its makeshift substantiality is the 1999 "Congregation," many pieces of wood covered with metal hooks, an assemblage of found objects including a rowboat. From afar it looks like a hairy character in an Ed Koren New Yorker cartoon, bristling with whiskers or fur.

More substantial are Mr. Cragg's heavier pieces. A horizontal bronze, "Early Forms (St. Gallen)," curved and curling on the ground, commands its space. A smaller bronze, painted red ("Sinbad"), is as tightly bound as a spring.

Mr. Cragg makes works with family resemblances. "Early Forms" are one group; they complement the show's largest sculptures, "Rational Beings." These include vertical, columnar plywood constructions that seem to defy gravity. Although not figurative, some of them have the heft of great Rodin sculptures like his "Balzac." Some seem to totter, some to balance like cantilevers. The red "Divide" soars perilously, looking like so many tectonic plates, massed and carved, moving in and out of one another. More horizontal is "Elbow," like an airplane about to take off. In all the plywood pieces you can also cherish the supple layering caused by the lamination.

They also invite us to play the old figure-and-ground game. From several angles you see, in all of them, profiles of human faces—noses, mouths, chins—and you know that abstraction does not preclude figuration.

Mr. Cragg achieves the same stratifying effect—iterating "Rational Beings," these columns with hints of faces—in other media. As in a family, you recognize the similarities and differences that unite and separate individual constituents. The red steel "Mixed Feelings" looks like a pile of giant communion wafers. The bronze "Accurate Figure," 77 inches tall, maintains a tensile balance. The eight-foot bronze "It Is, It Isn't" (Mr. Cragg's titles are often suggestive or just mysterious), with several of those protruding, quasihuman "faces," tempts the viewer, as do most of these, to caress the material.

Mr. Cragg's art is at once serious and playful. As a counter to the solidity of the work in bronze, steel, even plywood, he also makes pieces like the painted white fiberglass "Companions," gourdlike extrusions spreading gracefully in all directions. It is light in several senses. So is "Secretions," a solid work covered with plastic dice that looks from afar like folk art, perhaps a handmade basket. Is the core secreting the dice? Are the dice pressing from without to make a core? Is there a secret in the sequence of dice? What is skin, what are bones? We're back to the question of inside and outside.

Mr. Cragg has always called himself a "materialist." What sculptor would not say the same? What makes him important is his transformation of raw matter into art that transcends but never allows us to forget its material. These pieces, alone and together, provoke instant and long-lasting joy.

Mr. Spiegelman is the Hughes Professor of English and the editor-in-chief of the Southwest Review at Southern Methodist University.