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I had wanted to give my sculpture the immediacy one feels talking one-to-one with another person.
Anthony Caro, 1994¹

Introduction

In October 2008 Anthony Caro commenced a remarkable new series of sculptures. Almost a year later, of the 20 works that developed, eight are complete and the rest are still in the artist's studio in various stages of advancement. Even as these large-scale constructions continue to progress it is already clear that they are motivated by similar, shared preoccupations. Collectively, a family resemblance binds them, lending unity and a sense of common ground. As has been the case for almost 50 years, welded scrap steel remains the basis of Caro's sculptural language. In these recent works, I-beams, machine parts, fragments of engineering tools, large bollards, chain links and other elements that reveal their maritime origins are combined. Some incorporate massive sections of wood resembling railway sleepers. But the unity that connects these sculptures transcends the facts of their physical appearance. They seem connected because, despite marked variations in individual character, each advances the same powerful impression: that of an irresistible *presence*.

To stand in proximity to one of these sculptures is to be made immediately aware of a separate, assertive, material existence occupying a shared space. Yet, even as the viewer must become accustomed to being, in a sense, not alone, a further impression is that these works possess a character which is at once so unfamiliar and self-contained that they stand somewhat apart. They inhabit a territory, which is in real space and yet, at some deeper level, is unconnected with the viewer's domain. *Brake Press Head* (2008; fig.1), which was one of the first of the group to be made, encapsulates this dichotomy. The work's dominant feature is the machine part that figures in its title, an engineering tool used for bending metal, which protrudes like a giant nose from the centre of the sculpture. Indeed, such is the nature of this aquiline shape that the adjacent parts suggest other facial characteristics: eyes, cheeks and a mouth. The work has an emphatically physical nature. It is almost aggressively confrontational in the way that it stands directly on the ground, square-on, with its suggestion of head-like features. In these ways the sculpture possesses a vivid immediacy. Yet even as these characteristics begin to cohere, the work asserts its parallel nature as an abstract object: self-contained, autonomous, without function. It advances a completely independent existence: in the world, but not of it. Testing the boundaries between life and art, such sculptures declare a presence at once tangible yet elusive. As such, they continue – and extend in significant ways – concerns present in Caro's work from the outset.

The imperative to invest his sculpture with presence was evident at an early stage. Interviewed by Andrew Forge in 1965, Caro commented: 'I wanted

to make something that was as important in a room as a person.'² This aim underpins the massive figurative sculptures he made between 1954 and 1959. These early works depict large lumpen figures sitting, lying down, twisting and rising. They were made by impressing clay with rocks and pebbles and then casting the results in bronze. Awkward and ungainly, the sculptures assert a burgeoning material presence. Indeed, their central, connecting theme is that of the sheer physicality of occupying a body: a pliant mass, subject to gravity and carrying its own weight, taxed by the effort required to exert movements. Burdened, as it were, with the substantial fact of their own existence, these figurative sculptures seek to evoke an impression of being that equates with, or resembles, that of a living individual.

But while Caro's comments are an apt encapsulation of this early phase of figurative work, it is perhaps surprising that his words were addressed more precisely to the entirely abstract constructions in steel that he had made from 1960 onwards. The breakthrough that he made in that year established an entirely new, non-figurative language of pure shape and, later, bright colour. This not only eschewed literal references to the human body but positively banished such readings. Tellingly, in his conversation with Forge, Caro added that in seeking to invest his sculpture with something that had the impressive force of a living individual: 'I found it wasn't possible to do this by making a person-type sculpture.'³ This apparent paradox is formed, on one side, by the will to create sculpture that possesses the presence of an individual and, on the other, by the discovery that to achieve this aim it is necessary to remove literal references to the figure. Some light may be shed on this seeming contradiction by considering in more detail what is implied by the notion of presence.

It is commonplace to speak of individuals, creatures, places or objects having a 'presence'. This is made specific when it is said that they possess 'a certain presence', implying a particular character or set of circumstances. Some people may be described as charismatic, suggesting a presence that fills a space, drawing and holding attention by virtue of some special quality of interest or attractiveness. A place may also intimate some special character or quality arising from its spatial features. Although such impressions may be difficult to define, they constitute a singular experience, at once vivid and recognisable. Essential to that experience is an awareness of an individual's or object's independent existence. There is a sense of their separate otherness and state of being, situated outside one's own body and place. At a fundamental level, presence is inextricably bound up with an impression of some other plane or site of existence being physically present – being *there*: in proximity and in relation to oneself.

Of course, all persons and things possess these qualities to some extent. However, the attribute of presence becomes noticeable and identifiable when this sense of an independent existence is heightened in some way. To a large degree this arises from the physical characteristics of the observed person or thing. Particular corporeal features influence the extent and nature of the way someone or something makes their presence felt. Size, stature, shape and

Fig.1
Brake Press Head, 2008
Steel and jarrah wood
185.5 x 145 x 81.5 cm (73 x 57 x 32 in)
(T0104)



PREVIOUS PAGE
The Horse, 1961 (plate 4)

These give the sculptures a permeable character, their interiors being exposed to the flow of light from outside.

The most fully developed expression of this line of thought came in 1991. In the latter part of the preceding year, the Tate Gallery had commissioned Caro to make a sculpture that would be a response to the Sackler Octagon. This imposing circular space is positioned at the centre of the galleries that form the spine of the building. The project was enormously complex and at the heart of the challenges it presented was the idea of the sculpture's presence. The work had to be considered in careful relation to its surroundings, neither dominating nor being swallowed by a large architectural space. But, beyond these requirements, Caro was also determined that the work should not only respond to the gallery's architecture but itself have an architectural character. In this way, the *Tower of Discovery* (1991; plate 47), as it became known, would be a fully expressive abstract sculpture, not a piece of architecture, but would invite the viewer's physical exploration of its interior.

Given these complexities, on this occasion Caro broke with what had been

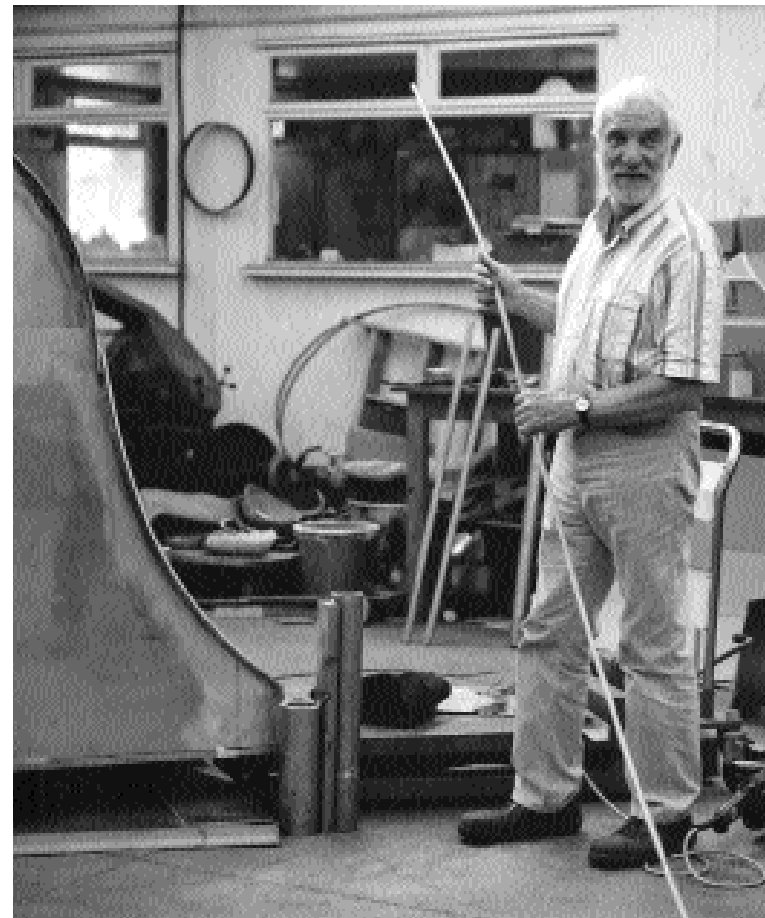


Fig.17
Caro working in his Camden Town studio, 1990s

an invariable practice. Instead of working directly on the sculpture, he made a one-third-scale model in steel which proceeded alongside the construction of the work itself. This enabled him to try out ideas on the model before committing to their incorporation within the larger sculpture. At an early stage, he also abandoned his original thought to work in wood. The intensely complicated interaction of shapes, planes, levels, steps and other elements precluded this approach in the time available. Instead, the *Tower* took shape in steel, being built by a team of welder-fitters using methods that veered close to architecture. Yet, throughout, they were governed by an eye that saw these developments always, ultimately, as sculpture. Although the work had to accommodate a human presence, at the same time it had to work in freely expressive, abstract terms.

The resulting construction is a marriage of two languages. An architect's concern with the passage of people through space is enlivened by the artist's play of imagination and his instinct for pure structure unconstrained by function. Comprising five staircases accessible from outside, and a sixth spiral staircase rising within, the sculpture admits the viewer, who explores a confined and constantly changing sequence of internal passages and spaces. Ascending and descending, occasionally emerging on one of three levels, the inhabitant and the sculpture become co-existent. The presence of one informs the other.

Physically occupying a sculpture in this way marked an advance into territory that for so long had been off-limits. Having taken this position, Caro now moved freely between the different but related lines he had opened up. From the 1990s his work is characterised by a remarkable diversity. But from the perspective of its presence, there are clear tributaries. In recent years, the development of this central theme has embraced ideas of physical relation with the viewer. There has been a new growing involvement with the idea of psychological depth. Throughout, there has been an engagement with abstract form underpinned by allusion. These alternative tracks were pursued independently but they also nourished each other. As a result, overall such advances have a rich breadth underpinned by a single preoccupation that has remained constant: that his work should have an assertive intrinsic reality whose fundamental nature is expressive.

Following the *Tower of Discovery*, Caro pursued its architectonic implications in other, subsequent large-scale works that test the boundaries with architecture in myriad ways. In 1994 he commenced what would become a

Fig.18
The Yellow Room, 2005–6
Steel and cast iron, galvanised and painted
186.5 x 230 x 180 cm (73½ x 90½ x 71 in)
(T0043)



20 Garland

1970

Steel, painted green and red

140 x 429.5 x 376 cm (55 x 169 x 148 in)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Anonymous gift
(B936)

Garland represents the full maturity of the language Caro had developed in the preceding decade. At the centre of these developments is the principle of *relation* – between the elements that comprise the sculptures themselves, and between the sculpture and the viewer. With its window-like element, *Garland* suggests a sense of place that exists within the sculpture. The curved elements enliven this self-contained area, imparting an impression of pure, abstract, movement. At the same time, this expressive ensemble confronts the viewer directly, activating real space and declaring its presence in the physical world.



29 Tundra

1975

Steel, waxed

272 x 579 x 132 cm (107 x 228 x 52 in)

Tate Gallery, London
(B1114)

In *Tundra* Caro hints at those forms in nature that inspire a sense of awe or wonder. Echoing vast expanses of landscape, the sculpture has an analogous sense of massive breadth. Extending his use of flat sheet steel, Caro eschews detail in seeking a raw power of expression and an imposing physical presence. As in the experience of landscape, the sculpture is experienced as an overall entity – as a single fact – rather than as an agglomeration of individual details.



42 Xanadu

1986-8
Steel, waxed and varnished
240 x 622 x 162.5 cm (94 1/2 x 245 x 64 in)
Caro Family Collection
(B1915)

Xanadu followed *After Olympia* (1986-7; plate 41) and was also intended as a response to Greek pedimental sculpture. However, during the process of its making the sculpture took on other associations. It is linked with one of Caro's favourite paintings, Matisse's *Bathers by a River* (1909-10, 1913 and 1916-17; fig.15), which, in formal terms, it resembles.



62 Ceres

2008–9

Steel and jarrah wood

242 x 200 x 134 cm (95¼ x 78¾ x 52¾ in)
(T0110)

Like *Erl King* (2009; plate 61), *Ceres* uses a language of allusion rather than imitation. Comprising steel from an engineering scrapyard, the sculpture has a raw, confrontational presence. This arises from its frontal nature: it seems to have a face and a profile. In this way it resembles a human head, an impression which reinforces its assertive character. But such connotations are resemblances only. It does not depict. As a sculpture it is, as Caro says, 'itself'.

