

A portrait of artist Conrad Shawcross in his workshop. The artist is seated on the right, wearing a dark red V-neck shirt. The workshop is filled with various tools, materials, and finished works. A large, glowing orange sculpture, resembling a thick, curved line, dominates the foreground. In the background, a large window lets in bright light, and a sign on the wall reads "PLEASE Tie HAIR BACK".

BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE SCULPTURE OF THE YOUNG BRITISH ARTIST **CONRAD SHAWCROSS** LOOKS LIKE THE PRODUCT OF AN OVERACTIVE, FRENZIED BUT BRILLIANT MIND. LOOK AGAIN, THOUGH, AND HIS HYPNOTIC CREATIONS TAKE YOU FURTHER, TO A PLACE WHERE THE WORLDS OF ART AND SCIENCE COLLIDE.

TEXT NICK HACKWORTH PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY ROBI RODRIGUEZ



It looks demented. The long arm of the wooden machine, which sits on the floor all struts, bolts and shafts, spins round at the neurotic rate of 200 revolutions per minute. At its end, set perpendicular to it, is a smaller arm, at the end of which is a lit light bulb, that performs its own frantic orbit. The machine looks as if it will fall apart at any moment under the strain of its own motion. But simultaneously the single spinning light bulb becomes, due to the speed of its movement, a floating line of light that traces an undulating circle upon the retina, a form that survives for a while as an after-image and seems entirely divorced from the violence of its creation. I make my observations to Conrad Shawcross, the 26-year-old creator of the machine, who, clearly adept at deflating the poetic pretensions of critics, says of the luminescent form, "Yes, it look likes a Pringle."

We are looking at "Skelter", a recent piece occupying much of the space in Shawcross's shared studio-cum-living space in Dalston, east London. Typical of his work, it is a machine of sorts, functioning but useless. Like "The Nervous System", the enormous rope machine that dominated his debut solo show at London's Entwistle Gallery last year, "Skelter" exudes a distinctively Shawcross aesthetic, with its strong, unclad, skeletal structure formed from oak struts and, again like the rope machine, gently alludes to various elements and phenomena described by science.

"I've always been fascinated by science, as much by its folly as by its wisdom," Shawcross explains. "It's like a building that builds upon itself, its previous theories. That creates instability because it always improves but it undermines and reinvents itself too. I try to get some sense of that weakness and wisdom in my pieces, which are in a sense follies themselves."

Follies or not, Shawcross's unique combination of characteristics has proved a winning one; his debut on the British art scene was one of the most successful for years, conjuring adulatory reviews from critics and the presence of the ubiquitous Charles Saatchi, who bought "The Nervous System" for his collection.

Just over a decade ago, Saatchi was busy fostering the fledgling Damien Hirst and his contemporaries. But, since then, the art world has grown, becoming far slicker. In this increasingly competitive atmosphere, the intensity with which everyone wants to avoid missing out on the Next Big Thing – like they did with the YBA's – is palpable. So the steepness of Shawcross's trajectory seems assured. He has already been booked in for a major national exhibition touring major venues in the north of England in 2005. This year, meanwhile, brings a show in Munich and a slot at America's top art fair, The Armory Show in New York, where he is likely to follow on from success at the inaugural Frieze Art Fair in London, where Alexander McQueen bought his piece "Inversal". Shawcross, though, seems to be handling the pressure



Skelter 2003. Museum 52

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pretty well, commenting only that, "I sometimes worry these commercial spaces create a detrimental context for my work. I worry they might constrain my ambitions".

It is pleasing that Shawcross's work has been so well received. It proves a willingness to embrace oddity, since these machines are indeed odd creations for the modern age. While they manage to look perfectly contemporary, their form and aesthetic recall the wooden devices and proto-machines of the Industrial Revolution. That visual connection with the past is generated not only by the structure of the work or his predominant use of wood, but also from the clearly invested labour, for the machines look, rightly, like they take planning, skill and time to build – harking back to an age of craft. It is in a craft sense that these works are beautiful, and beauty is important to Shawcross.

"Yes I want to make things beautiful, look right. I think that makes them more approachable for people who haven't got an art background. Also, of course, beautiful things survive and have longevity. People place a value on them because they need them. I don't

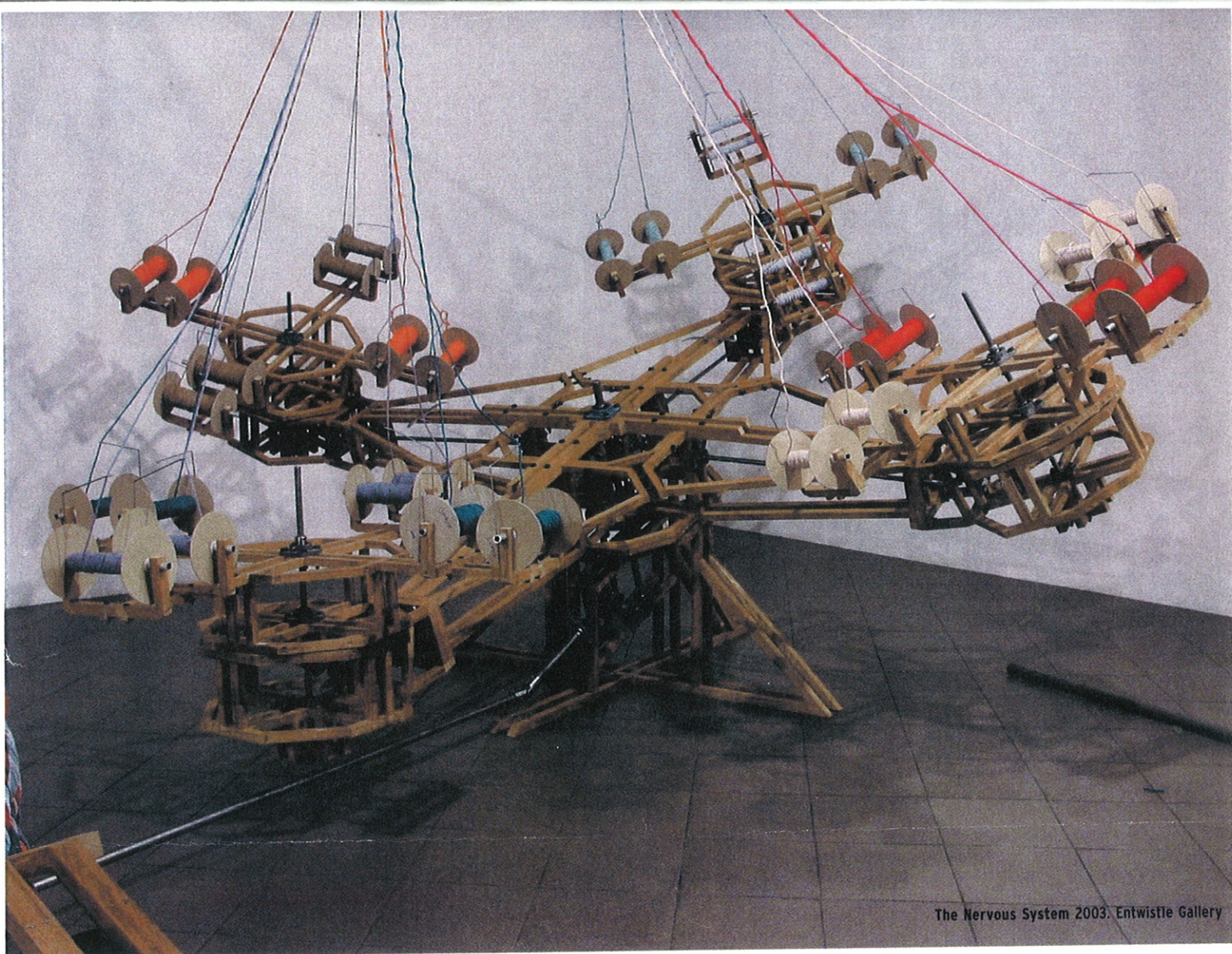
want to place a particular merit on things that are beautiful, but it's just a truth."

Those historical connections are extended further, if slightly tangentially, since the mechanics and the science that Shawcross's pieces allude to tend also to be pre-modern. The slow but relentless cycles of the twin hubs upon "The Nervous System" echo the motion of Orreries, the 18th century mechanical models that represented the movement of the planets. Similarly, the ethereal light shapes made by "Skelter" are to an extent updated versions of the mathematically determined rounded patterns drawn by the Harmonograph, a kind of Victorian Spirograph. Yet the pieces are not simply specific historical quotations made into material form.

"They are to an extent actualisations of metaphors, but they are not just machines that demonstrate scientific principles. If they were, they wouldn't be art. There has to be a twist."

Moreover, as Shawcross goes on to point out that "Skelter's" light shapes "also resemble the circles of energy which are the basic element in string theory. If you look at 'The Nervous System' it can seem almost biological, like the two hemispheres of the brain attached to the spinal cord. Or sometimes, I think of the threads as being capillaries which combine in the centre as the double helix structured rope, like an enarged vein that snakes up the throat."

All this strangeness is, of course, unsurprising. Contemporary art is an odd space; odder than film, music or literature, whose histories suffered less radical breaks and revolutions. Much of that strangeness comes from the schizophrenic relationship that much contemporary art has with history, which is remembered or forgotten according to the needs of the artist or the gallery. But however much history is abused in the art world, it itself cannot escape history. Looking at the work of Shawcross and some of his contemporaries, such as the sculptors Nathaniel



The Nervous System 2003. Entwistle Gallery

Rackowe and Petroc Sesti or the photographers Justin Coombes and Joe Duggan, it is possible to discern the process whereby younger artists instinctively revolt against the customs and sensibilities of older generations and so surpass them. For Shawcross and this generation of 20 something British artists are very different to the YBA's. Even though the YBA's themselves were a disparate bunch, squeezed into a collective acronym by Saatchi, they had a tight bond with pop culture and its pseudo-shocking content. This generation – though just as eclectic – is far less invested in popular culture and its loaded images, but instead pursues its own esoteric paths. Proving the point, aside from mentioning Mike Nelson, the British artist who was short-listed for the Turner prize in 2001 for his narrative filled installations, Shawcross cannot name any particular artists who have influenced him. Like many artists, Shawcross just does what he does, leaving it to the art historians and critics to play "join-the-dots" and so create movements, categories and distinguishing lineages.

On that note, Shawcross might well have been happy treading the streets of Moscow in the salad days of the Bolshevik regime. His work has much in common with a group of Russian modernists who, in a time when artists were avant-garde heroes, pushing back the boundaries of culture, sought to create a radical new art to match the radical new social relationships that had been forged in the heat of revolution. In fact, works like "Skelter" fulfil, to the letter, the demands made by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner who, like the Italian Futurists a decade before them, wanted to undermine the myopic restraint of bourgeois art. The Russians in their Realistic Manifesto of 1920 "renounced the thousand-year old Egyptian error in art which considered static elements in pictorial art. We affirm a new element in pictorial art, kinetic

rhythms, as the basic forms of feeling in our time". They declared their work four dimensional, as they had brought in the element of time, just as much of Shawcross's work does. They vaunted the aesthetics of construction and engineering, renouncing mass and surface, as Shawcross does, ("I am not interested in surfaces"). As in their work, the form of Shawcross's work is dictated by its function. As "Skelter" does, true kinetic artworks create forms in space by moving. So here, we might say, we have a Russian modernist living in 21st century east London.

But the era of the manifesto is long gone. Nor did Shawcross arrive at his work via some ironic rehash of the manifestos of kinetic art. Instead, his forms have flourished almost organically from a particular mix of the myriad elements to be found in our cultural environment. They are physical accretions, dynamic and self-possessed that combine beauty, history, science and folly in equal measure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CONRAD SHAWCROSS CHECK
WWW.ENTWISTLEGALLERY.COM.