

Arts

'See a pigephant, it'll scare the s*** out of you'

LOOK, a nipple!" I exclaim, and point to the offending part of the sculpture. "What nipple?" says Tony Cragg, sounding mildly irritated. We are standing in a large, airy studio in Wuppertal, the German city that has been home to Cragg for the past 24 years, and to which he was drawn by the accident of love.

Staring at one of a recent series of sculptures that he has dubbed Early Forms, Cragg, prominent British sculptor, Royal Academician and a past winner of the Turner Prize, makes a confession. "Actually, someone recently saw this piece and told me I should have been a gynaecologist." Looking at the suggestive curves of the abstract bronze and its dark, mysterious voids, you can't help but agree that Cragg's retrospective career adviser might have had a point.

Luckily, Cragg stuck to art. Belonging to a generation of sculptors, including Richard Deacon and Anish Kapoor, who dominated the British art scene in the Eighties, Cragg has now reached a stage in his career where both his place in art history and his market value are assured. He, thus, no longer needs to court media attention in the rabid fashion of the Young Turks that follow in his stead. Nevertheless, as his forthcoming show at the Lisson Gallery and the recently installed works on the River Terrace at Somerset House testify, Cragg has remained busy.

In the main part of his studio a small army of assistants are at work and a series of new sculptures destined for the Lisson are taking shape. In one corner, a hairy young man is carving into an eight-foot column of polystyrene oval slices glued on top of each other. It is a model that will be taken to a foundry in nearby Dusseldorf and used to

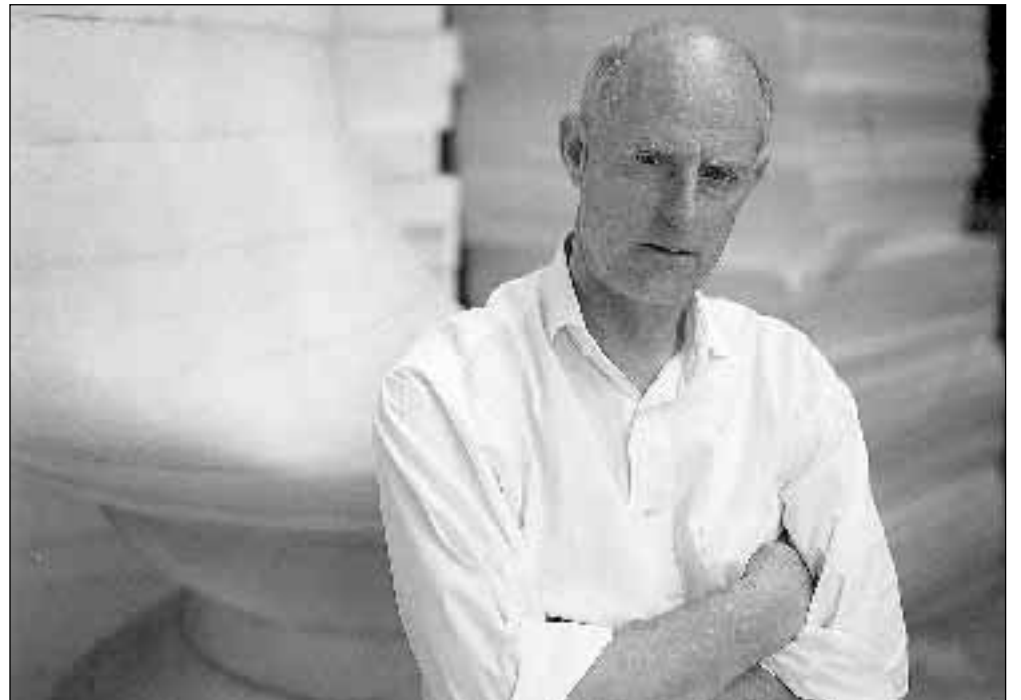
Turner Prize winner Tony Cragg's powerful sculptures are suggestive, mysterious, but never useful. He tells Nick Hackworth why

make a mould for a bronze casting. As Cragg explains, the tall, undulating shape is similar to the sandstone piece called, appropriately enough, Column, that has just taken pride of place on the River Terrace.

Cragg quickly sketches a map of the terrace on to the surface of a table in felt-tip. Four large blobs indicate the pieces. "And here," he says, stabbing at a mass of smaller blobs, "are people having their nosh" — diners at Oliver Peyton's Summer Café who, in terms of sculpture viewing, have ringside seats. Also occupying the terrace are two more Early Forms, which look like melted car engines that fold in on themselves, and a massive three-part sculpture, recently rescued from the abortive Dome, made of green bullet-proof Kevlar.

Cragg has always been interested in unusual sculptural materials but seems to have developed an unhealthy fascination with Kevlar and begins enthusing about his sculpture's indestructibility. "Of course, they'd be a mess if you shot at it, but the bullets wouldn't go through. Oh, by the way," he adds, "please don't print that, someone might start shooting at it."

As Cragg goes into graphic detail about his work and "the pure language of sculpture", I notice a transformation in his voice, which



Resisting the functional world: Tony Cragg

still retains something of his native Liverpool. His vowels become shorter, his consonants harder and his s's become z's. He is slipping into a German accent. Suspecting that Cragg is teasing me, I allow the disconcerting change to pass unmentioned.

It is with a German inflection that Cragg describes the development of his art from his Seventies figurative, mural-like pieces of found, brightly coloured plastic objects (a prime example, Britain Seen From The North, hangs above the staircase of Tate Britain's new extension), to the bolder, abstract, three-dimensional work he makes today.

I ATTEMPT to formulate a succinct and penetrating conclusion to my existential questioning, but end up with the devastatingly clumsy: "Er, so what exactly is it you think you are doing?" After a moment of silence and an unreadable look on Cragg's drawn face, he matches the question with a direct answer: For him, the man-made environment is ugly and boring: everything is designed not to be beautiful or interesting, but to work. So far as Cragg is concerned, his sculptures derive their power from the very fact that they

aren't useful but are just there, forming little islands of resistance in an otherwise functional world. The poetic resonance of Cragg's explanation hangs in the air until he draws an unfortunate comparison between his work and the result of some perverse, hypothetical biotechnology experiment. "If you see a pig, you know it is a pig. If you see an elephant, you know it is an elephant. But," and he leans forward, fixes me with his gaze and declares triumphantly, "if you see a pigephant, it'll scare the shit out of you. Pretty soon, after you've recovered from your shock, you'll be forced to make decisions about the pigephant, like, 'Does it want to eat me' or 'Do I want to eat it?'"

Dazed by the pigephant, which also serves as an unwelcome reminder of the Bratwurst I have unwisely consumed at Dusseldorf airport, I have a nightmare vision of the sculptures and diners on the River Terrace eyeing each other up as potential lunch.

● Tony Cragg's sculptures are on show at the River Terrace, Somerset House, The Strand, WC2, until May 2002. His solo exhibition at the Lisson Gallery, NW1, runs 26 October to 14 December (020 7724 2739).

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