

Financial Times
May 25, 2013

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Man of steel

Ahead of his Venetian retrospective, Anthony Caro tells *Rachel Spence* about abstraction, sculpting metal and why he is now embracing Perspex



Just move those blankets so we get a better sense of the space," requests Sir Anthony Caro as he gazes at his sculpture, "Hopscotch". Instantly, a gaggle of young men spring forward. The offending heap of cloth is swept away from the gallery in Venice's Museo Correr and "Hopscotch" stands alone, an ethereal, asymmetrical concatenation of aluminium rods balanced precariously on wafer-thin struts.

The work is part of a survey show that will open at the Correr, Venice's most prestigious exhibition space, to coincide with this year's Biennale. Watching Caro, now in his 90th year, direct his team until each piece is installed exactly as he wishes, it is clear that his intensity and commitment have barely altered since he first showed at the Venice Biennale in 1966, when he was in the British pavilion with a quartet of painters. Since then, he has become one of the world's greatest living artists, with work in more than 200 public collections, a knighthood and an Order of Merit. He also distinguished himself as a teacher during a 30-year career at St Martin's School of Art, where students included Barry Flanagan, Richard Long and Gilbert & George.

By the time of his first Venetian expedition, he had already changed the face of British sculpture. It was in 1963, at a show at the Whitechapel Gallery, that Caro unveiled his mute yet mercurial abstractions welded out of industrial steel painted in Pop-bright colours. To a generation brought up on the monumental

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humanism of Henry Moore, Caro's sculptures, which he did not even dignify with a plinth, were revolutionary.

"I was in the Tate one day and I saw some Bacons and Dubuffets and Picassos, and I suddenly realised there was another way other than Henry's and that gave me a jolt," Caro replies when I ask him to elucidate his journey towards the Whitechapel revelations over macchiatos in the Correr's café overlooking St Mark's Square.

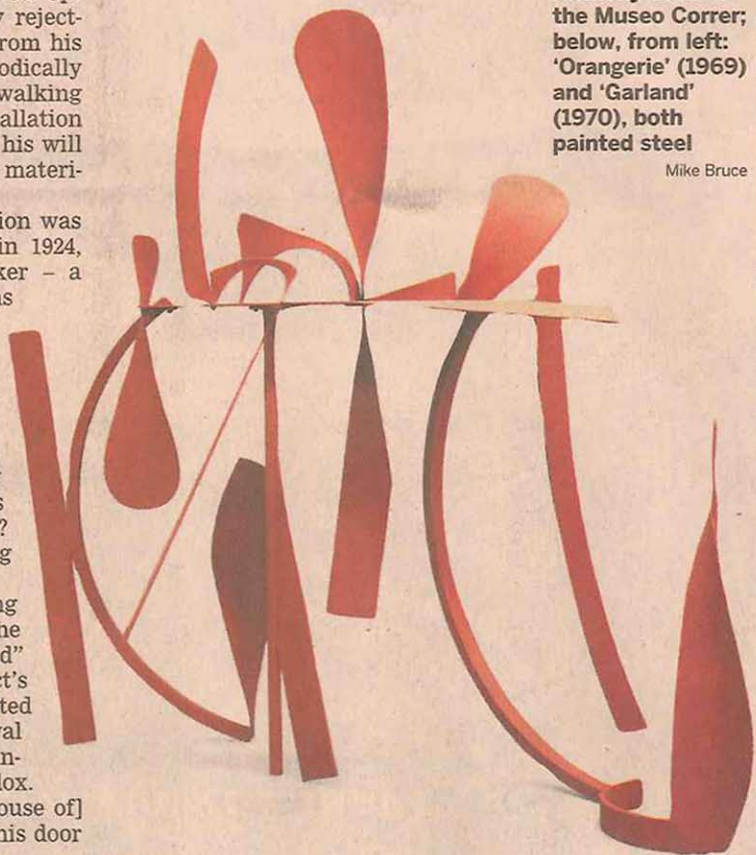
In his black polo-neck jumper and tweed jacket, his beard immaculately trimmed, Caro makes for an unlikely radical. Speaking in clipped, postwar Cambridge tones, he has a cordial, winning formality that is more redolent of *Brief Encounter* than *Blow-Up*. Yet whether he is courteously rejecting the offer of a wheelchair from his companions – he uses it periodically but is also agile with his walking stick – or overseeing the installation process, there is no doubt that his will is as firm as the machine-age materials for which he is renowned.

The road to his Tate revelation was not smooth. Born in Surrey in 1924, Caro, the son of a stockbroker – a "great father, lovely" – was groomed for a career in the City of London. "I couldn't do it; all those bits of paper [that were] stocks and shares. It was too abstract," he recalls, with unintended irony. As a boy he was rarely far from a sketchbook. His favourite subject matter? "Motorcars with noise coming out of the exhaust!"

A stint at Cambridge studying engineering and a spell in the Navy were followed by a "hated" apprenticeship in an architect's office. Finally his father relented and Caro enrolled at the Royal Academy. Yet there, too, he hankered after an art less orthodox. "One day I drove up to [the house of] Henry Moore and knocked on his door

Anthony Caro in the Museo Correr; below, from left: 'Orangerie' (1969) and 'Garland' (1970), both painted steel

Mike Bruce



and said, 'Can I come and work for you?' He said, 'You might have phoned first!'"

Moore took him on as an assistant, and throughout the 1950s Caro grappled with the figure, slowly jettisoning his master's voice in favour of more angular distortions. One of the virtues of the Correr show is the presence of a clutch of drawings of bulls and figures from this period whose

saw-jagged outlines resemble off-cuts of scrap metal. "Mark [Francis, the curator at Gagosian Gallery, which is collaborating with him on this show] suggested it," explains Caro, who hadn't looked at these works in years. "He said, 'If you take away the heads and testicles, they are abstract.'" He gives a rueful smile. "You can't get away from yourself."

Disillusioned with his "pseudo-



figures", Caro decided to pursue pure abstraction. "It was very, very hard. I couldn't get it at all. I was governed by the plaster and the 'shapiness' of things that I was inventing, [the way] they kept referring to [other] things." What rescued him was an encounter with the American critic Clement Greenberg. "He said, 'If you want to change your art, change your habits.' And that's when I thought I should change my material."

Steel, which he first saw used by the US sculptor David Smith, appealed because "I didn't know anything about it". (Indeed, he remembers asking a friend how to join two pieces together.) I ask if he felt a sense of homecoming on discovering the material that would allow him to express himself. "No, I thought, 'God, it's heavy!'"

That refusal to romanticise art fuelled Caro's groundbreaking decision to take sculpture off the plinth. "I simply wanted to bring sculpture much closer to our world," he says. Yet while the next generation of sculptors, such as Barry Flanagan, Donald Judd and Carl Andre, took this sentiment to a conclusion so minimal it defied traditional artistic boundaries entirely, Caro never embraced iconoclasm. "I didn't want to bring it entirely into our world," he observes. "There is a sort of invisible barrier between it and us."

The tension between art and life imbues his work with the hermetic power that is its signature. Often referred to as "conversations with materials", in reality his pieces hug their secrets within themselves. Mysterious but never mystical, his enigmatic elements are involved in private encounters between each other and the air around them.

Over time, you sense he has grown more open to the possibility that art may offer a glimpse of the transcendent. In 2008 he designed a chapel for the Church of St Jean Baptiste in

Bourbourg, northern France. Asked for his thoughts on the rapport between art and religion, he shies away like the puritan modernist of old. "It's tough to talk highfalutin," he sighs, hesitating. "I didn't want to design it for a specific religion, although the bishop wanted me to. I wanted a place where people could go in and sit down and find themselves. And art can supply that."

The Correr's non-chronological display emphasises the timeless buoyancy of his eye. Few would intuit that the jaunty, calligraphic gestures of scarlet-painted steel sculpture "L'Orangerie" (1969) were welded more than 40 years before "Venetian" (2011-2012), an enigmatic dialogue between planes of steel and garnet-red Perspex.

At the core of that freshness lies Caro's undimmed curiosity. "People said that I was terribly into steel but I always tried different things: Perspex, wood, silver." Among the most engaging works in Venice are sculptures from the early 1990s – creamy reefs of Washi paper that foam around gouache and pastel washes – made according to a technique Caro learnt from paper sculptors in Japan.

Although he learnt to saw, bolt and weld, Caro insists he is not a practical person. "I can make a shelf fall down very easily." He believes his inability "to handle materials very well" has been a virtue, prompting him to invent his own ways of working. (When he needs more robust solutions, he turns to his "marvellous" long-time assistant Patrick Cunningham for advice.)

His latest experiments are with Perspex. "I wanted [the material] to be there and not there," he muses. "I didn't want it to be virtual but I wanted it to be not so... solid."

Opaque yet transparent, Perspex attracts him because of its unpredictability. "You are guessing all the time. There are lots of failures and going back." That restless imagination suggests this Biennale won't be Caro's last.

'Caro al Museo Correr', June 1 to October 27, visitmuve.correr.it/en