

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

London Evening Standard

Man of steel: Anthony Caro on his upcoming exhibitions

Sir Anthony Caro will unveil a new show at the Venice Biennale, ahead of his latest series at the Gagosian Gallery in King's Cross and a giant sculpture at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Now in his 90th year, he has no intention of slowing down

Ben Luke



Metal guru: Sir Anthony Caro with his eight-metre-long sculpture, Shadows, at the Royal Academy (Picture: Daniel Hambury)

As I make my way to Sir Anthony Caro's studio in a quiet yard in Camden, I know I'm heading in the right direction when I see a big pile of scrap steel gently rusting in a corner. Unpromising on their own, these funnels, grills and pipes are the stuff that Caro has been transforming into dramatic abstract sculpture art for more than half a century.

Caro is one of Britain's few surviving post-war greats among those rare artists who caused seismic change in the history of British art, which arguably can't be said of Lucian Freud and David Hockney, however great their individual achievements. He was assistant to Henry Moore but then, in the Sixties, he radically shifted away from Moore and Barbara Hepworth's very British, lyrical and organic take on modernism, bringing in new ideas from America, throwing out the plinth and placing his steel sculptures directly on the floor. He helped make modern British art more international, less parochial.

It is a big summer for Caro, now in his 90th year. His huge new work *Shadows* (2013) will welcome visitors to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition the week after next, just after a group of new sculptures are unveiled at the Gagosian Gallery in King's Cross. As you read this, he's in Venice, unveiling a new show at the Museo Correr overlooking St Mark's Square as the art-world hordes arrive for the Biennale.

We talk in a quiet room away from the welding and clunking of heavy machinery in the studio.

Caro is in fine form, looking at least 10 years younger than he is, and regularly punctuating his thoughts and reminiscences with laughter.

He's clearly delighted to be showing in the "wonderful galleries" of the Academy, where his career began as a student in the RA Schools in the Forties. *Shadows*, which stretches for eight metres across the building's front hall, emerged from the remnants of the Millbank Steps, the towering work he made for Tate Britain in 2004. "I'd been cleaning out my store in Yorkshire, an old barn full of corn and all sorts of things," he says, "and uncovering the stuff and bringing it out. There were a lot of pieces that the constructors used when they made Millbank Steps and when I pulled those pieces out of there, I said: 'There's the beginning of a sculpture here.'"

Many of Caro's sculptures over the decades have emerged from similar circumstances — he relishes the chance to turn hulks of heavy steel into vast sculptural collages whose playfulness and movement belie their weightiness — *Shadows*, with its undulating sheets, arcs and sharp diagonals, transcends its origins, evoking Picasso's collages cobbled together with studio tat and Matisse's paper cutouts. Caro is keen not to over-analyse his process and clearly loves being in the studio, grappling with his materials and letting them lead the way. "One is tremendously at the disposal of the stuff," as he puts it.

His Gagosian exhibition derives from what might have been his grandest project, for Park Avenue in New York City. "I'd been asked to put a sculpture of mine in Park Avenue. I've seen those lumps and when you go by at 30 miles an hour it just seems stupid to me," he says. Seeking alternative ideas, he was inspired by the length of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. "I thought, 'Why not make a very long sculpture, because you could be passing this at any speed from walking pace to 20 or 30 miles an hour,'" he explains. But although Caro made models for the work, the project floundered due to a lack of money — it would have cost about £1 million to install it and then remove it six months later. "We did everything we could, but I am not a fundraiser, I don't like it," he says. "I'd rather be a sculptor."

The Park Avenue plan was abandoned "without too much misery", then, but not in its entirety. Caro has "cannibalised" the quarter-size models and created new sculptures for the Gagosian show. He shows me an intricate model of the galleries, filled with miniature versions of the new works which are full of industrial, urban energy — "longish not uppish things" which are "a bit more muscular than some of my stuff", he says.

That Caro tried to make a sculpture three blocks long in New York just before turning 90 reflects his undimmed ambition. He puts this partly down to his dad's disapproval of his career choice. "My father didn't like the idea because he said artists are dilettantes," he says. "He didn't get the idea that artists are having a wonderful time because they're trying to make the impossible possible. So I always felt I needed to justify taking this path — he was so good to me, he was a lovely man, and I was a big disappointment." His father urged him to do sculpture as a hobby but arranged for a tutor at St Martin's School of Art in London to see his son's work. "My father gave him a five-pound note as a fee for coming to look at my sculpture and Mr Marsden said to my dad, 'Treat it as a hobby, he's never going to be any good,'" Caro remembers. "My father said, 'There you are, you see, Marsden says so.' But I said, 'This is what I want to do.' And I had to want to do it an awful lot."

After studying engineering at Cambridge from 1942-44 and serving in the Fleet Air Arm from 1944-46, Caro finally joined the Academy Schools in the late Forties, but perhaps his most

profound apprenticeship was as assistant to Henry Moore a few years later and his introduction to modern art. “My first preoccupation was Moore and going to work there,” he says, “but then coming to London and going to the Tate, I realised you didn’t have to be as tidy as Henry. First there was Picasso, then there was Bacon and Dubuffet, and De Kooning’s figurative things. That was my breakthrough.”

In 1959 he went to New York and met the sculptor David Smith, who was using steel, and the critic Clement Greenberg, who told him: “If you want to change your art, change your materials.” And metal became his obsession. “I wanted to take myself by surprise,” Caro recalls. His first success was *Twenty Four Hours* (1960), a raw collage of geometric steel shapes, painted in brown, but his eureka moment came with *Early One Morning* (1962), currently on show at Tate Britain and one of the centrepieces of the Whitechapel Gallery show exactly 50 years ago that made him a major figure in modern art.

Early One Morning was made in his one-car garage in Hampstead, the doors of which he left open to allow the sculpture to poke through. Still his best-known work, it is famously bright red. But it wasn’t always thus — his wife, the painter Sheila Girling, whom he married in 1949, played a major role. “She’s always been very close to my art, and its colour. With *Early One Morning*, we painted it green first, and we stuck it outside, and she said, ‘I love it but it’s not the right colour.’” It was also Girling who had earlier encouraged Caro to keep *Twenty Four Hours* in its raw state. “I started it and Sheila came out and said, ‘Leave it — it’s there.’ I didn’t think it was there, but it stayed like that,” he says.

Their partnership has been crucial to Caro’s life and work. “She’s been incredibly generous, because she was a terrific artist from the start, but she gave it up while the children [they have two sons] were young,” he says. “She gave a lot of time to the children, but always, every day, all the time — even now — I say, ‘You’ve got to come and look at something.’ And she says the same to me.”

Like many figures who begin by treading a radical path, Caro is now firmly part of the Establishment, knighted in 1987 and a member of the Order of Merit since 2000. He sat next to Elizabeth II at a recent lunch. “She is great, she lets her hair down, she has opinions about things she’s not allowed to have opinions about!” he laughs. “She was a totally nice human being.” If only his father could have lived to see it, he says.

Caro is already planning exhibitions 18 months ahead, and working for the first time on sculptures in transparent material. “As T S Eliot said, ‘Old men ought to be explorers.’ I want to be excited and entertained. In the mornings I want to look forward to going to the studio and surprise myself and come out and say, ‘I’ve had a good day in there,’” he says. “If I was doing something I had done already, I’d be bored stiff.”

Has he ever thought about slowing down? “At one time I was a bit low or depressed and I thought maybe I should be thinking about making a foundation or about what we would do when I’m dead,” he admits. “But fuck that — I’m alive.”

Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition 2013 is at Royal Academy, W1 (020 7300 8000, royalacademy.org.uk) June 10 to Aug 18; Anthony Caro: Park Avenue Series is at the Gagosian Gallery, WC1 (020 7841 9960, gagosian.com) June 6 to July 27.