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Anthony Caro

1924–2013

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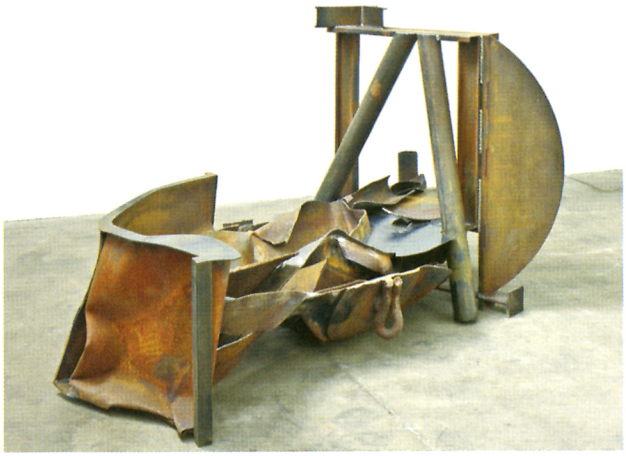
ALL OF US WHO WERE CLOSE TO ANTHONY CARO (Tony to his friends, an international society of thousands) were certain that he would live to be at least one hundred, making significant sculpture all the way. My impression was that he thought so too, though the last few times I saw him he spoke confidingly about the experience of being really old (he was eighty-nine when his heart gave out on October 23, 2013) and how different that was from anything he had quite imagined. In fact, when I spent two days with him this past July in his Camden Town studio, his legs were hurting so much that he found it hard to walk—in retrospect an alarming sign. But as usual, nothing could diminish his resolve to go back into perhaps half a dozen sculptures that to a greater or lesser degree required further work, and he sat in a chair with wheels that could be pushed from one part of the studio to another as we—Tony, his infinitely resourceful chief assistant Pat Cunningham, various younger assistants organized by Pat, and I—shifted our collective attention from piece to piece.

For the most part, the works in process were large abstract sculptures in steel and sheets of colored Perspex; one of these, *Venetian*, 2012, deploying two shaped sheets of translucent red Perspex, was the latest piece included in the modestly sized but carefully chosen one-man exhibition at the Museo Correr in Venice this past summer and early fall. Word from his studio suggests that during his last weeks Tony had made all the essential decisions regarding the other unfinished pieces, and I hope that's true. In any case, the sculptures with Perspex, however many there will turn out to be, amount to his closing statement by virtue of chronology. But there is nothing final about them: They came about because several years ago, Tony began to wonder whether it might be possible to integrate glass with welded steel, and eventually concluded that sheets of glass (which became Perspex) were the solution; there isn't the least question that once this group of works was done, he would have moved on to something else equally unpredictable, to be pursued with equal passion.

The artist's "Park Avenue" series is nothing less than one of the supreme triumphs of high-modernist sculpture, indeed one of the signal achievements of our time in any art.

A better candidate for his valedictory achievement is the monumental "Park Avenue" series, twelve large, abstract, rusted-steel sculptures made over the past several years—all are dated 2012, when the sculptures were finished—and shown as a group in three large spaces at Gagosian Gallery in London this past summer (minus one, *River Song*, exhibited at the Museo Correr). The title of the series derives from an initial invitation from the Fund for Park Avenue and the Department of Parks and Recreation to make a very large sculpture (to call it that for the moment) that would temporarily occupy the central mall of Park Avenue in Manhattan. I've written about this series before (in a 2012 essay that appeared in the catalogue for the Gagosian show and, in slightly amended form, in the online journal nonsite.org), so I won't go on about it here, except to say that the construction that Tony planned for the site would have been three city blocks long, and that in my view it was a tremendous stroke of luck that in the end the funding needed to realize it was not forthcoming. Instead, Tony and his team took the quarter-scale model that he had built in his studio and divided it up so as to provide the basis for a dozen individual sculptures, all of which in various ways bore the marks of the original, strongly lateral conception. I had watched most of the pieces being wrestled into form, two or three at a time, over a few years. It was a daunting process of subjecting massive steel elements to an uncompromising and unflagging aesthetic will that no one who didn't have the privilege of witnessing it or similar operations in Tony's studio will ever be able to imagine fully. I was determined not to pass up what was likely to be a unique opportunity to view the series as a whole (save for *River Song*, as already mentioned). So I flew to London,

View of "Anthony Caro: Park Avenue Series," 2013, Gagosian Gallery, London. From left: *Torrents*, 2012; *Clouds*, 2012. Both from the series "Park Avenue," 2010–12. Photo: Mike Bruce.



Anthony Caro, *The Brook*, 2012, rusted steel, 52⅜ x 105⅛ x 53⅝". From the series "Park Avenue," 2010–12.

Anthony Caro working in his Camden Town studio, London, 1989. Photo: John Riddy.

made three long and intense visits to the gallery, and spent most of two days with Tony—who typically and frustratingly had no interest in listening to my unstinting praise of the sculptures, his entire mental focus being reserved, as always, for the pieces needing further attention.

The tremendous stroke of luck alluded to above has to do with the fact that had financial support for the original project been available, Tony would have gone on to realize it at full scale; the result no doubt would have been admirable, a quasi-sculptural environmental construction that would have set the standard for such projects for decades to come—but artistically speaking, it would not have mattered. (This is a statement about quasi-sculptural environmental constructions, not Tony's limitations, though his one "weakness"—again, in my view—was his ambition, when the opportunity presented itself, to combine sculpture with architecture.) Instead he was compelled, or should I say inspired, to turn the huge model in his studio to practical account, and the result, which could not have been foreseen, is nothing less than one of the supreme triumphs of high-modernist sculpture, indeed one of the signal achievements of our time in any art. Groping for analogies, I keep coming up with . . . the Sistine ceiling (an "environmental" work—I know, I know). Of course that's hyperbolic, and I understand that my belief in Tony's greatness, which goes back more than fifty years, can only seem bizarre to generations reared on postmodernism and its various sequelae.

There is much, much more that might and probably should be said on the present occasion, but I'm going to break off here. I'll only add that, reading over what I have written, it strikes me that these remarks may seem deficient in sadness. So let me assure the reader that it will be a very long time before I personally manage to come to terms with the immense fact of Tony's absence from the world. But he was a life force of extraordinary magnitude and generosity, and simply calling him to mind is, and is likely to remain, a source of joy. □

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