

The Artforum

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PASSAGES

# ANTHONY CARO



Anthony Caro, *Midday*, 1960, painted steel. Installation view, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2011.

**SHORTLY AFTER ANTHONY CARO DIED LAST FALL**, I proposed a moratorium on the phrase “I really like his early work.” In the context of Caro, this sentiment is generated from our taste rather than from a deeper understanding of his sculptures. The figuration from the ’50s is not included in my moratorium, and to many this period of his oeuvre serves more as a footnote

to his beginnings. Understanding the intent behind these potent bronze figures allows us to step forward with the artist, grasping the potentiality and originality of works like *Twenty Four Hours*, 1960, *Midday*, 1960, and *Early One Morning*, 1962. The great joy of looking at Caro comes from liberation.

Caro's moment of sculptural liberation is as profound as it is complex, both in relation to his cultural moment and to the sculptural vocabulary that was a given for a sculptor of the time. Envisioning new and necessary ways of orienting ourselves is difficult because what is familiar is useful. Caro's figuration connects to Henry Moore, but develops its own understanding and attitude toward the aliveness of the body. Musculature stands in relation to the gravitational field of space and time. We are not only born in this field but are inseparable from it. Caro's early figurative sculptures depict bodies bound to the world by gravity. *Man Taking Off His Shirt*, 1956, is all shoulders and arms struggling to get out from under the constraints of clothing. The artist's success in the '50s lay in transforming kinesthetic feltness into a material image of a body as it is lived in. His figurative work consisted of an aspect of the body, depicted as alive. At the end of the '50s, Caro, it would seem, awoke to the realization that his figuration could only *describe* the feltness of the body. The kinetic power of what we feel as a consequence of being made of bones, muscles, flesh, and will is a lived phenomena, and its description moves us a great distance from experience.

Caro's solution and the deeper development of his sculptural thought is a breakthrough occurring at the beginning of the '60s, and it can be associated with that turbulent, exuberant decade. As an artist, he was in tune with currents outside his own immediate concerns. His willingness to abandon the familiarity of figuration and to begin working in a new genre with unfamiliar methods and materials produced work born alive in a time of change, however illusory the cultural and political transformations of that era may now seem. Caro abandoned the particular figurative genre associated with his artistic concerns and success. He then extended the very nature of another genre—constructivism—by altering the visual trajectory from which sculptures were viewed. Caro moves sculptural elements out laterally, often below

eye level. There is no reference to a body nor compositional verticality of a figure. Experience of relationships is held between the parts of a sculpture rather than in a shape, profile, or gestalt (common in American Minimalism). This innovative and beautiful move liberated kinetics from the body and created the abstract sculpture associated with high modernism. A work such as *Early One Morning* is a sculpture that totally disregards the orientation of the figure. The space that this sculpture occupies finds its own horizon, and the floor becomes a sculptural element rather than a gravitational ground. Disjunctive properties turn space into a fluid, expanding-and-contracting accordion that is outright hallucinogenic around the time when the Beatles were singing “I Want to Hold Your Hand!” *Early One Morning* dispenses with the necessity of gravity and the history of visual associations brought by sculpture’s adherence to or divergence from figurative and imagistic structures, whether literal or poetic.

A great work is not timeless; it seems the opposite as it rides through time in complex and marvelous ways. *Midday*, owned by the Museum of Modern Art, keeps up with us and never falls behind. When it was installed on the roof of the Met a few years ago, a mistake was made by the artist, or perhaps his or the museum’s conservation team. The orange-yellow color of the original sculpture was replaced with a yellow with too much lemon in its hue. A yellow of today is a design hewn from our moment. One reason among many that this color felt so wrong was that its contemporariness short-circuited the sculpture’s ability to travel through time. A beautiful aspect of looking at Caro’s work is that the color clings to its structure through time, as space clings to it like clay. The color is not a painted skin but an aspect of the cultural moment when the work was created. The sculpture carries its rightness of color not on its surface, but through cultural change brought on by time. The right orange or red is of the sculpture, not secondary to it. You can see the work’s journey in its relationship to the present and in the relationships that make up the sculpture. Many viewers experience a great Caro and feel nostalgia for the high-modernist moment or its associated cultural era. My advice is to drop your nostalgia for a time that never really was. Look at the world today and check out the brand-new sculpture by Anthony Caro titled *Twenty Four Hours*.

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