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Spence, Rachel: Anthony Caro: The shaping of a radical

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Anthony Caro: The shaping of a radical

Two shows reveal how the British sculptor trampled on tradition and redefined his art

Rachel Spence JULY 24 2015

[Sir Anthony Caro](#) once told me that he had trouble putting up a shelf. Given that it was 2013 and Caro had been regarded as Britain's greatest living sculptor for at least 20 years, this seemed improbable. But he believed his lack of practical skills held the secret to his art. Ignorant of the correct approach to materials, he simply bent them to his will. When they proved recalcitrant, his long-serving assistant Patrick Cunningham stepped in as engineer.

[Two new UK shows](#) — the first museum surveys since [Caro's death in 2013](#) — are welcome testaments to his words. At Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) and the Hepworth Wakefield, Caro leaps out as the radical he was: an artist who folded steel as if it were whipped cream, bolted shapes together in rebellious anti-symmetry and cooked up his concoctions of junky, industrial materials — steel, wood, stone and latterly Perspex — with scant regard for their “truth”, which artists of his generation were constantly implored by critics to respect. A further virtue is that both institutions are also hosting exhibitions of the sculptors who can be seen as Caro's symbolic parents — Henry Moore at YSP and Barbara Hepworth at the Hepworth Wakefield — and whose heritage he trampled with Oedipal glee.

The two spaces are at the core of *Caro in Yorkshire*, an initiative of the Yorkshire Sculpture Triangle which in turn is a collaboration between YSP, Hepworth Wakefield, Leeds Art Gallery and the Henry Moore Institute.

The two institutions clearly felt the need to distinguish themselves from each other. YSP has chosen to concentrate on Caro's rapport with painting while the Hepworth Wakefield focuses on his relationship to architecture. While YSP has created the more thematically coherent display, the show at Hepworth Wakefield is more enthralling, thanks to the sensitive installation and its magnificent, luminous space.

To start at the beginning, head to YSP, where the brittle, stick-like limbs and earthbound squatness of Caro's small, early bronzes — "Warrior 1" (1951-53), "Fighting Bull" (1954), "Woman Arranging her Hair II" (1955) — show how he fought to emerge from the shadow of Henry Moore (whom he assisted between 1951 and 1953) and Picasso, another huge influence.

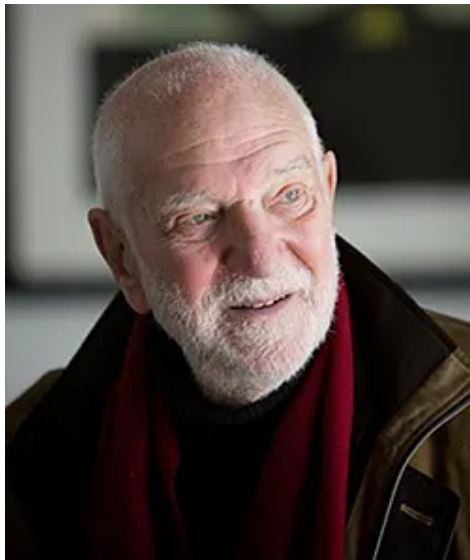
More relevant to Caro's later practice are the brush and ink drawings from the mid-1950s, also at YSP. Showing flattened figures crammed on to rectangular surfaces as if imprisoned by one-dimensional walls, they owe a debt to the Cubist urge to unfold three dimensions on to a single plane of simultaneous shapes. But they also possess a gawky linearity which is Caro's own.

By the early 1960s, Caro had discovered how to translate that quality into three dimensions. The first major sculpture in YSP's show is "Month of May" (1963). With steel and aluminium tubes and slats in shades of fuchsia, tangerine and leaf-green, its twiggy limbs are frozen in the air with disorderly grace. Still fizzing more than half a century later, it's not difficult to imagine the punch it packed when it appeared in Caro's landmark show at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 1963. One critic talked of "raw shock" at seeing works that — in terms of respect for line and material — held two fingers up to the classicism that had until then reigned in British sculpture.

Propped haphazardly upon two floor brackets, "Month of May" reminds us that Caro is most renowned for his decision to throw away the plinth. In doing so, he stripped sculpture of the grandeur that was its Hellenic legacy and thrust it into the brave new democratic world of Britain and the US in the 1960s.

The American sculptor David Smith — among the first to risk the use of tough, lowbrow industrial steel rather than stone, marble or wood — is considered Caro's biggest influence. Caro first saw Smith's work on his trip to the US in 1959. In the same period, he also encountered a new generations of painters including Kenneth Noland, Morris Louis and Jules Olitski. Known as post-painterly abstractionists, they were reacting against the emotion of the Abstract Expressionists by using colour and form to say precisely nothing beyond their work's physical frontiers.

Caro is at his best when he prunes those ideas down to their minimum. In "Smoulder" (1965), shown here, he takes a line of plum-coloured steel for a walk along the floor and into the air through two right-angles. Equally glorious is "Slow Movement" (1965), which forges lines and triangles into a mystical calligraphy of midnight-blue steel.



Caro in 2012 © Jonty Wilde

As his works' lyrical titles reveal, Caro desired to say everything while appearing to say nothing. Far from wedded to mute abstract painters, he would go on to make pieces such as "Xanadu" (1986-88). On show here, this aggressive barricade of waxed steel was inspired by the awkward, hieratic forms of Matisse's painting "Bathers by a river" (1909-10). Caro's paper sculptures, many of which were made in Obama, Japan, show how he loved to tear, scrunch and scribble his sumptuous, cream sheets of *washi* until he had created gestural shapes that harked back to the Abstract Expressionists. Dotting YSP's bucolic hills, the 1974 series "Flats" emerged when Caro saw paintings of trees by Gustave Courbet. However, by the time Caro had finished layering thin panels of dark, rusted steel over each other in skewed, irrational disequilibria, the works ended up possessed of a winning illegibility that defies interpretation.

The Hepworth Wakefield show would have been better billed as part two of the same theme. In this beautiful space, with white walls, sloping ceilings and natural light pouring from generous floor-to-ceiling windows, Caro's love of the lonely line and emotional nuance leaps out even more clearly. His 1960s "table pieces" — small, steel contraptions clamped to flat surfaces with handle-like protuberances — feel like querulous, witty hieroglyphs.

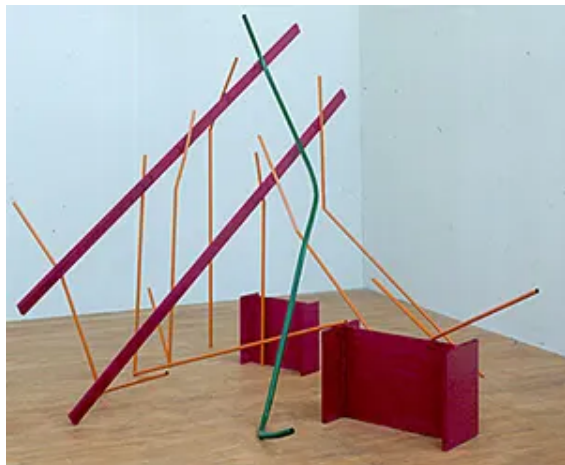
Caro leaps out as the radical he was: an artist who folded steel as if it were whipped cream



'Slow Movement', 1965 © Jonty Wilde

Tate's "Déjeuner sur l'herbe", a bold sprawl of steel whose gloopy, unruly folds mock the mannered drama of Manet's masterpiece, is surely an escapee from YSP's show. The title of "Morning Shadows" (2012) — a precarious encounter between steel slabs and tubes — nudges us to imagine light and darkness as solid matter in a way that recalls the efforts of abstractionists such as Pierre Soulages. A late masterpiece, "Terminus" (2013), shows Caro at his experimental, Expressionist best, criss-crossing frosted raspberry planks of his favourite new material, Perspex, with steel girders and lengths of wood spattered with claret paint.

As for architecture, Caro talked it more than he walked it. “They’ve got an inside but they’ve got no centre. And I realised that they were leading me on towards thinking more architecturally,” he said of the pieces he made in 1977 at a workshop in Saskatchewan, Canada. Obligated to use lightweight material because the location was so remote, the experience prompted him to create works such as “After Emma” (1977/82), a crumpled steel skeleton, displayed here, that suggests nothing so much as the battered frame of a tent whose occupants have been eaten by bears before they could finish putting it up.



‘Month of May’, 1963 © John Riddy

In 1983, he made “Child’s Tower Room”, a Gehry-like spiral of Japanese oak with an interior staircase that would put any under-12 in high spirits, but it’s more of a glamorous toy than a functional space. Nevertheless, he did work with architects, helping Norman Foster to design London’s Millennium Bridge and collaborating with Frank Gehry on his “Sculpture Village” in 1987. But aside from a display of photographs there is little material on show relating to these projects.

In any case, to regard Caro’s work as architectural is to deny it the glorious pointlessness that is a prerequisite of art. As Caro put it himself: “The sculptor is much more free than the architect . . . [He] is free to disobey the rules, turn a work upside down, to work from the wrong end . . . and this opens doors.” Indeed it does. Both these shows are wonderful as a result.

‘Caro in Yorkshire’, to November 1, ysp.co.uk, hepworthwakefield.org

Photographs: Jonty Wilde/Courtesy of Barford Sculptures; John Riddy; Wilde/Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre; John Hammond/Courtesy of Barford Sculptures; Steven Sloman