

FINANCIAL TIMES

Anthony Caro, Pitzhanger Manor review — adventures in heavy metal

The sculptor's works in steel and other materials form a powerful, architectural show in west London

Edwin Heathcote / MARCH 1 2023



Anthony Caro's 'Forum' (1992/1994) in the grounds of Pitzhanger Manor © Andy Staggs

When a British government minister was recently asked about the future of the UK's steel industry, she replied, "Nothing is ever a given." But in the modern world, the need for steel is a given. There is no construction, no vehicle manufacturing, no defence or aviation, no machinery, no trains or bridges without steel. Steel is modernity.

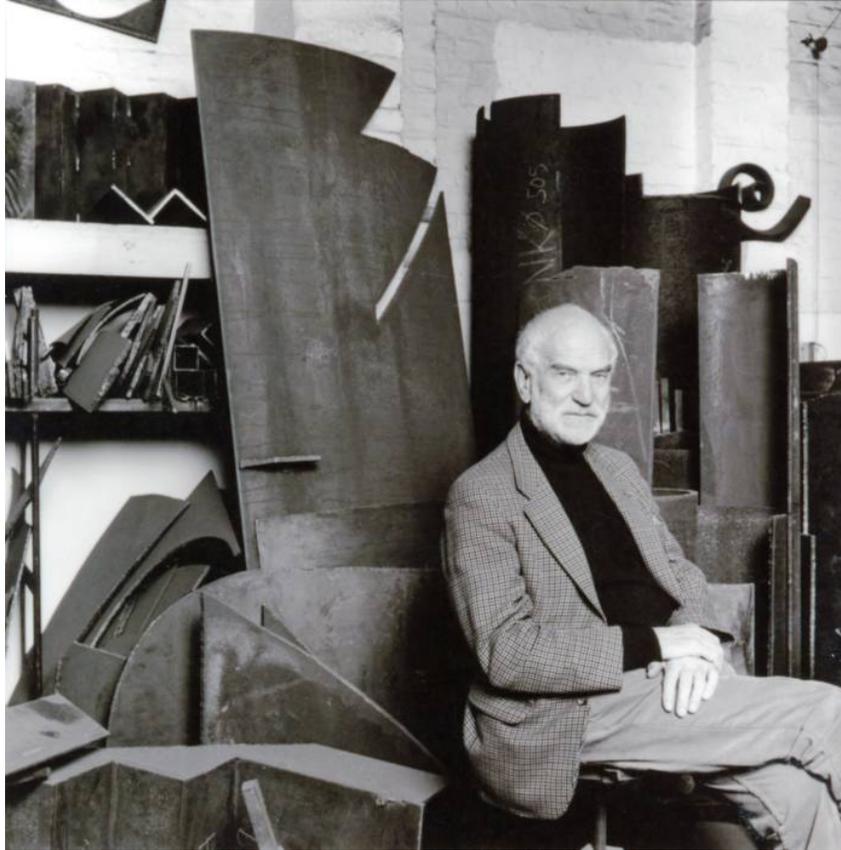
Sculptor Anthony Caro knew this well. That's why his powerful steel works caused such a stir when they first appeared in the early 1960s. Caro (1924-2013) had been an assistant to Henry Moore and, after leaving Moore's studio, had struggled to find his medium, at first creating large but rather lumpy figural bronzes.

After a visit to the US, a meeting with art critic Clement Greenberg and an encounter with the works of David Smith, Caro returned to London, bought an oxyacetylene welder and started working with steel. At first, no gallery would show them. Despite the huge Abstract Expressionist canvases emerging from the US, London's scene remained restrained and domestically scaled. It was only when Caro had a solo show at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961 that his work was given real space.

There is still, 60 years on, something radical, strange and enigmatic about his heavy works and, in the show Anthony Caro: The Inspiration of Architecture, in the setting of architect Sir John Soane's Pitzhanger Manor in west London, they simultaneously shine, intrigue and bear down on the building.

Before you even get to the door, you encounter "Magnolia Passage" (2005-06), a galvanised steel and lurid purple construction which introduces all the components that define the show. There are the found industrial objects (here steel box beams); the confusion between sculpture and space, between installation and playground; and the suggestion of art with an inner space.

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Anthony Caro in his Camden Town studio, c. 1985

Paul Moorhouse, CEO of the Anthony Caro Centre, says: “Sculpture had always been about the object and the surface. Caro wanted to make it about the interior, to suggest a space inside which you might not be able to see, but you would know was there.”

On entering the foyer, you’re confronted with a crumpling rusty steel tower, an odd object that looks as if it is leaning back a little in contemplation, its hips slightly askance. There is nothing remotely human about its form and yet it suggests an attitude. Part Constructivist tower, part scrapyards robot, part Bauhaus ballet costume and part cult object, it suggests the whole of the early 20th-century avant-garde crushed into a seemingly ad hoc tower. He strikes me as a Constructivist, I say, someone who is interested in form and junctions. “Caro was not a Constructivist,” responds Moorhouse. “He was the opposite.”

The sculptor’s longtime assistant, Patrick Cunningham, who made all the sculptures in this show (he worked with Caro from 1970 until his death), says, “He never knew what the sculpture would look like at the beginning. He might start with a single thing, perhaps this bit” — he points to some industrial scrap — “and then he’d want to place it next to this” — an inch-thick steel plate — “and it’d go from there.”

The show’s title suggests an affinity with architecture, but this is not how architecture works. There is no building without a plan. Caro’s work suggests a dreamier understanding of space, one determined by a subconscious idea rather than a practical destination. It is a technique that frees both sculpture and space. “Architecture,” Caro once said, “is perhaps the purest abstract visual form.”

I talked to him a lot about this in his later years (we were going to work on a book together) and I was never sure whether it was a misunderstanding of architecture or a more profound understanding of it, perceived as pure form rather than function. Either way, his practice created an intriguing in-between zone. At its most architectural, as in the large wooden “Child’s Tower Room” (1983-84), a tall, friendly-looking thing situated somewhere between a rocket ship and Vladimir Tatlin’s unbuilt spiralling tower, it invites kids in to climb and inhabit the shadowy spaces inside.

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At their most minimal, as in “The Eye Knows” (2013), the brushed steel surfaces resist intimacy yet the forms pull you in. I had to look carefully to understand that the heart of the piece is a salvaged industrial sink, upended. It becomes a curved niche, drawing the eye into the interior of the work while a sheet of thick, clear acrylic cuts through. In this hybrid of found objects and minimalist construction, the abstract beauty of a bent steel pipe becomes clear. Industrial manufacturing processes produce, it suggests, sublime things, whereas art is always imperfect — the junctions are awkward, between the hand- and the machine-made.



Caro's 'Child's Tower Room' (1983-84) © Andy Stagg



Caro's 'Autumn Rhapsody' (2011) © John Hammond

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One room of smaller works reveals another scale. These are pieces on plinths, overhanging the edges, elements interfering with their preciousness and containment. “Reliquary House” (2011) is a haunting concrete hut with found steel sections sticking out of its dark interior. In some sculptures, the space is visually accessible, in others it is obscured but is always viscerally present.

Caro, apparently, hated sculpture parks, presumably associating them with his former boss, Moore, and wanted his work shown in the white cube. He mellowed in older age, becoming more comfortable with the outdoors. Here, the heavy, rusted frame of “Forum” (1992/94) sits comfortably in the grounds outside, and perhaps the most strikingly set piece — one you might easily miss — is in a small outside space between two buildings. “Door” (which is not a door) partly obscures and partly reveals an actual gate to the park behind. This galvanised steel structure of machine parts and construction elements (framed by what looks like a massive bollard and a steel post) subsumes bits of half-recognisable things, the elements of a banal, almost unseen modernity, the temporary vernacular of the construction site and the generic components of metal sheds and agricultural architecture.

Here, set alongside Soane’s collection of faux-antique fragments, of cornices and entablatures, the beginnings of a mass-produced architectural classicism, we have two figures making stories from the found objects of their respective modernities, one looking back, one looking forward. Steel itself, that language of heavy industry, now looks like the archaeology of a once-great industrial civilisation. The found fragments of construction have been disassembled to make something new with a hint of decline, but an optimism that things can still be made.

March 9-September 10, pitzhanger.org.uk