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EDGE IS IMPORTANT



A Conversation with
ANTHONY CARO

Clouds, 2012. Steel,
90 x 230.5 x 71 in.

PHOTO: MAMMOET & BARRON SCULPTURE LTD. COURTESY: BARRON GALLERY



BY JON ISHERWOOD

Earlier this year, I sat down with my longtime friend Sir Anthony Caro in his London studio. The idea was simple: Would it be interesting to generate a conversation between two sculptors whose work is very different, but who share many common influences? In some ways, our discussion was simply an extension of an ongoing dialogue that has lasted for more than three decades, ranging across many topics, from studio practice and artistic process to our shared connection with Bennington College in Vermont.

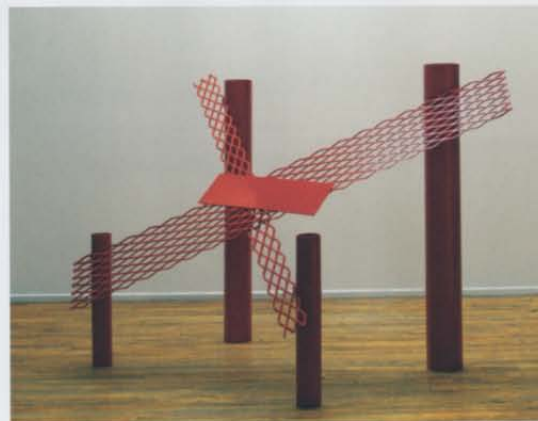
Jon Isherwood: *You had two shows open recently, one at the Museo Correr in Venice (through October 27) and the other at the Gagosian Gallery in London (through July 27). What can you tell me about the Venice show?*

Anthony Caro: The show runs concurrently with the Venice Biennale. The museum was a challenge, like Trajan's Market in Rome, where I installed work in 1992. The Correr is a historic location—you look out over the Piazza San Marco in the middle of the city. The exhibition space on the second floor is a succession of small rooms, each one fronting the square; it's a jewel.

Jl: *Did the space affect the choices in the show?*

AC: Oh yes. We made a model of the gallery, 1/20th scale, and tried

Above: *Hopscotch*, 1962. Aluminum, 217 x 84 x 98.5 in. Below: *Red Splash*, 1966. Painted steel, 45.5 x 69 x 41 in.



again and again with different sculptures to see what could work. In the end, we came up with a survey show—not a retrospective, but a mixture of works from different dates right up to today.

Jl: *Is the earliest piece Red Splash (1966)?*

AC: The earliest are drawings from 1954, which were done even before I'd started to make abstract work.

Jl: *The drawings look as though they were influenced by Cubism.*

AC: They were. At that time, I was very taken by Picasso. Now, seeing them again after many years, they have a feel about them of the

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Garland, 1970. Painted steel, 55 x 169 x 148 in.

abstract works that followed. We included sculptures from the '60s and '70s like *Hopscotch* (1962) and *Garland* (1970). Neither one has been seen much, so it was interesting to include them.

JJ: *Those early works like Hopscotch and Red Splash seem to have a sense of illusion, a floating plane and implied perspective. Did they come out of painting, looking at painting or thinking about painting in some way?*

AC: *Hopscotch* looks back to Jackson Pollock. I was very influenced by painting in those days. And that went on for years. When I was teaching at Bennington (1963–65), I was making sculpture close to where Ken Noland lived and worked. Jules Olitski lived three or four miles away, and he also taught at Bennington. I remember seeing a painting of his that he gave to Ken. It was a white canvas, with a few—no more than three or four—tiny spots in one corner: that was all. He was trying to empty painting out, asking, “Is this possible, is this art?” The next thing is, you ask yourself, “What’s the emptiest sculpture I could make?” So, I made *Sight* (1965). It is a sculpture, just. We relate to each other’s thinking, especially when we work in close proximity to one another. And this sculpture belongs to its time. I can’t imagine even wanting to make such an empty work now, in 2013.

JJ: *I was thinking about your early works in comparison to the new pieces that you’re showing at Gagosian. I feel that I am being asked to view or navigate these new sculptures differently.*

AC: You’re asking how I’m thinking in my work. That’s important, but once it is established in my mind, I shut off and allow myself to be led by the materials to hand. It’s a dialogue. I’ve got to let the material have its say. I pay attention.

JJ: *When you are making a sculpture, are there certain points in the process when you have stand-ins for things? When you might say, “Well, this has to be here to get started, and I know that it might not be there in the end, but it stands in for something in the piece”?*

AC: A stand-in is a way of beginning.

JJ: *Yes, and does it lead to something else? When you plan something out or create these organizational prompts, where do they come from? Do they come from intuition, something you’ve experienced, or from someplace else?*

AC: They can come from almost anything. When I work with Hans Spinner in the south of France, we go on expeditions to scrap yards. When I came across a perfume distillery vat, I felt that I had to have it. I had no idea how I would use it, but now, a year later, it has become an element in a sculpture. It has come into my world.

JJ: *It seems that you avoid referencing the function of individual elements in the work.*

AC: Oh yes, often because I don’t know what the thing is or what its real purpose was. I didn’t know what the perfume vat was; I’d never seen one before. An architect friend, responding to my first abstract sculptures from the ‘60s, said to me, “That’s not the way you use an H-beam.” I didn’t want to know the proper way to use one. That gave me the freedom to see it as just a shape.

JJ: *So, not knowing gave you permission to transform it?*

AC: I wasn’t deliberately divorcing it from its use. And I think that is true of the collage sculptures that Picasso made—he didn’t pay attention to what the objects in the collage were really intended for.

JJ: *I’m wondering about the piece in the Gagosian show that has*



the big compressor tanks in it. It's interesting that I want to know what they are, but I also know they are not what they are.

AC: *Clouds* (2012) was a dare for me. It is clear what the forms are, but it is their volume that is really important. To put these solid lumps inside a planar, linear sculpture, a spatial sculpture, that was the gamble.

JJ: *There seems to be both movement and stationary moments in the 12 Gagosian sculptures.*

Above: *Venetian*, 2011–12. Steel and Perspex, 70.06 x 170.06 x 70.5 in. **Below:** *Tempest*, 2012. Steel, 63 x 103.125 x 89 in.



JOHN HAMMOND, © BARFORD SCULPTURES LTD.

AC: Intervals. Mostly they are going in one direction. But the last one, *Tempest* (2012), begins to go in one direction, then turns back on itself. It's a kind of struggle within the piece.

JJ: So, if somebody said, "I don't know how to look at these," what instructions would you offer for navigation?

AC: I suppose I would say, "Walk it."

JJ: One of the pieces for Venice, Venetian (2011–12), uses Plexiglas, a new material for you.

AC: I like working in steel, it's direct. I use steel on its own, but I'm certainly not wedded to it, and I've often worked in other materials—wood, clay, stone, silver, even paper. In this case, I wanted something transparent, something there yet not there. The transparency invites you to look closer. From a distance, you are aware of edge rather than surface. As you walk closer, you see the surface of the glass and you also see through it. The edge is important. It is the clue to the reality of the transparent material. Whether the edge is polished or not becomes a big issue. Color is an issue, too. When you start making it, you can't try out with the really transparent stuff; it's too fragile. So, you work with substitutes like plywood or MDF. But since that stuff is not transparent, you have to take it on trust. It's like an architect working on a drawing on paper, which finally gets transferred into three dimensions and actual materials.

JJ: The Plexiglas in Venetian is blood red. It's deep and moody. Were you trying to evoke strong emotions with this color choice?

AC: In this case, the color does carry an emotional charge. But it simply seemed the right color for that sculpture. The sample pieces you choose from are no bigger than 2.5 inches, so you hope and you guess, and if it's wrong, you try again. Again, it's working like an architect: from his drawing, he thinks he knows just what it's going to look like, but it's never exactly what he expected. Mostly I believe that it's best to be hands-on, but not in quite the same way as the old sculptor working in clay.

JJ: I remember once being with Ken Noland at Bennington, and he said, "Let's go look at something I've been fascinated by." He took me down to a nearby river and said, "Now look in the water, just look in the water." When I said, "It doesn't look like there are many fish," he responded, "No, no, just look into the water." And I realized what he was saying: "Don't look for objects. Don't look for a thing, just look." Some of your works, including the "Trojan War" series (1995–99) and Chapel of Light (2008), have very strong figurative references. It seems, however, that figuration has left your recent work, has moved away, but the emotional context is still there. Is that possible?



Death of Hector, from the "Trojan War" series, 1994. Stoneware, pinewood, and steel, 66 x 48 x 53 in.

AC: It's all emotional, either apparent on the surface or deep down. I don't feel that I'm finished with narrative, though it's not my main thing.

JJ: Does figuration allow for a greater reflection on humanity because we recognize the object represented?

AC: The content of the work of art is the artist and his character and how he works with his materials. We want the work to be "right," and yet we don't want to get totally into the form of the thing. The subject matter is the handle, what we can grasp. I'm re-reading a life of Tolstoy right now.

Throughout his life, Tolstoy was see-sawing: at one moment, "Art for art's sake," and the next, "Reality! Human life!" We are all in this quandary: one moment we're inside our world of shapes and objects, and the next we're wondering whether that's enough. Yet maybe that's where the truth is hidden. I don't make art about the current political or economic problems confronting us. I think art is about human nature. When I am confronted with Cézanne's apples, they are just as real—perhaps even more real—than the apples I am about to eat now.

Jon Isherwood is a sculptor and professor at Bennington College in Vermont.

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