

FINANCIAL TIMES

Remembering Anthony Caro

By Toby Glanville

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The sculptor died a year ago this month, just as his major show in Venice was coming to a close. He is remembered here by the photographer who was working with him, and in a new book about his life and art.



Work in progress: Anthony Caro in his studio in London, October

Watching the great steel sections of Sir Anthony Caro's sculptures, swathed in polythene, being lowered by crane into barges moored outside Harry's Bar in Venice last October, a thought occurred to me. This man-handling of slabs of marble and porphyry, iron and gold, booty from Byzantium, had been going on for 1,000 years. Seven hundred miles away in London, Caro, an English artist of genius, had just died. Long wooden crates containing his work were being wheeled past the stalls of memorabilia that line the Piazzetta; past neatly stacked acqua alta trestles, past unsuspecting crowds.

A text had come through as I sat on the plane at Gatwick waiting for roll-back. It read: "Such sad news about Tony." At that point I didn't know what it meant; that Tony – Anthony Caro – had died suddenly the previous day. That he hadn't been feeling well enough to take this plane, was all I knew. We were meant to travel to Venice where I would take photographs for a monograph on his work, first the de-installing of his exhibition at the Museo Correr, then to Murano, where he would oversee the making of glass to be incorporated into new sculpture. He was 89 years old and constantly at work.



“It’s wonderful to come home in the evening and say, “Gosh, I’ve had a good day, I think I got it right, I think I got that one nearly right.” Oh, it’s great, and I mean it’s very crazy to make these things, these useless things, but it’s a way of life and I’m lucky to have it.”

- Sir Anthony Caro

'Twenty-Four Hours', 1960, steel, painted dark brown
©Toby Glanville

In Italian, *caro* means dear. I’d been struck on our first meeting by what seemed an entirely natural and unforced interest in the world and in what others, perhaps in particular what young artists, were up to in it. “I like you,” he’d said, “you’re invisible.” (It’s always a good sign when a person is wary of being photographed – it suggests they have a soul.) When I’d pointed enquiringly to a huge black-and-white print of a charging rhino high on the workshop wall, he’d responded: “My son.” Who is, it turned out, a professor of animal behaviour in California.

“And are you doing what you want to do in your work?” he’d asked. I’d hedged, finding it difficult to be quizzed so directly. He repeated his question, which, I realised, was informed by his genuine interest in the lives and wellbeing of others. His generous spirit was based, I think, on profound curiosity. To watch him turn the pages of an enormous illustrated catalogue on the history of art was to watch a child mesmerised by the wonder of it all. “I gave a copy of this book to my grandchildren!”

In the loo were pictures taken at a Buckingham Palace lunch for those who’d been awarded the Order of Merit by the Queen. There in the line-up was Tony, smiling, and Lucian Freud, covering his face with both hands. If, Her Majesty had apparently cautioned, you don’t want to be in the photograph, then say so.

Eight weeks before Tony’s death I’d stood outside the Gagosian Gallery near King’s Cross in London watching a crane lifting one of his “Park Avenue” sculptures high into a blue August sky. There was a telegraph wire to be negotiated and a huddle of passers-by had gathered. Through a cutting below the street, tube trains shuttled east and west along the tracks. Slowly the two-tonne steel piece was lowered

on to the bed of a lorry. Guide ropes were dropped and the work was anchored in place and driven off. About these sculptures, which had begun life as a proposal for a public sculpture programme in New York's Park Avenue, the art historian Michael Fried had written: "My own impulse had been to think of late Beethoven, the great quartets . . . "

It was exhilarating to emerge on a hazy Venetian morning from the labyrinth of side streets into St Mark's Square and see the word "CARO" emblazoned on red banners advertising the exhibition at the Correr. In the wake of Tony's death I felt both wonder and sadness on seeing his work in Venice – already a place of innate melancholy.

Some consolation was to be found in the act of photographing the work. To take a picture of a still object is to be compelled to meditate on the subject in question. The most successful pictures were those I made of "Garland", a piece Caro produced in 1970 inspired by a Matisse painting, "The Moroccans", of 1915/16. In order to be level with the sculpture I put my camera on the floor. I lay down next to it and looked at the beautiful form of the piece, marvelling at its perfect harmony of colour in deep glossy greens and dazzling reds.

Later I watched again as the works were lowered section by section from rooms in the museum, high above St Mark's Square, to be packed up in the lee of the Campanile and shipped back to England. As the barge left its moorings, I remembered a lunch at the studio in London: two of Tony's assistants, Ollie and Neil, had been talking about the party in Venice for the show's opening that summer. It must have been around 2am when Ollie had dived into the Grand Canal and swum to the other side. "It had to be done," he'd explained, smiling in recollection of the feat. I like to think that Anthony Caro would have thought so too.

'Caro' by Anthony Caro, edited by Amanda Renshaw with photographs by Toby Glanville, is published by Phaidon next week, £75

Photograph: Toby Glanville

Slideshow photographs: Toby Glanville