

'Anthony Caro: Upright Sculptures', Annely Juda Fine Art

*Anthony Caro: Upright Sculptures* (Annely Juda Fine Art, Galerie Daniel Templon, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 2010). £20. ISBN 1 904621 38 4

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It is now fifty years since Anthony Caro made his great breakthrough into pure abstract sculpture. Removed from the plinth, his work from 1960 on inhabited the real world, confronting us with its raw industrial parts, which rapidly became imbued with an implausible sense of life and movement, seeming to defy both materials and gravity. *Early One Morning* (1962), with its expressive gestures and hovering planes, showed how sculpture could shake off its status as object, to become an active engagement with space; so too, with its allusions to Malevich and Matisse, it opened up possibilities for a collaboration with the concerns of painting. Or, in Caro's abiding metaphor, his sculpture is a form of music which cannot give 'the entirety of the experience ... all at once.'

His trajectory has reversed that of many preceding modernists, in that this early 'truly abstract' sculpture has given way to a more figurative approach, turning from unfettered balancing acts to more grounded explorations of volume and mass; from the traces of bodies to bodies themselves; from aniconism to religious iconography. At 86 Caro shows no signs of slowing down; if there is any sense of a late style in his current series, *Upright Sculptures*, now showing at Annely Juda Fine Art, it lies in its sheer proliferation, and perhaps too in the emphasis on interiority: not a quiet introspection, but a sense of 'almost imploding', as he says in the catalogue interview.

The emphasis on the upright is wholly unexpected given that horizontal extension was always a defining Caro feature. The new scale is indicative of his return to the figure, but figuration remains in an always unstable state: *Break Press Head*, for example, can be read as both a portrait and an abstract collage, while its title teases us still further in referencing one of its component parts' origins. There is an increased emphasis on the frontal but, recalling his interest in cubism, he disrupts identifiable features, and throws the focus down as well as up, so we can't look these characters straight in the eye.

These works span his full expressive range, dense and spacious, painted and raw, resolved and suspended; they amount to a summation of all that has gone before. There are moments of bold iconic purity, as in *Up Front* – whose huge upturning cone in this context cannot help suggesting a gaping mouth; and moments of contemplation, as in *Upper Case*, a concentrated demonstration of Caro's weathered geometry, constructed around a mysterious, oracular cubic centre. The lavish catalogue does its best, photographing the sculptures from a variety of angles; but this new work, with its ravished textures and secret spaces, always looks dead on the page: perhaps this is why some are now charging Caro with staleness, when in reality nothing could be further from the truth.

Coinciding with this exhibition, Lund Humphries has completed its attractive and richly illustrated five-volume survey. Much like Caro's continually overlapping series, these books reflect on related material

from different perspectives, loosely organised by type or theme. Caro presents a challenge to the critic, not least in his notorious hostility to the conceptual; he rarely makes preparatory drawings or plans, and his works constantly defy schematic accounts, moving rapidly in unpredictable directions. Karen Wilkin, the general editor, dismisses close analysis of Caro's 'visual rhyming and assonance' as 'tedious'; though modern sculpture criticism could in general benefit from far greater engagement with technicalities, no doubt subjecting Caro's work to mathematical scrutiny might threaten the sense of live play and improvisation. Nonetheless, these texts' greatest virtues lie in their close readings of individual works.

Paul Moorhouse, who curated the magnificent Tate retrospective of 2005, here recapitulates valuable material from his earlier volume, *Interpreting Caro*, now framing his discussion in terms of the works' 'presence'. The argument might have been strengthened by a more robust conceptualisation of this notion: just because Caro himself is anti-conceptual, does not mean that critical responses have to follow suit, and the lack of definition shows when Moorhouse casually remarks that art forms 'in general possess this quality [of presence] to some degree'. It is a subject crying out for a more theoretical approach to bridge the tricky gaps between the human and the inanimate, the literal and the abstract; but he remains highly sensitive to the interplay of levels of reality in Caro's work.

Wilkin takes a similarly intuitive approach in examining the interanimation of interiors and exteriors, but she develops a full sense of the spaces under scrutiny, defining her terms always through example, and is best on the instability of these relations. Her proposition that Caro's most profound engagement with space occurs when he strays into architectural territory seems questionable: it might equally be argued that there is a superficiality to the various interactive towers, steps, and passages that Caro has produced since the mid-1980s, and many find these his least affecting works. A weightier and more reflective contender would be the hidden and mystically charged enclosures of his box-based constructions, begun in the mid-1990s; these lead Wilkin to a wide-ranging reading of Caro's largest project, the recently-completed *Chapel of Light* in the church of St John the Baptist, Bourbourg. Her text is enlivened by quotation from her own conversations with the artist, and from unpublished texts, which grant us insightful anecdotes of Caro studying the Kamakura Buddha from the inside, or of him abandoning functional projects rather than having to think about handrails.

Mary Reid concentrates on Caro's use of line in three dimensions, or what he calls 'drawing with my torch'; she deftly and succinctly investigates matters of weight, colour, movement, and environment. Though the least substantial, in argument as in scale, the volume on smaller sculptures by H.F. Westley Smith (a collective) provides the greatest revelation in giving valuable attention to little-known work encompassing clay, paper, bronze, silver, stainless steel, and even jewellery. The authors show how the *Table Pieces*, begun in the mid-1960s, have been consistently at the forefront of Caro's formal inventions, without ever functioning as maquettes for the large-scale works. Though surprisingly little is made of the allusive qualities of the later *Table Pieces*, this subject is taken up by Julius Bryant in his assured volume on figurative and narrative works.

For all its scope, this series suggests that writing on Caro is still in an introductory phase; but the accounts are refreshingly direct, jargon-free, often stylish, and always engaging.