

Wall Reliefs: Tony Cragg's New Figuration (1985) and African Culture Myth (1984)

This in-focus exhibition revisits the extraordinary plastic works that Tony Cragg made in the 1980s through two mid-decade works: *New Figuration* (1985) and *African Culture Myth* (1984).

They highlight the salvaging and recycling ethos of Cragg's work at the time, gathering discarded pieces of plastic – often of the banks of the river Rhine, near where he lived and worked - and then reordering them back in the studio (through form, size and colour) and making mosaic-like sculptures out of these smaller objects. In doing so, he made different kinds of wholes through these fragments – and different kinds of multipartite composition.

'Plastic Fantastic' was one of the well-known sayings at the time, highlighting the exciting new possibilities of plastic in the mass production of everyday goods. Cragg, who turned 35 years of age in 1984, saw both the beauty and poignancy of this versatile material, understanding its sculptural and reproductive possibilities, but also aware that it was already being found in the landscape, as a new industrial layer within the geological sediment of the modern world.

His early plastic works, like *New Stones, Newton's Tones* (1978) and the *Spectrum* series of works, began on the floor, reconnecting these reorganised plastic fragments, to the ground from where they came. Cragg soon started to wall-mount the works, taking these forms and images onto the vertical, giving viewers a more eye-to-eye encounter with the sculptures. In doing so, the works take on a relief-like quality, which is something the artist himself highlights in calling these works 'wall reliefs.' We see both the overall composition and the individual object components simultaneously, as we are invited to think back and forth between the particular and the general, between smaller objects and fragments (like lighters, bottle tops, cups and toys) and their colours, in relation to the new re-complicated life of the larger subject or motif. Such works turn their backs on more familiar ideas of 'truth to materials', popular in Britain earlier in the century, in which materials are perceived to carry their own essential and vitalist meanings and metaphorical potentials.

The subjects for Cragg's new plastic works range from domestic objects and sports activities, to individual self-portraits to large figurative ensembles. *New Figuration* (1985) presents us with a dynamic and liberated figure, looping the loop within itself, and soaring upwards like an aeroplane to the sky. Like the plastic fragments themselves, the pieces rise up from the ground and are held elevated and suspended against gravity. *African Culture Myth* (1984) is one of the sculpture-orientated plastic works, that include a range of different kinds of sculpture. This one is based on a wooden statuette.

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