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His Motive Was Defiance

Sculptor Anthony
Caro delighted in
instigating huge
challenges for himself

BY WILLIAM FEAVER

The first time I met him, in the spring of 1974, Tony Caro showed me around his studio—a former piano factory in Camden Town, North London—as though conducting a slightly overdue tour of inspection. Short, burly, genial, he tapped dottle from his pipe on the leading edge of a work in process of being welded together.

“Bit off here, wouldn’t you say, Pat?” His assistant Pat Cunningham, who was to direct Caro’s studio operations for more than 40 years, nodded. There was obviously no need for explication: the sculpture was taking shape by dint of assembly and running reassessment; its final appearance was to be determined by standing back and walking round, by feel and measure, by decisions as to whether it should be painted or patina-sealed or even perhaps left to rust a little. There was a strong sense of urgent, open-ended capability.



Caro's painted steel-and-aluminum sculpture *Early One Morning*, 1962.

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Caro, who died on October 23, had already come a long way from his first solo show, in 1956, at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan. There, he had been introduced as a modeler: “Caro’s heavy human figures,” the critic Lawrence Alloway wrote, “express the heroic combat, unnoticed but unending, between the body and gravity.”

Back then he was the former studio assistant to Henry Moore, making a name for himself with bulky little bronze sculptures such as *Woman Arranging Her Hair (Spring)* and *Man Holding His Foot*. And since then he had undertaken so dramatic a shift (“I’m not interested in monuments. I’m fed up with objects on pedestals”) that his name had become synonymous with lightsome, colored, tensely sprung steel contraptions parked not on plinths but on the floor.

Take *Early One Morning*, Caro’s keynote piece from the early ’60s. A construct that struck out in a direction taking him well away from the rooted stability of any late David Smith, it sang in bright

The artist on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York on the occasion of his 2011 exhibition there.

scarlet, a poised array of steel rods, girder lengths, and rectangular plates, occupying its space as though it had just landed. It was utterly abstract, it could have been supposed, yet circling it now, one detects not only obvious indications of respect for postwar paintings by Picasso, such as *The Kitchen (1948)* and *The Cannes Studio (1955)*, but also hints of typical Henry Moore recumbent figures: those watchful heads and outstretched legs. This is not to accuse Caro of being derivative but rather to salute his new takes on the latest Old Masters.

Throughout his working life, Caro squared up to the concerns of his predecessors and contemporaries, belligerently at times. Often the outcomes were best described as plucky homages, notably his clunky variations in stoneware, earthenware, steel, brass, and bronze on Matisse’s *The Moroccans* and—even more misconceived—*Descent from*

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the Cross (Rubens and Rembrandt versions). Yet the emulative zest was attractive. Caro's propensity to have a go (for if he didn't, who would?) gave him a head start over his rivals.

What students who found themselves within his orbit (Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, Gilbert & George) were apt to regard as a bullying manner yielded much output: triumphs indeed of exercised willpower. In 1972, for instance, at the Ripamonte factory in Veduggio con Colzano, Italy, he exploited the oozy, lippy appearance of the discarded ends of sheets of rolled steel to make huge, whale-scale portals, leathery rudder shapes, and massive fins; these epitomes of grandeur were varnished to preserve the rich rust colors. By then he had more or less stopped doing paint finishes, warming instead to the intrinsic beauty of metals and timbers.

Eager to keep momentum going, buying up found materials (industrial leftovers, chunks of pottery, gymnastic vaulting horses even) and absorbing them into his schemes, Caro contested the

In 1972, Caro used discarded scraps of rusted steel to create large-scale sculptures such as *Veduggio Sun*.

notion that one's oeuvre should be consistent, not to say predictable. He obviously loved to defy expectations, so much so that the defiance itself became a key motive. Many a "table piece" was produced over the years, small enough for domestic display yet dramatic enough to magnetize attention. Such pieces, seated on ledges, were to be regarded as dimensional sketches, each enacting a feat of balance or swerve.

While other distinguished sculptors were at pains to pursue strategic courses in the interest of status protection, Caro forged ahead, keeping the old piano factory busy. This undoubtedly skewed his reputation. Consistency, that tedious virtue, demands deliberation at every turn, and that was not Caro's idea of a good way of life. He delighted in instigating huge challenges for himself, most notably in recent years in the Pas-de-Calais. There, in the small Romanesque church Saint Jean-Baptiste in Bourbourg, a village halfway between Calais and Dunkirk, he fitted out the interior with lashings of

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steel, timber, and terra-cotta—part furniture, part tableau. Inaugurated to the strains of a local oompah band, *Chapel of Light*, as he called it, was revealed to be a far cry from the bracing colors and sheer agility of the works that had made his reputation half a century earlier, but, by his reckoning, it was a demonstration of progress.

“A sort of digested cubist thinking is at the root of most of the interesting sculpture that’s going on,” Caro wrote to me in 1973; he was reflecting then on the legacy of Picasso and, obviously, speaking primarily for himself. As a born-again Cubist in the ways he treated his materials—clamping them, abutting them, clustering them—he upheld the philosophy of synthesis: that untiring appetite for the reconciliation of disparate parts into congruent wholes.

His Cubism was businesslike. From *Early One Morning* onward, his career was geared toward the occupation of spaces, from closest indoors to greatest outdoors. He worked on such a scale that,

The artist constructed the Cor-ten steel work *Millbank Steps* for his 2005 retrospective at Tate Britain.

relishing opportunities, he could locate processional quantities of his Greco-Romanesque Cubism on Park Avenue and in the Tuileries—not so much for his own satisfaction as in the belief that such grand temporary implants could do wonders for the cause of modern sculpture. *Millbank Steps*, a 75-foot-long array of bulwark ziggurats in Cor-ten steel, made in 2004 for his Tate Britain retrospective the following year, was one of the last great monuments he created in this spirit of inspired bravado.

Caro punctuated his life’s work with telling shows: at the Museum of Modern Art in 1975; in Trajan Markets in Rome in 1992, where each piece sat in its own ancient, roofless cubicle; and, most recently, at the Museo Correr in Venice, a display that, characteristically, he willed into being, against all logistical odds. The exhibitions proclaimed him the great Caro. From *Hopscotch* (1962) and *Garland* (1970) to *River Song* (2012), with its steel haunches housing a great red Perspex slab, this was a roll call of all that he did best. ■