

# LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

## Tony Cragg *Riot*

March 14 – April 15, 2023  
508 West 24<sup>th</sup> Street, New York

Lisson Gallery is honored to present the seminal 1987 work, *Riot*, by British sculptor, Tony Cragg. Comprising found, discarded plastic objects, this large-scale wall relief, is readable as a response to the political and social turbulence of the 1980s in Britain and is considered as one of his most acclaimed works. Despite its initial historic specificity, the work is simultaneously comprehensible as a current reflection of our own fraught context. Alongside this work are two further compositions – *Policeman* (1981) and *Leaf* (1981) – that similarly address this unrest as well as our paradoxical relationship with nature.

Assembled from a multitude of meticulously positioned plastic objects, which span the entire width of the gallery wall, *Riot* conveys a barricade of police officers wearing special protective gear. Following Cragg's enduring interest in the dynamic power of matter to assume form, the wall work figuratively foregrounds a scene of militarized state power, alluding to the many social upheavals that arose in reaction to the conservative Thatcherite regime in 1980s Britain.

Considering *Riot*'s monumental scale, the work is evocative of Parthenon Friezes, playing on traditions of spatial engagement with relief composition and narrative-led portrayals of imperial warfare and societal collapse. These art historical nods simultaneously position *Riot* with a view towards the past while make striking connections with our present context of rising authoritarianism and police repression. An early example of the artist's studied interrogation of industrial materials, Cragg uses the vivid colors and unaltered forms of disparate plastic objects to materialize a sensorially immersive and dynamic image-sculpture.

*Policeman*, 1981, similarly echoes the volatile political conditions under which the work was made in its depiction of a singular police officer that towers over the viewer. Composed of a mélange of blue plastic objects, the work unpacks the color blue and its loaded symbolic associations with two interconnected institutions of societal repression during this period, the Metropolitan Police and the Conservative Party. *Leaf*, 1981, underscores Cragg's interest in exploring humans' relationships with their material environments. A commentary on the rapid accumulation of man-made materials (especially plastic) in industrialized economies, Cragg substitutes pointed ecological critique with playful humor by forming a leaf – a charged symbol of organic purity – out of green plastic objects. The artist explains that his preference for man-made materials arose out of a desire to confront viewers with their overlooked yet deeply intimate quotidian relationships with such objects. The paradoxical form of *Leaf* further probes viewers to question what separates the natural from the unnatural.

Taken together, these three works give important historical context to an artist who has gone on to become one of the world's foremost sculptors. Though the works are reflective of the socio-political context of 1980s Britain, their poetic allusions to civil unrest and industrial pollution could not be more contemporary.

A new essay by Dr. Jon Wood, curator and art historian who has written extensively on modern and contemporary sculpture, accompanies the exhibition. Dr. Wood previously published a major essay entitled "Strata, structures, stories: Stacking in Cragg's sculpture" in the career-spanning publication, *Tony Cragg: Stacks*.

## About the artist

Tony Cragg is one of the world's foremost sculptors. Constantly pushing to find new relations between people and the material world, there is no limit to the materials he might use, as there are no limits to the ideas or forms he might conceive. His early, stacked works present a taxonomical understanding of the world, and he has said that he sees manmade objects as "fossilized keys to a past time which is our present". So too, the floor and wall arrangements of objects that he started making in the 1980s blur the line between manmade and natural landscapes: they create an outline of something familiar, where the contributing parts relate to the whole. Cragg understands sculpture as a study of how material and material forms affect and form our ideas and emotions. This is exemplified in the way in which Cragg has worked and reworked two broad bodies of work he calls *Early Forms* and *Rational Beings*. The *Early Forms* explore the possibilities of sculpturally reforming familiar objects such as containers into new and unfamiliar forms producing new emotional responses, relationships and meanings. *Rational Beings* examine the relationship between two apparently different aesthetic descriptions of the world; the rational, mathematically based formal constructions that go to build up the most complicated of organic forms that we respond to emotionally. The human figure being the prime example of something that looks ultimately organic eliciting emotional responses, while being fundamentally an extremely complicated geometric composition of molecules, cells, organs and processes. His work does not imitate nature and what we look like, rather it concerns itself with why we look like we do and why we are as we are.

Tony Cragg was born in Liverpool, UK in 1949 and has lived and worked in Wuppertal, Germany since 1977. He has a BA from Wimbledon School of Art, London, UK (1973) and an MA from the Royal College of Art, London, UK (1977). Among many major solo shows he has exhibited at the Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria (2022); La Venaria Reale, Venaria, Italy (2022); HEART Museum, Herning, Denmark (2022); Museo del Vetro, Venice, Italy (2021); Houghton Hall, Norfolk, UK (2021); Museum Belvédère, Heerenveen, Netherlands (2021); Museu Oscar Niemeyer, Brazil (2020); Split Kula Cultural Institution, Croatia (2019); City of Arts and Sciences, Spain (2018); Isfahan Museum of Contemporary Art, Iran (2018); Istanbul Modern, Turkey (2017); Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK (2017); the National Museum of Havana, Cuba (2017); MUDAM Luxembourg, Luxembourg (2017); Ludwig Museum, Koblenz, Germany (2017); Wrocław Contemporary Art Museum, Wrocław, Poland (2017); The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, Russia (2016); Von der Heydt Museum, Wuppertal, Germany (2016); Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece (2015); Gothenburg International Sculpture Exhibition, Gothenburg, Sweden (2015); Heydar Aliyev Centre, Baku, Azerbaijan (2014); Musée d'art moderne de Saint-Étienne, Saint-Étienne, France (2014); National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taichung, Taiwan (2013); CAFA Museum in Beijing, China (2012); Musée du Louvre, Paris, France (2011); the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, UK (2011); Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, TX, USA (2011); Skulpturenpark Waldfrieden, Wuppertal, Germany (2010); Tate Gallery, Liverpool, UK (2000); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte, Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain (1995); Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (1991) and Tate Gallery, London, UK (1988). He represented Britain at the 43rd Venice Biennale in 1988 and in the same year was awarded the Turner Prize at the Tate Gallery, London, UK. He has been a Professor at Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Paris, France (1999-2009) and Professor at Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf, Germany (2009-present). He was elected a Royal Academician in 1994; received the Praemium Imperiale for Sculpture, Tokyo, Japan (2007); was Awarded the 1st Class Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (2012) and was made a Knight's Bachelor in 2016.

## About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, two in New York, one in Shanghai and Beijing, as well as a forthcoming gallery in Los Angeles, opening 15 April. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estate of Leon Polk Smith. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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