

# NEW YORK

## Repeater, Inventor

**TONY CRAGG**  
**"INCIDENTS"**  
**MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY**  
**28 OCT – 20 DEC 2022**

Since early on in his half-century career, Tony Cragg (\*1949) has worked in series, or, as he puts it, "families." Under this scheme, he often pursues multiple divergent aesthetic signatures at once, iterating them to the point of exhaustion. His oeuvre has the mark of two contrary artistic temperaments: he is both a repeater and a restless wanderer. The exhibition "Incidents" at Marian Goodman comprises a desultory selection of offspring from a half dozen of his sculptural families, putting both tendencies on view.



View of  
 "Incidents," Marian Goodman Gallery

The first room of the show features a regimented phalanx of works on pedestals, divided into the series "Masks" (2021) and "Integers" (2021–22). Writers on Cragg's sculptures frequently invoke their resemblance to geological forms, even when he is not working with geological material. Yet the "Masks" are too carefully balanced to suggest anything besides human design. Two are carved in Guatemalan green and a third in Statuario stone, their gleaming opulence lending them the chicness of luxury design. A fourth in green wood provides a welcome and subtle bit of warmth. The "Integers" series, meanwhile, rehearses the ways in which two torsos might intersect and come together as a single form.

The star of a middle room is *In No Time* (2018), a bronze work which seems to take the folding force lines of baroque drapery and amplify them into a dazzling miasma of abstract ripples. Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) comes to mind as a precedent, with a similarly palpable sense of movement. Boccioni's work looked forward, with Futurism's feverish delight, to a time when machines would make everything ever faster. Cragg's work, a century later, seems to realize that anticipation. His imagination and instincts have been augmented by digital modeling tools, and while he and his galleries hedge about the degree to which he employs them, it is clear that CNC and CAD

# NEW YORK

technologies are integral to the design and construction of his fiendishly intricate, flowing forms.

Two 2021 bronzes continue the "Hollow Head" series's exploration of the ways in which Cragg can pull, stretch, and twist a head. Some of the most famous of Cragg's head sculptures spiral upwards like expressionist pillars, their facial features resolving and then blurring into abstraction. In interpreting these works, one could begin thinking about the disorienting flexibility of identity – "Man is broad, too broad indeed. I would have him narrower," Dostoyevsky writes in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) – and how our selves get warped over time, so that no single self can be claimed durably. But this seems a reach: the work is visual, spatial, and exciting to move around; just what is being stretched hardly seems important.

In Paolo Sorrentino's film *La grande bellezza* (The Great Beauty, 2013), a dissolute theater critic looks across a bed and reassures an insecure lover: "It's sad to be good – one risks becoming proficient." Cragg may not be sad, but his grip on technique is sometimes so tight that his work hangs limp. But how much can we ask for? His massive back catalog includes a bevy of astonishments from unvisited realms of sculptural form. In the "Hollow Head" works and *In No Time*, contrails of movement appear to overwhelm and conceal their apparent sources, and sheer visual complexity forces a viewer to linger, retrace, and untangle. This optical labor makes the eye operate like the needle on a vinyl record, following grooves and channels. In a sense, some of Cragg's objects become encapsulations of lapsed time, derivatives which we unravel back to their initial state of coherence. Though this entails an obvious puzzle; to find the initial figure from which its form un-spools, Cragg's serializing implies a larger, unsolved problem whose solution remains unresolved – or else why keep at it?



*In No Time*, 2018  
 Bronze, 140 x 107 x 67 cm

Tony Cragg is no longer the reigning patriarch of British sculpture that he was in the 1980s. But his unfashionableness – ever the prelude to fashionableness – makes him ripe for reconsideration. To look at his work today is to see a mode of art which took for granted the possibility of seriousness without borrowing salience or significance from popular politics. Cragg tends to talk about his work in a way that seems radically blithe to theory. In the promotional video for "Incidents," he delivers homilies like "the

very principle of sculpture [...] is that you look at things and you have an emotion." That sounds refreshingly out of touch with the trending art of this moment, which often seems to find feelings embarrassing, unless they are situated politically and catalyzed by social conditions – not by interactions with colors and shapes. If Cragg's tamer efforts are in evidence in this show, they also serve as testimony to just how much work it takes to prepare the ground for his undeniable triumphs.

**Brecht Wright Gander**

© Tony Cragg. Courtesy: the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery. Photos: Michael Richter