

CONRAD SHAWCROSS MATRIX 179



JUNE 21, 2018 - SEPTEMBER 9, 2018
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

NEED TITLE

Industrial robotics hacked to create an aesthetic environment through balletic movement.

Mathematics and sound mapped in solid forms.

Illusion and vision challenged by built solids and voids that hide their materiality.

None of these would strike us as a particularly familiar theme for contemporary sculpture here in America. Yet each has been a focus of creativity and realization in the work of English artist Conrad Shawcross (born 1977, admitted to the Royal Academy in 2013) over the first two decades of his career. This project—the first museum presentation of his work in the Americas—combines one colossal outdoor sculpture, two mid-size sculptures, several maquettes and project drawings, artist interviews, and a new shadow-producing machine that touch upon each of these modes. While they form a compact study of only the past few years' work, they also provide insight into the thinking and materiality of a systems-inspired sculptor of uncommon accomplishment.

These interdisciplinary approaches to sculpture come from both the practical experience of physics and the natural world, but also from Shawcross's keen curiosity—based in the humanities—and sensitivity to the questions posed by visual and literary artists across the twentieth century. He was trained in England (at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford, and then at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London) at the turn of the millennium. The objects he makes take form in a variety of materials and scale, sometimes embracing ephemeral effects (light and sound) and other times embracing machine-based outcomes. At first glance, his works appear both omnivorous and entirely practical in regard to these physical matters. Did his early, caged machines—a massive rope-winder (*Nervous Systems*, 2003) or a spinning light rotor made of oak (fig. 1)—require the handcrafted look of the early industrial age (think of a trestle train bridge or perhaps a Renaissance catapult) as part of a recapturing of the basic and essentialist goals of the engineer? Do their distinctive machine sounds intend to menace and remind us of the anxieties, violence, and alarm we feel around the robotic world? And how did they lead to his more current work's frequent embrace of larger, metal sculptures—slower robotic pieces executing more compound, precise movements (fig. 2) and static sculptures (fig. 3) alike—that create both ephemeral beauty (often shadow play) and solid harmonies? One key to appreciating these questions and understanding this shift begins with a consideration of the sculptor's point of view.

FIG. 1: LOOP SYSTEM – MAJOR THIRD 5:4, 4 PART COUNTERPOINT, 2006.
MIXED MEDIA; 88 ½ X 118 ½ X 98 ½ IN.





FIG. 2: *SLOW ARC INSIDE A CUBE VIII*, 2017. POWDER COATED STEEL, LIGHT, MECHANISM; 127 7/8 X 77 1/2 X 55 1/2 IN. COMMISSIONED BY ARTSCIENCE MUSEUM. PHOTO COURTESY ARTSCIENCE MUSEUM



Shawcross trusts in the fundamental systems of the world around us—whether the rhythms of astronomy or human-made constructs to understand them, such as mathematics and computing—so profoundly that his work is not overdetermined by the artist, but rather shaped by the capabilities for making those rules visible. One wonders how far he is taking us closer to the limits of physics, visually, and how much he is inciting in us a renewed focus on and consideration of the forces of the material world—the variable track of the sun, the inescapability of gravity, the limits of mathematical progressions—as manifest in his sculptures and machines. In this approach to science thinking, he can be compared to any number of conceptual artists, living and dead, who cultivate mathematics for aesthetic opportunity. More exceptionally, this method allows for the scalability usually found in architecturally-oriented practitioners. In fact, Shawcross often employs the tools of the engineer in the process and realization of his work. One early opportunity to explore what has now become his hallmark comfort with powering sculpture with these systems came from the artist's ambition to work large. At age 30, he completed a commission for Unilever's headquarters on the Victoria Embankment. The massive result—the sculptural machine *Space Trumpet* (2007) perched from six stories above the lobby—pushed the material limits of wood, and it was clear that the tensile strength of metals and the opportunity for both welding and precision machining that

FIG. 3: *HARMONIC MANIFOLD 1 (5-4)*, 2011.
PATINATED BRONZE; 88 ½ X 35 ½ X 35 ½ IN.



FIG. 4: INSTALLATION VIEW, *THE DAPPLED LIGHT OF THE SUN*, 2018.
14 SEPTEMBER – 25 OCTOBER 2015. CHATSWORTH HOUSE,
DERBYSHIRE, UK. PHOTO: MARC WILMOT



come with metal substrates would open up a future at every scale. A fluency in metals has liberated his sculptures to become, variously, shade-generating trees and clouds of weathering steel (fig. 4), sine waves of musical chords frozen in cast iron (fig. 3), and skins reactive to the sky (cover image).

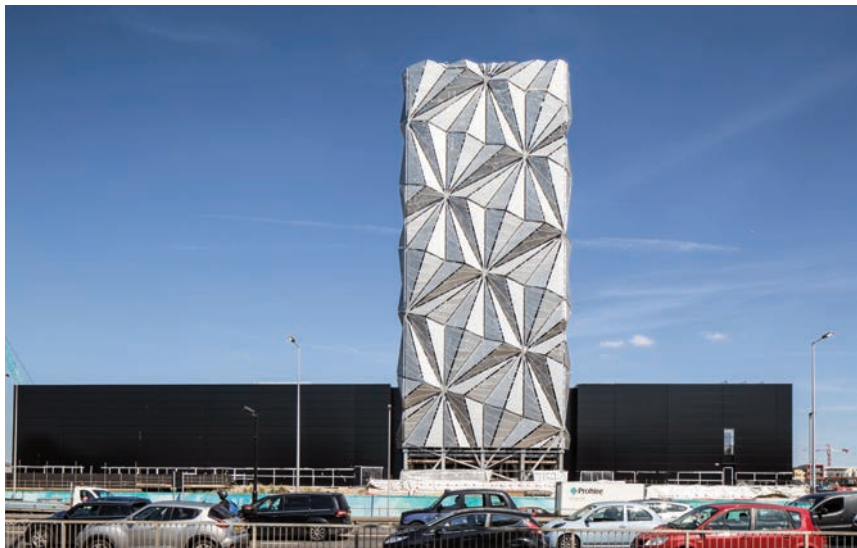
The artist also seeks to reacquaint us with questions of our human understanding of the universe, to challenge our sense of control and rationality, to fundamentally embrace the insufficiency of our knowledge. Asked to remark on the innovative approach he applied to an open competition associated with the massive smokestack profile of the new Energy Centre on London's Greenwich Peninsula (fig. 5), he said:

I guess with the work I'm trying to be a bit unnerving. It's trying to ask questions rather than answer them. My primary goal is not to educate people—I just want to chisel away at the sense of reality. I hope the work illuminates how incomplete things are in terms of our understanding of our sensory envelope. I'm not trying to preach.¹

His sculptural solution to that particular challenge—of making a structure that both embraced its functional role and played with our capacity to perceive it as a solid form—informs so many of his machines and static works.

For all the harnessing of (or is it abandoning to?) systems, the work is remarkably consistent in its pursuit of beauty. His vocabulary is filled with references to classical rules—of western music scales, golden mean proportions, Fibonacci sequences,

FIG. 5: *THE OPTIC CLOAK*, 2016. ARCHITECTURAL INTERCENTION AT THE ENERGY CENTRE, GREENWICH PENINSULA, LONDON, UK. 160 X 69 X 10 FT. PHOTO: MARC WILMO



Greco-Roman mythology. And his sculptures, for all of their contemporary materiality and relevance, find stability and harmony among earlier art. When first discussing an engagement at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the artist asked if he could make work in dialogue with Pietro Francavilla's colossal marble sculpture *Venus with a Nymph and Satyr* (1600) at the center of the International Style atrium of the Avery Memorial (1933). Shawcross considers his previous response to Titian's *Death of Actaeon* (1559-75) at London's National Gallery one of his pivotal works. A balletic industrial robot caressing/carving an antler in real time, *Trophy* (2012) was on view in the room next to Titian's canvas.

Similarly, Shawcross's stainless steel *Monolith (Optic)*—related to the monumental *Optic Cloak*—finds neighbors on Main Street, just steps away from Alexander Calder's *Stegosaurus* (1973), Tony Smith's *Amaryllis* (1965), and Carl Andre's *Stone Field Sculpture* (1977). And upon entering the Wadsworth Atheneum one encounters the sculptural and architectural work of Sol LeWitt and many other artists from the second half of the twentieth century up through today—many who cultivate art systems from numeric rationality. All the while, an exactness and abstract clarity propels the artist's work forward, whether in the finishes (fig. 6) or the smooth motion of his machines (fig. 7).

THOMAS J. LOUGHMAN

Director

FIG. 6: *DETAIL OF PARADIGM – B (SOLID)*, 2018. WEATHERING STEEL.
RAL INTERCENTION AT THE ENERGY CENTRE, GREENWICH PENINSULA,
LONDON, UK. 160 X 69 X 10 FT. PHOTO: MARC WILMO



FIG. 7: *LIMIT OF EVERYTHING (5:4)*, 2011. METAL, OAK,
MECHANICAL SYSTEM, LIGHT; 236 ¼ X 236 ¼ X 39 ¼ IN.



CONRAD SHAWCROSS

Conrad Shawcross has undertaken numerous residencies, awards and commissions including *The Ada Project*, an ongoing series of musical commissions between Shawcross and leading contemporary composers, which was conceived for the Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2013) and has since travelled to venues in Tasmania, London, Hong Kong and Denmark. Shawcross was one of three contemporary artists invited to create works inspired by Titian's masterpieces for the project *Metamorphosis: Titian 2012*, an ambitious collaboration with the National Gallery and Royal Ballet for the Cultural Olympiad. He was Artist in Residence at the Science Museum, London, from 2009 to 2011. His first public commission, *Space Trumpet*, was installed in the atrium of the refurbished Unilever Building in London in 2007 and won the Art & Work 2008 Award. In 2009 he was awarded the Illy prize for best solo presentation at Art Brussels. The artist earned a foundation degree in 1996 at Chelsea Museum of Art, London; a BFA with Honors in 1999 at the Ruskin School of Art, Oxford; and a MFA in 2001 at Slade School of Art, University College, London.

Shawcross has had solo exhibitions at institutions including the New Art Centre, Roche Court (2015); ARTMIA Foundation, Beijing (2014); MUDAM, Luxembourg (2012); Science Museum, London (2011–2012); Turner Contemporary, Margate (2011); and Oxford Science Park (2010). His work has recently been exhibited nationally and internationally as part of the *Summer Exhibition 2017*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2017); *Socle du Monde Biennale 2017*, HEART Herring Museum of Contemporary Art, Denmark (2017); *Into the Unknown: A Journey Through Science Fiction*, Barbican, London (2017); *The Universe and Art*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo (2016–2017), which travelled to ArtScience Museum, Singapore (2017); *GLOBALE: Exo-Evolution*, ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (2015–2016); *Art Out Loud*, Chatsworth House, Derbyshire (2015); *Proportio*, Palazzo Fortuny, Venice (2015); *Summer Exhibition 2014*, Royal Academy, London (2014); *Light Show*, Hayward Gallery, London (2013), which travelled to Auckland Art Gallery (2014–2015), MCA Sydney (2015), Sharjah Art Foundation (2015) and Benaki Museum, Athens (2016); the 55th Venice Biennale (2013); and *Journeys: Conrad Shawcross and Tavares Strachan*, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design (2011). MATRIX 179 is Shawcross's first solo museum exhibition in the United States of America.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dappled Light of the Sun (Study IV – Prevailing Wind), 2018
Weathering steel
39 ¾ x 59 ½ x 59 ½ in.

Paradigm – B (Solid), 2018
Weathering steel
55 ¾ x 18 ¾ x 18 ¾ in.

Slow Arc X, 2018
Powder-coated steel, light, and mechanical system
94 ½ x 51 ½ x 37 ¾ in.

Study for The Optic Cloak, 2017
Aluminum and steel
40 x 16 ¾ x 16 ¾ in.

Harmonic Manifold 1 (5:4), 2011
Patinated bronze
88 ¾ x 35 ¾ x 35 ¾ in.

A Picture of a Chord Falling into Silence (Major Sixth 5:3, Speeds 0, 2, 5, 8, 10), 2009
Set of five ink on paper drawings
10 ¾ x 33 in. each

All works and images courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice © Conrad Shawcross

Born in 1955, New York, NY
Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY; New Haven, CT;
and Norfolk, CT

ARTIST GALLERY TALK

Conrad Shawcross
Thursday, June 21
6 pm

CURATOR GALLERY TALK

Patricia Hickson, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of
Contemporary Art
Friday, August 3
Noon
Free with museum admission



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