Pegs: Three Stages, 1986
British artist Tony Cragg uses the refuse of 20th century society to create sculpture. Bits and pieces of debris—used plastic containers, broken toys, tin cans—are used like paint daubs or collage elements and arranged to form familiar icons. His references to plastic sculptures (Some Kind of a Group), landscape (Isoprene Landscape), and architecture (Pegas: Three Stages) address fundamental issues of man's relationship to his environment.

Some Kind of a Group, currently on view, is typical of Cragg's wall sculptures, although it is not a sculpture in any conventional sense. Composed of plastic shards affixed directly on the wall within defined contours, it lacks weight, volume, and cohesion. Cragg relies on the viewer to visually unify the bright red, yellow and blue fragments into figural shapes; much as in a Pointillist painting, one must merge dots of colored pigment to complete the illusion. That with the poorest of materials and simplest of means he is able to create a monumental work capable of expressing specific human types and attitudes is both indicative of Cragg's particular genius and a witty commentary on the preciousness of the art object.

Some Kind of a Group, which are composed of hundreds of small, scattered components, are metaphors for cellular structure (not unlike Jonathan Borofsky's archetypal Molecule Man), whereas the construction of Pegas: Three Stages parallels geological stratification, a record of the earth's configurations of rocks that marked his forays into the English countryside. But Cragg's concern was never with shells or stones but rather with exploring the expressive possibilities of man-made materials that, once discarded, have lost their original identity and function and merged back into nature. The worn, moss-covered rubber tire in Isoprene Landscape is such an object.

Although artists have inserted fragments of everyday reality into their works since the Cubists included bits of newspapers into their collages, Cragg's attitude about such objects is one that could only belong to his generation, the first to recognize the limitations of science and technology and question their promise of progress. He notes that man has altered "the geography, the geology, the vegetation, the animal kingdom, the water-flow, and the atmosphere" but in the process has lost a fundamental understanding of the world and its objects, with potentially disastrous results. In calling attention to commercial and industrial castoffs, Cragg helps us see beyond their banality so that we might consider their "metaphysical, poetical, mythological" possibilities.

Cragg was born in Liverpool, England, in 1949. After completing his art studies at the Royal College of Art, London (1973-77), he moved to West Germany. Since that time he has lived in Wuppertal and taught at the Düsseldorf Academy.

Pegas: Three Stages and Isoprene Landscape were made especially for the current MATRIX exhibition, Cragg's first on the West Coast. Subsequent to its presentation at the University Art Museum, Cragg's exhibition will travel to the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX (all works lent by Marian Goodman Gallery, New York):

1. Some Kind of a Group, 1983, Plastic, 75-1/2 x 360".
3. Isoprene Landscape, 1986, rubber, masonite, steel, 28-1/2 x 45 x 63".
Selected one-person exhibitions:


Selected group exhibitions:

Venice, Italy, Biennale, Aperto '80 (catalogue); Whitechapel Gallery, London, British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century, '81 (catalogue); Kassel, W. Germany, Documenta 7, '82 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, '84 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogues under exhibitions):


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