

## **Caro/Araeen: A Conversation**

The sculpture of Anthony Caro (1924-2013) inspired a generation of young artists in the 1960s and 1970s encouraging them to think differently about the forms and meanings of sculpture, about its relationship to the human body and about its material and spatial possibilities. Soon championed by the American art critic Clement Greenberg, a supporter of the sculptor David Smith (1906-65), Caro enjoyed huge success, both in the context of the 'New Generation' exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1965 and the acclaimed St Martins' Sculpture Department which included Philip King (b. 1934), William Tucker (b. 1935) and Tim Scott (b. 1937).

For Rasheed Araeen (b. 1935) who first encountered Caro's work in 1965 soon after moving to Britain from Pakistan, such sculpture was hugely influential. On seeing it, Araeen decided to make a 'fresh start' (to quote the artist), giving up painting and creating works such as 'Sculpture No. 2' (1965), in which painted metal beams were stacked together in rows to form a cube which comprised tunneled internal spaces. Such works would begin a rich and complex conversation with Caro's sculpture that effectively carries on into the present, as the lives of Araeen's fabricated structures extend into the present.

In recent years, Araeen himself has reflected on this early mid-1960s shift, reading it as a moment of continuation as much as conversion. He has recalled that he was open to new ideas whilst also channeling pre-existent expertise into new areas. He was also a young, thirty-year old man quickly looking for other ways of seeing and doing things, as he has recalled in relation to Caro: 'I soon became fed up with this juggling of material – putting things here and there until you found something significant.' Araeen was not alone in this and it would be interesting to triangulate such considerations by considering potential so-called 'minimalist' dialogues with works by other constructivist artists working in Britain at this time, such as Kenneth Martin (1905-84), Mary Martin (1907-69), Anthony Hill (b. 1930) and Gillian Wise (b. 1936).

Araeen was a trained civil engineer and it was his engineering background and his early window design work (he designed the lattice structured window grilles for parents' house in Karachi) that evidently charged his sculptural thinking, enabling him to envisage the framing of views and viewpoints and intuit the three-dimensional experiences at stake. 'First Structure' (1966-67), a cube strengthened by diagonal struts, demonstrated a move to open structure, and began a large and continuing body of work in wood in which the idea of the open, cubic enclosure, variously configured, delineated and ventilated, would be key. As Araeen was working on his early 'Structures' in 1966, Caro was making his first table sculptures, as well as his large, painted steel and latticed sheet metal sculpture 'The Window' (1966-67): a window-sculpture rumination on sculpture's relationship with architecture, an issue that preoccupied Caro throughout his life.

Looking back at this moment today and at the work of both these artists, we can discern fascinatingly different attitudes to structure, sculpture and space. Whilst Caro and Araeen both share an interest in the use of applied primary colour to help give precision and presence to line in space, this conversation can also be read as a series of opposites and/or contrasting qualities. Viewing Caro and Araeen's work schematically, we find contrasts between: composition and configuration; asymmetry and symmetry; imbalance and balance; single units and parts of larger wholes; horizontality and verticality; table support and wall support; heaviness and lightness; fixity and portability; and between viewers and physical participants.

The potential conceptual and political ramifications of these qualities of Araeen's structures have been well-articulated over the years not only by the artist, but also by many writers, including Guy Brett, Jean Fisher, John Roberts, Osman Jamal, Courtney Martin, Patricia Bickers and Michael Newman who in 1986 succinctly summarized Araeen's sculpture as being based on 'an abstract structure as a metaphor for an open, egalitarian and dynamically modern society.' It is a good point well made and seeing Rasheed Araeen's work alongside that of Anthony Caro offers a great opportunity to think again about what this might mean today thirty years later and to reconsider both Araeen and Caro's work historically within the increasingly international coordinates of sculpture in London more generally in the 1960s and 1970s.

*- Jon Wood, July 2017*