

RICHARD TRUPP

Studio assistant: 2000-01

London, UK

HIS MASTERS BOOTS

I was studying for an MA at the Wimbledon School of Art when I received a phone call: *'Anthony Caro wants to meet you. Come along Tuesday morning. Bring your portfolio'*. I'd been recommended to him by my tutor.

I arrived early at Caro's studio in Georgiana Street, North London. I had time to kill and went to a nearby park and sat on a swing, trying to relax, just me with some local pigeons. Back at the studio I was greeted by an effusive Caro. As I stuck out my hand out to shake his I realised, to my horror, that I had pigeon poop on my palm. Caro didn't seem to notice; he grabbed my hand, shook it and said *'Welcome Richard'*. He turned the pages of my portfolio. *'Oh yes, this guy is serious!'* he said, enthusiastically.

At university, I remember looking at a book of Caro's work. There was a photograph of him in his studio, working on a brass sculpture called *'Elephants Palace'*. Six weeks after the interview, I found myself using the same welder in his studio and working as his assistant.

On my first day Caro was out of the country and I found myself under the guidance of studio manager Patrick Cunningham. *'Tony is away for a couple of weeks but we would like you to work on this steel sculpture,'* he explained. The piece had been made in a studio in America and when it had been shipped to the UK, Caro was not happy with it. He wanted to change it - so he turned it upside down.

Caro phoned to see how I was getting on. When I told him about the changes I had been working on his tone altered; *'Changes? I don't want big changes!'* Despite the scale of his sculptures Caro was a small details man. *'Tidy it up a bit and cut where I have marked with chalk and I will view it when I return'* he instructed.

Each sculpture was made up of small sections, bolted together with hidden fixings so that it could be taken apart if it needed to be transported to a museum or gallery.

Occasionally Caro would have tea with us. The tearoom was a seventies cabin with a smoke stained tongue and groove interior and those tea were a great opportunity to listen to stories of Henry Moore and Picasso.

Caro worked as an assistant for Moore for two years. In his youth he turned up to Moore's studio in Yorkshire and asked for a job. He was told there was no work but to come back in three months. Caro waited three months to the day before he knocked on his door again. *'I still don't have anything,'* Moore replied, *'but as you're here again you can come in and sweep the studio floor.'*

Caro told me that Moore was mesmerizing to watch as he worked with a piece of clay, shaping it with his hands to form his sculptures. He would then turn to Caro and say, *'Right, scale that up. I want it big.'*

At the studio, I found a drawing of a nude that Caro had drawn whilst he was Moore's assistant. Moore had crossed out part of Tony's drawing and drawn his own correction. Both Caro and Moore had signed the sketch.

One teatime Caro recounted a meeting with Picasso. In the 60s Picasso gave a talk to the new generation of sculptors. The room was full of Caro's contemporaries, many of them talented and celebrated artists in their own right. Picasso's opening words were *'I am better than all of you'*. Caro said, *'We all looked at each other, paused and then all quietly nodded'*.

Caro was excited by change but worried about being seen as outdated. He was taken on a personal tour of The Tate Modern before it opened by Sir Nicolas Serota. He loved the building but not all of the artwork.

Caro came into the studio red faced and frustrated. I asked him what he thought. *'I don't know'* he said, shaking his head. *'I went up the escalator and there was a neon sign saying Video or a hard place'. I turned to Nicholas and said 'what the hell does that mean? I didn't get an answer!'*

Caro wasn't a big fan of the YBA's and I recall him declaring: *'they are all getting success too early. An artist doesn't really know what they are doing until they are 35 years old'*. Now I'm 42 and I see what he means.

The only other time I saw him frustrated was during the Millennium Bridge project over the Thames in London. Caro couldn't bear the amount of meetings he had to attend about the project.

With every meeting came new problems and as each design got knocked back, Caro became more and more vexed with the whole process. He was quite vocal if he didn't like something and wouldn't care if the whole studio was listening. I remember him shouting, *'I am going to resign from the project! I am not interested in any more meetings, I just want to make sculpture.'*

The project organisers were soon at the studio trying to persuade Caro to stay on board.

At the opening ceremony of the Millennium Bridge we walked down past Caro's completed sculptures next to the Thames and onto an unfinished bridge.

I have never seen Caro as happy as he was on that day. After the ceremony he invited me back to the studio for drinks. He got out a bottle of whisky and poured me the biggest measure I have ever had. That same day Caro was awarded the Order of Merit. Immediately after the ceremony, he had to design his own coat of arms. He chose a crucible, a hammer and an anvil.

From then on he would become Sir Anthony, though he always insisted on me calling him Tony.

I worked with Caro on a show called Encounters at the National Gallery. The brief was new works by contemporary artists that were inspired by paintings from the gallery's collection. Caro chose the painter Duccio. He was asked to make three sculptures but he got on a roll exploring different materials and ended up making seven. Walnut, oak, steel, brass, Perspex, plaster and iron were all used. I remember having trouble with the casting for a plaster version of a piece. Caro never liked the process of casting; to him it was a secondary process. He preferred the immediacy of welded steel. Occasionally he would get metal shapes sand cast, but even then he would spend time composing them in a direct, immediate and spontaneous way.

I had ambitious plans of my own for a solo show at the Royal British Society of Sculptors. My RBS show went ahead and Caro went to see it alone. He was never keen on the hustle and bustle of private views. At the private view of his retrospective at Tate Britain I remember asking him how he felt about the evening. He replied *'I will be happy when it's all over.'*

After the private view for my show, Caro called me into his office, pulled out his address book and called the art critic and historian Tim Marlow (now Artistic Director at the Royal Academy of Art), urging him to see the show. Tim's reaction was heartening: *'I am pleased Tony got in touch. The work is terrific.'*

The caring side to my mentor extended beyond his contacts book. One day he noticed that my work boots were worn through, the soles virtually split in half. *'Richard I have some boots,'* he said. *'I used them in America.'* He opened the box and passed them to me. *'Try these,'* he said. I pushed my foot in. They were a size too small. *'Thanks Tony they are perfect'* I told him. They did loosen up and stretch over time. I wore them every day for the rest of my time at Barford. I still have them.

News of Caro's death hit me hard. I recently installed a sculpture outside my old university building in Nottingham, which was directly inspired by something I found on the floor of Caro's studio all those years ago. The timing is co-incidental - the sculpture was made months before Caro's death – but the work has since taken on an added resonance. Patrick Cunningham called me to give it his blessing.

I went back to Caro's Camden studio recently. It was 16 years since I'd first set foot in the place. I was greeted like an old friend by studio manager Patrick Cunningham. '*Richard, it's so lovely to see you*' he beamed, putting his arm round me and ushering me back into the place that had shaped my life forever. It was like I'd never been away. All that was missing was my mentor.

It is strange, and also fitting, for me that Caro's life and achievements were celebrated with a memorial at Tate Britain in 2014, as it was there that I last saw him in person, at the opening of his 2005 exhibition.

There was a drinks reception and Caro walked in to a huge round of applause. Once it had died down, he walked through the crowd of people, everyone trying to talk to him, straight towards me. I was shocked and honoured. He said, '*Richard, great to see you,*' and shook my hand.

There was not a drop of pigeon poop in sight.