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• FEBRUARY 2022 •

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THE SCULPTOR JOHN CRAWFORD'S ABSTRACT LANGUAGE

FROM BASIC, CAREFULLY CRAFTED COMPONENT PARTS, AN ARTIST'S LARGE-SCALE WORK EMERGES

by Edward M. Gómez

What is it about abstract art that still seizes the imagination of artists and art lovers around the world more than a century after its modern expressions began to emerge — art-makers and viewers who continue to find expressive power in the simplicity — or richness — of color, line, and gesture, and an exultant, even spiritual charge in the essence of pure form?

With this article, **brutjournal** inaugurates a new series of interviews and thematic essays that will examine different aspects of the alluring and intriguing language of abstraction.

We'll speak with artists, art dealers, collectors, curators, and students about a kind of art that, at its best and in many ways, is still as radical today as it was when its first rumblings were detected in the late 19th century in the works of such artists as J.M.W. Turner, James McNeill Whistler, and the mediumistic maker of "spirit images," Georgiana Houghton.



John Crawford, "Bifurcation Spheres," 2022, works in progress, forged steel. Photo courtesy of the artist

We're looking – and speaking – retrospectively, of course, from the vantage point of today's knowledge and understanding of abstract art's evolution prior to, during, and after modern art's textbook-timeline heyday. The point is that the language of abstraction in art-making has been around long enough to have developed into a multifaceted, popular, and remarkably international artistic lingua franca.

If abstract art were the brainchild of a gaggle of Broadway producers, you can be sure they would say, "Now here's an idea that really has legs!"

For those who find aesthetic excitement – and reward – in the diversity and impact of abstraction, often it is a kind of art that really has soul.

Throughout this series of articles and essays to come, a variety of artists and other sources will be introduced, and as it continues, some of these informed and informative thinkers and creators will reappear, weighing in with comments, questions, and observations in what we hope will become a broad, multi-themed discussion of and dialog about abstract art's many modes and mysteries.

Our first stop is the studio, in Brooklyn, of the sculptor John Crawford, a maker of both smaller-scale and monumental-size works in steel and other metals. Crawford's art is that of an inquisitive, inventive, technically skilled, and often very determined craftsman who uses his hands and also some heavy machinery – the ancient methods of the forge and the power of modern technology – to build sophisticated three-dimensional compositions using the most basic elements, which tend to be spheres or other simple geometric forms.

Crawford, who was born in 1953, studied art at the Rhode Island School of Design in the mid-1970s. There, he experimented with a such materials as wax and cardboard, and produced wood-and-metal sculptural objects inspired by his interest in wood-and-metal farm tools. After graduating from RISD, for a while Crawford worked on a fishing boat and on oil rigs.

Then he set off for Italy in search of an opportunity to apprentice in a metalsmith's workshop. His goal: to learn firsthand about a range of metalworking techniques, including forging, which involves, as he explained to me a few years ago, "heating steel to an orange-hot, malleable state but not liquefying it" (which is casting).

In the late 1980s, in a shipyard in South Brooklyn, Crawford began to add machining to forging to produce his sculptures. He noted, "Machine tools – lathes and mills – are almost the opposite of forging. They produce very precise cuts. I knew that the combination of the organic qualities of forging and the cool precision of machined steel would provide me with an artistic-vocabulary range that I could use for the rest of my life."

As a young man, in a small town in the province of Lucca, in the Tuscany region of west-central Italy, Crawford did serve as an apprentice in a centuries-old water-powered forge run by two blacksmiths who were brothers. There, the sculptor recently recalled, “they made all kinds of hand farm tools.” In one of my earlier conversations with the artist a few years ago, Crawford remembered that formative period in Italy. He said, “I swept the floors. I started from zero. I began by trying to make the most basic tools, like mason’s chisels, by copying the ones these skilled craftsmen had made. In the end, I was able to make all of the different shovels, hoes, and axes that they made. It was not easy.”

Today, Crawford may spend many months developing and then executing a design for, say, an institutional client – the kind of large-scale sculpture that will be installed and displayed in a public space. Even his small-scale works exude a monumental air; to examine them is to easily imagine them rendered large and monumental in size.

Since last summer, I’ve been in regular communication with Crawford as I’ve followed his progress in the development of a new sculpture in his “Bifurcation Spheres” series that he would like to realize on a large scale but whose carefully balanced composition – he is working with solid steel – made up of repeated clusters of spherical forms is at once simple and complex in both appearance and construction.



A view of the sculptor John Crawford's studio in Brooklyn, New York.. Photo courtesy of the artist

Last year, he visited some industrial forges to inquire about the production of the multiple units that will make up his proposed sculpture, each of which is not an exact, perfect sphere, and each of which must connect, by means of an internal, unseen element, to its neighboring parts. Moreover, he was looking for skilled artisans to whom he could show the highly specialized production methods he had devised for these parts, whose engineering is novel and precise.

Crawford is an artist who revels in the expressive power of simple forms and who also savors the kinds of aesthetic-technical-intellectual challenges the realization of his designs tend to throw up. About his latest project, he told me: “The primary focus of my work over the last few years has been on planning some larger pieces, which means that I’ve had to work at some industrial or non-art venues, outside my studio. Planning something that no one has ever done before, which, with regard to the technical details, is the case with the sculpture I’m working on now, is extraordinarily difficult in the best of times. It has been even more difficult during the pandemic.”



Above, left: The young John Crawford in 1977, making metal farm tools 1977. Right: A section of the sculptor John Crawford's "Bifurcation Spheres," showing how the basic elements of his work in progress relate to each other formally and fit together physically. Photos courtesy of the artist

Among other sources, in addition to farm tools, Crawford says he feels an affinity for such items as African, forged-metal currency shapes (metal objects that were exchanged in pre-colonial Africa as a form of commodity money), Dogon ladders, and Nupe house posts. He said, "I've been drawn to sources that suggest something beyond design, something meaningful, whether it's the impersonal structure of an axe or a fractal. I found this quality in abundance in the forged iron and copper currencies of West Africa, many of which are abstracted farm tools."

Crawford's studio is a skylit, industrial-feeling space filled with worktables, large metal-working machines, rugged chains hanging from the ceiling, and piles or suspended sections of multi-part works in progress. Given his well-equipped facilities, I asked the artist why he found it necessary to consult with other experienced metal workers with regard to his current, in-progress "Bifurcation Spheres" sculpture project.

He explained, "My studio is set up for working out industrial problems on a small scale, so I can invent forging and machining procedures here at home. Then I have to go to industry, adjust the procedures I've developed to accommodate the realities of scale and equipment changes, and work with people at an industrial forge to make the forms that will become the component parts of my large sculpture."

I asked Crawford how the techniques he employs to make his sculptures relate to his particular mode of abstraction. He explained, "Forging is a direct process, like drawing or playing the piano. But when everything gets really heavy, I need the help of four or five people to help play a very big piano. In the 1970s and 1980s, I learned to forge steel farm tools, which required an understanding of [how to make] the tool shapes at the level of muscle memory, like dance. I forge the shapes for my sculpture the same way. I need to understand the form well enough so that, in the moment, I just know what to do, whether a form weighs ten pounds or 10,000 pounds."



The sculptor John Crawford working at a forging press at a facility away from his own studio. Photo courtesy of the artist

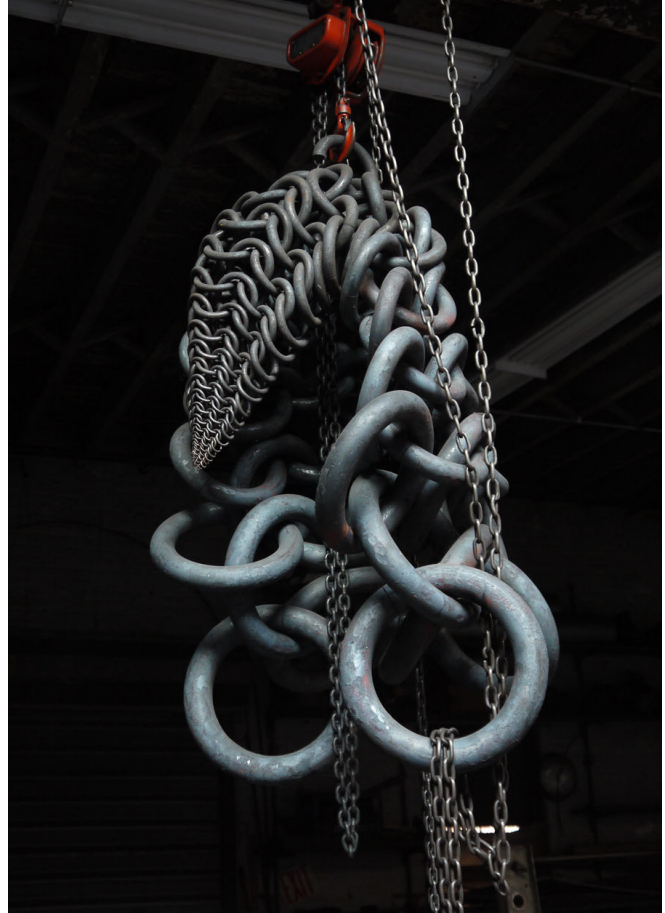
In recent discussions, Crawford shared with me his detailed drawings showing how the many pieces of his in-progress, large-scale “Bifurcation Spheres” sculpture should fit together.

He told me, “Until recently, I completely avoided showing how I make sculpture. Forging is very difficult; it’s very dramatic, with lots of noise and fire. I believed that the process distracted from seeing the sculpture. But our world has moved so far away from making things that [for some viewers] some awareness of the process, which was once a distraction from the experience of the sculpture, may now help enrich that experience.”

Does Crawford regard abstract art as an expressive language, one that, as an artist, he has learned to speak and to skillfully manipulate for his own communicative purposes? He seemed to savor the notion of abstraction as a visual, formal, emotion-provoking language, noting that, insofar as it is or may be regarded as such, as a sculptor, he is “still learning” how to speak it.

But as an artist, he added, “I cannot separate what I say from the language I use. The elements of my sculptures are like words. Simple shapes, slightly varied, repeated, can spawn complex results. Maybe this suggests natural growth patterns or fractal geometry. I was led to abstraction for the same reason I was led to forged and machined steel. Abstraction has the broadest expressive range of any language. Steel has the broadest formal range.”

He added, “At this point in my life, several decisions I made when I was in my twenties are bearing fruit: I wanted to become fluent in a medium and I wanted that medium to not have a huge amount of art history attached to it. Also, I wanted to be able to make my own work regardless of the vicissitudes of the art world.”



Above: John Crawford, “A(r)mour,” 2015, forged steel.

Photo courtesy of the artist

Below: The sculptor John Crawford on the occasion of a solo exhibition at John Davis Gallery in Hudson, New York, in 2016.

Photo by Edward M. Gómez

