

William Cannings

By Catherine D. Ansporn

The Cool, Clear Future

“My work exists between American conceptualist and British formalism,” says British-born William Cannings, who now lives and works in West Texas, where he is an associate professor in sculpture at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. What distinguishes Cannings’s practices is his hands-on approach to materials and their manipulation.

Growing up in the industrial metropolis of Manchester, Cannings absorbed the example set by his family’s patriarchs: his father, a cabinetmaker; one grandfather in tool-and-dye manufacturing and the other, a foundry foreman for the British railroad; and his great-grandfather, an art-glass blower. After a year at Loughborough College of Art and Design (Loughborough, England), Cannings emigrated to the United States and earned a BFA in sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond, Virginia, 1995), then an MFA in sculpture from Syracuse University (Syracuse, New York, 1998), where Rodger Mack was an influential professor. The artist also credits sculptor Sir Anthony Caro for inspiring his practice by example –especially Caro’s pioneering work spanning the art world and the real world.

Cannings, who was enamored with metal, had long been intrigued by technique and process. He therefore supported himself during college as a mechanic restoring vintage race cars. After graduate school, he was recruited to teach sculpture at Texas Tech, where he now directs the welding and foundry program at the School of Art. In 2001, he began bridging art and industry, process and concept, by exhibiting forced –art sculptured formed by inflating welded-steel forms with a pneumatic device. This work was prompted by a boyhood memory: “I am lured by the visceral quality of inflated objects,” he says. “I remember as a child bouncing on a Day-Glo orange toy with the fresh scent of rubber and vinyl.”

The resulting sculptures are part of an ongoing series with seemingly endless permutations. They hover between the representational and the non-objective while evincing the perfect finished of an Anish Kapoor offering. Cannings's current work also conjure associations ranging from Andy Warhol and Billy Kluver's 1966 Silver Clouds to the Buoyant primary hues of a beach ball and a pure white ring, as utopian as a John McCracken sculpture, anchored in the everyday as it mimics a swimming-pool inner tube. These inflatable also suggest the toy-inspired aluminum-and-stainless-steel balloons of Jeff Koons; unlike Koons, however, Cannings welds, inflates, and fabricates each piece without outside help. "I could never imagine a studio run by assistants. I love being in control of the work," Cannings says of these sculptures, which also differ from his Pop predecessor in their flirtation with abstraction.