



# A G A I N S T T H E G R A I N

These three silos on an Essex farm aren't your typical studios. But then Will Cruickshank isn't your typical artist, building madcap machines with which he carves sculptures and weaves colour fields. But for all his nonconformity, he decided to 'work with the structure' of these functional buildings, keeping their architectural integrity and just renovating their interiors, which now supply an ideal, if unorthodox, foil to his creations. Text: Amy Sherlock. Photography: Antony Crolla

Opposite: the mezzanine of the heated and insulated central silo serves as a kind of office and display space. Most of the furniture has been found or inherited – the desk came from an uncle of Cruickshank's wife, the plan chest from Ebay. The artist built the shelving himself. This page: the decking in front of the structures is populated by furniture made by Cruickshank, as well as parts for his various carving and weaving machines



Top: since he began 'the silos project' in 2015, Cruickshank has been working in four main media – wall hangings, wrapped wooden sculptures, monoprints and sculptures carved with a pressure washer (above right). Above left: the artist has recently been experimenting with applying thread-filled plaster to empty gas bottles, carving the casts to produce these downy vessels. Opposite: he built his first weaving machine in 2016



the furled petals of a mechanical peony: a moment of incidental aestheticism in a place never intended to be seen.

It's perhaps for this reason that, as Cruickshank explains, he chose to 'work with the structure', not drilling into the walls, but respecting their integrity as far as possible. Doors aside, there is one exception to this guiding principle: the window cut out above the wooden mezzanine installed in the central silo. With a desk installed beneath, the large single pane of glass gives a gloriously unobstructed view of the surrounding farmland. 'When I first cut the hole for the window,' he recalls, 'it was getting late. There was a kind of dusky sunset over the field. It was quite amazing.'

It took Cruickshank less than three months to renovate the silos, which he did entirely on his own. He wired the spaces to light them and installed a fridge and coffee machine in the central, burner-heated workshop. Downstairs in this space is a *Wunderkammer* of wood- and metalworking tools while, on the mezzanine, finished works are displayed alongside earlier experiments, prototypes and trinkets – including a collection of the tiny, smooth leg bones of homing pigeons, metal bands still attached, disinterred by metal detectorists. (Cruickshank explains that he often sees people scouring the fields from his window; there is a particular stone nearby where the metal detectorists leave their discarded treasures.)

Initially, he says, he thought about making the silos more liveable (by installing a kitchen area, say) but ultimately decided not to. It would have distracted from his primary motivation for being there: a desire, having spent many years making large-scale participatory installations and sculpture, to return to making objects.

It seems fitting, given the context of the farm, that for all their homespun charm, Cruickshank's sculptures are machine-made. Not that his machines are slick weapons of mass production; rather, they're improvised, makeshift, constantly adapted. What Cruickshank refers to as 'the silos project' has its origins in a cement-mixer-driven lathe that he used to turn spindly-necked vessel shapes out of wood. Other machines followed, including the towering weaving machine – a cacophony of spools, counterweights and bicycle parts – that he uses to produce panelled wall hangings, their interlocking Vs of colour reminiscent as much of Josef Albers's vibrant colour studies as of his wife, Anni's, maze-like tapestries. He uses the machine to wrap wooden forms, sometimes packing them with sawdust and fibres from the floor to create irregular swollen forms with the anthropomorphic appeal of prehistoric fertility goddesses. He's also been experimenting with concrete, casting forms using improvised moulds and then carving them with specially made lathes, or blasting them with a pressure washer while still slightly wet to create incisions that reveal the 'aggregate' of fibres within – like a sewing-group update of pebbledash.

The key, Cruickshank explains, is that there is no pre-existing technique for any of this. He learns as he goes; the work is determined by mechanised processes that are, in turn, added to or amended in an ongoing loop. He describes this as 'the push and pull between machine, material and maker'. It is this idea of 'push and pull' that provides the title for the solo show that he will open in July. His first exhibition for two years, it will showcase the many strands of his practice that have been incubating in the silos. With his process and output modulating constantly as one form of work develops, I suspect that the difficulty will not be in knowing what to show, but rather what to leave out. 'It feels like I'm at the beginning of something,' he tells me. 'I could be working on this forever' ■ *Will Cruickshank. Visit [willercruickshank.net](http://willercruickshank.net). 'Push and Pull' is on show at Aspex Gallery, The Vulcan Building, Gunwharf Quays, Portsmouth PO1 3BF, until 16 Sept. For opening times, ring 023 9277 8080, or visit [aspex.org.uk](http://aspex.org.uk)*

## TAKING

the Central line east from Liverpool Street station, there is a point at which the dense, seemingly interminable sprawl of suburban London suddenly opens out into flat Essex farmland. Hedgerows and fields whizz past the window, and farmhouses and outbuildings nestle into the gently undulating expanse of green that stretches away on both sides of the train: in only half an hour you feel you're a world away from the glass towers and endless cranes of the Square Mile.

The artist Will Cruickshank does not consider himself to be a city person. Though he lives in Walthamstow, northeast London, he has worked from studios in rural Essex for much of the last decade. His base since 2015 has been a trio of former grain silos on the edge of a working farm. Having convinced the farmer to let him convert them into functional spaces, he has spent the last two-and-a-half years filling them with his turned wooden sculptures and colour-field weavings – and the deliciously Heath Robinson-style machines that he builds to produce them.

No-one who has seen the photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher can be unmoved by the monumental presence of industrial outbuildings. Cruickshank, who began his training as an architect before studying fine art at Manchester, has long been fascinated by the architectonic forms and material properties of silos: for a 2010 performance, he played a tuba inside one, the brass instrument's deep reverberations echoing superbly around the tin-can interior. The cold, luminous January afternoon of my visit, white puffs of smoke hang over the central silo, which has been fitted with a wood-burning stove. Of the three, this is the only one whose interior has been clad (with MDF) for insulation; the corrugated-steel walls of the other two – which serve as a storage space-cum-photography studio and 'machine house', respectively – remain exposed. The roof of each cylindrical space is formed of 18 panels that join like



This page: one of the silos is used as a photography space. Of all three, this one required the least work. Cruickshank just cut a door into the corrugated steel. Opposite: the artist stands in front of a 'pie-chart' window, which is made out of interchangeable triangles of coloured acrylic

