

It all ties together

Conrad Shawcross's mathematical sculptures, often installed in vineyards, tell us much about the link between art and science, writes **CHRISTINA MAKRIS**

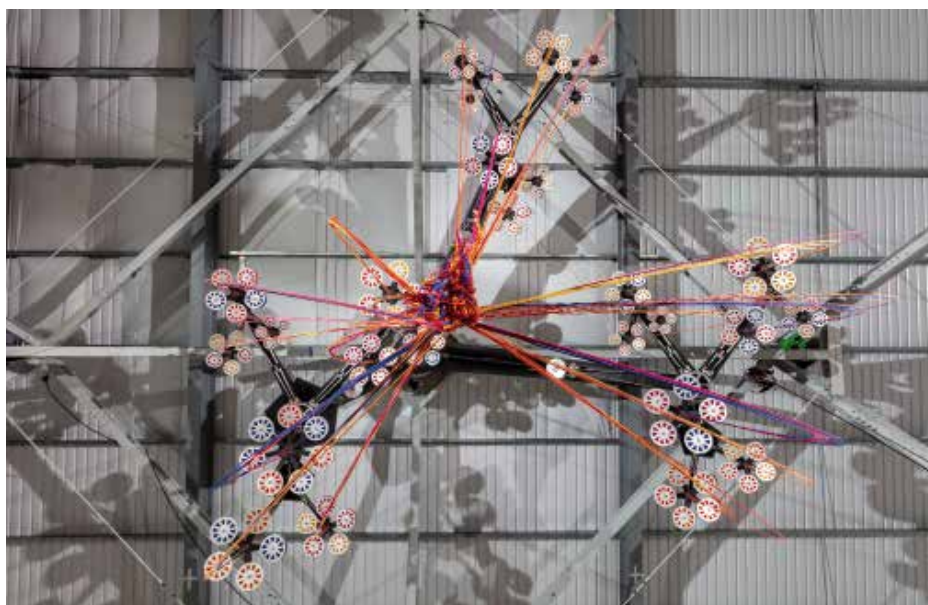
If we look at a glass of wine closely enough, we see the entire universe,' Richard Feynman said in his lecture 'The Relation of Physics to Other Sciences' (1967). It was a statement grounded in science, but also an acknowledgement of the imaginative leaps necessary for understanding the world. Wine-making is, similarly, both precise and creative; the wine carries in it the signature of the land that produced it, the climate that shaped it and the human hand that crafted it.

The sculptor Conrad Shawcross, who is interested in mathematical models, has had a number of works shown in vineyards and wineries. There are affinities between making wine and art; vineyards can 'sculpt the landscape', according to Shawcross. Estates are regimented, intensely farmed and aligned in particular ways to capture the sun. Sculpture is 'another exemplar of a kind of beautiful control'. Wine and art are 'complementary because a master sculptor or master painter is an exemplar of their medium and its mastery, and wine is another kind of mastery'.

Shawcross is no stranger to integrating large-scale kinetic and geometric sculptures into the landscape, having exhibited *The Dappled Light of the Sun* at Chatsworth in 2015. He was initially nervous about moving the work from the Royal Academy courtyard, where it was first shown, to Chatsworth's gardens, assuming the sculpture 'would compete and fail against a tree'. Instead, it 'resonated with natural formations, offering a contrast or a rhyme to then inform or even look like clouds'.

In 2020 he installed *Schism* at the Château la Coste winery in Provence. Set among vines and skies, a sculpture can echo the expansive complexity of a great wine. When the estate's owner, Patrick McKillen, commissioned Shawcross, 'He asked for an architectural feel where you actually enter into something, you sort of find a hidden chamber or anticipate a realisation to come.' The 6m-high Corten steel structure consists of 19 tetrahedrons, approximating a perfect shape, an icosahedron, but undercut by a chasm in its frame.

Recently, Zinc House Farm in Napa Valley installed a work from Shawcross's *Paradigm* series, a variation on the tetrahedron theme. It is more poised, but precarious – a gesture to the uncertainty and risk involved in innovation. At



Installation view of *The Nervous System (Umbilical)* (2025) by Conrad Shawcross (b. 1977) at Here East, London

a vineyard it becomes a totem for chance and the precariousness of winemaking. 'There's a lot of risk-taking in any form of farming or winemaking. It's a gamble every year in terms of the weather,' Shawcross says. 'In a way that's very much aligned with artists. You have to have a certain heart to be involved in the wine industry or to be an artist.'

Elsewhere, his *Slow Arc Inside a Cube XI* is part of a group show, 'Vertigo', currently at the Fondation Carmignac on the Mediterranean island of Porquerolles, which occupies the same land as the organic winery Domaine La Courtade. Most recently, the Museum of Old and New Art (Mona) in Tasmania – another institution that shares its land with vines – commissioned Shawcross to realise his most ambitious rope-machine project, a series he has been developing for over a decade. *The Nervous System (Umbilical)* will be unveiled at Here East in London (10 September–2 November) before being shipped off to be permanently installed at Mona. The progress of Shawcross's thinking, experimentation and scale in the rope series can be compared to two other key works: *Yarn* (2001) and *Paradigm (Ode to the Difference Engine)* (2006), both made of oak with copper metalwork. The new work is 10m high

and 12m across, with 40 interlocking arms of varying lengths and spools of different thickness. It is engineered to keep weaving a rope in a sequence of orbits that will never repeat. The coil will accumulate as time passes; each moment in its history correlates with a specific section of the rope.

Its eventual placement in Mona, with its connected winery Moorilla, also lends itself to metaphor. A bottle of wine, aged over decades, contains the imprint of climate, terroir, grapes and every moment in its production will manifest later, when it is drunk; visitors who view the work in London will make their mark on the artwork that will become apparent down the line in Tasmania. Feynman reminds us:

If our small minds, for some convenience, divide this glass of wine, this universe, into parts – physics, biology, geology, astronomy, psychology, and so on – remember that nature does not know it! So let us put it all back together, not forgetting ultimately what it is for. Let it give us one more final pleasure: drink it and forget it all!

Christina Makris's Art in Vineyards: Cultivating Culture will be published by Skira this autumn.