

**“Mother’s Pride IV”, 2012. By Antony Gormley
Spotlight Paper by Linda Karlson, 2017**



Artist’s Background:

Sir Antony Mark David Gormley; British; born in London, England, in 1950.

- **Education:** Gormley studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1968 to 1971, where he received degrees in art history, archaeology, and anthropology. While at Trinity, he did not consider pursuing art as a career, although he made extra money by painting murals for parties and at night clubs. He then traveled for three years in India and Sri Lanka, where he studied meditation with a guru and toyed with the idea of becoming a Buddhist monk. It was while he was in India that he decided to pursue art as a career. When he returned to London, he attended the Central School of Arts and Crafts, Goldsmiths College, and the Slade School of Fine Art. He had his first solo exhibition in 1981.
- **Influences:** He was influenced early in his artistic career by postminimalist artists such as Richard Serra, as well as the land art of Robert Smithson. He has singled out Brancusi’s *Endless Column* (1935-1938), Giacometti’s *La Place* (1948-1949), and Richard Serra’s *The Matter of Time* (2005), as being sculptures of especially great importance.

He attributes his approach to art to his early upbringing. His parents insisted when he was a young child that he take a nap every afternoon, and rather than rebel, he came to look forward to the experience. He describes how, alone in his room, he became aware of how enclosed we are in our bodies. This launched his interest as an adult in conveying through sculpture what it means to inhabit a body and experience it when you close your eyes and are inside yourself.

- **Art movement:** Gormley, while influenced by postminimalists, developed into a highly individualistic artist who can be viewed generally as a postmodernist. This is especially

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exemplified by the fact that he uses unlikely materials to create art: for example the ordinary white bread of which *Mother’s Pride IV* is made. In addition, like other postmodernists, his works are intended mostly to be accessible to the public, as opposed to collectors, elitists, and academics. In fact, many of his works are sited in outdoor locations where the public can view them.

- **Medium:** Gormley uses various materials in his work. For example, in *Blind Light*, an installation in 2007 in London and later in New York, he used light and water vapors in a glass room to create a kind of disorienting cloud that the visitor walked through. For the most part, however, he works in the less ephemeral medium of steel.
- **Technique and methodology:** Gormley’s work consists primarily of sculptures of the human body (mostly from casts of himself). He is interested in exploring, and having the viewer explore, the human condition. He does not view his works as narrative, or having a story to tell. Rather, he seeks to move the viewer to look inward, to experience what it is like to occupy a body, which he considers a place, rather than an object. For works like *Mother’s Pride IV* and *Apart X*, his wife, Vicken Parsons, who is also an artist, assists him. For pieces like *Apart X*, he poses in the position of the sculpture, and she wraps him in plastic, then covers him in plaster, placing straws in his nose and mouth so he can breathe. He then holds that position for two hours or more until the plaster is dry to create the mold.

He has progressed in more recent years to using computer techniques to create his sculptures. He first makes a three-dimensional scan of a mold of his body, then uses the computer to figure out the sizes and shapes of the metal blocks that will form the sculpture. He then stacks them like “physical pixels”, as he says, to make the final figures. The results are an abstraction of the original human form. One example is a figure from his *Land* series that was installed on Lundy Island in 2015. It is similar to his earlier figures, such as *Angel of the North* (1998), but more abstract due to the fact that the form has been digitized, then realized in metal.

- **Artist’s impact on the art world:** Gormley is extraordinarily commercially successful. In 2008, the life size model for his massive 1998 statue, *Angel of the North*, became the first item in the history of the British Antiques Roadshow to be valued at over a million pounds. His career spans more than 35 years. He is primarily a sculptor, but also does installation art. He has exhibited in major museums throughout the United Kingdom, in Brazil, Russia, Sweden, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Denmark, the United States, and other countries. Permanent installations of his work include, among others, *Angel of the North* in Gateshead, England; *Another Place*, at Crosby Beach, England; *Inside Australia*, at Lake Ballard, Western Australia; and in 2015, *Chord*, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. *Chord* is a series of welded steel polyhedrons that reach from the floor of the Mathematics and Chemistry building four stories to the skylight; the composition reflects the chemical building blocks of life.

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He was awarded the Turner Prize in 1994; the South Bank Prize for Visual Art in 1999; the Bernhard Heiliger Award for Sculpture in 2007; the Obayashi Prize in 2012; and the Praemium Imperiale in 2013. He was made an Officer of the British Empire (OBE) in 1997. In 2003 Gormley was made a member of the Royal Academy. He received his knighthood in 2014. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, as well as an Honorary Doctor of the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Trinity and Jesus Colleges, Cambridge.

My Impressions/Analysis:

Mother’s Pride IV is a wall relief, made from slices of plain white bread, which have been soaked in a wax preservative, and mounted on board. The slices are arranged to form horizontal and vertical lines in a grid pattern. The grid is 18 slices wide by 22 slices high. The overall dimensions of the work are slightly more than nine feet high by seven feet wide. It is an early work by the artist, originally made in 1982, and remade in 2012. This date difference is important because 1982 is early in the artist’s career, and the work is less representative of his later work.

In *Mother’s Pride IV*, the medium is the message. Gormley chose the most mundane processed white bread in England (“industrial” he called it). The brand name is Mother’s Pride. He used an outline of his own body to form the negative space of an adult in a fetal position as though floating in a womb. In looking at the piece, one might ask oneself, “Is the bread enclosing the figure? Is the figure there, or not there?” The artist himself said that he meant the negative space to impose the memory of the fetal body on a manufactured life supporting material. The bread is a symbol of nourishment of life, of the relationship between an individual and the environment. According to Gormley, eating is the primal process by which the matter in the universe is transformed into the energy of the body and the mind. He literally lived this idea in the execution of the work by eating the bread and using the marks of his teeth in the slices to create the outline of his body. The work is also a play on the idea that a fetus in the womb is the pride of the mother carrying and nourishing it.



Compare & Contrast Artwork:

The Museum has a second work by Antony Gormley, titled *Apart X*, dated 2002. This is a life-size sculpture. Created 20 years after *Mother’s Pride IV*, this work also features the form of the artist himself, posed in a fetal position. It takes the flat horizontal and vertical grid pattern of *Mother’s Pride IV* and converts it to a three dimensional grid pattern using steel blocks to create the solid form of the figure. The artist is still concerned in both works with the internal life of the viewer. One of the ways he achieves this is by the generalized features of the face. While he used himself as the model in both works, these are certainly not portraits of the artist, so that the viewer is encouraged to think of himself in the piece. In addition, the artist continues the use of negative space. In *Mother’s Pride IV*, the negative space defined by the outline of the figure

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conveys the memory of the body. *Apart X* uses the negative spaces between the welded steel blocks to give a sense of tension on the surface that reflects the tension of the tightly held pose.



Another work the Museum owns that might be compared and contrasted with *Mother’s Pride IV* is *Untitled* (2006), by Jim Isermann. Both Gormley’s *Mother’s Pride IV* and Isermann’s *Untitled* are wall reliefs. Isermann, like Gormley, used industrial material – styrene rather than commercial bread - to form a grid of horizontal and vertical lines. Both works are also monochromatic. At the same time, the two works are different in that Isermann is interested in the architectural and design qualities of his art, including an exploration of the visual impact of the shapes and lines, while Gormley seeks to encourage the viewer to consider the relationship between the human condition and the materials used.



Museum Owned and Purchased:

Mother’s Pride IV is a Museum purchase with funds provided by Donna MacMillan. This piece fits well with the museum’s strategy of collecting works by major international contemporary artists.

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Photos of Two Other Works by Antony Gormley:

Angel of the North (1998), located in Gateshead, England:



Figure from the *Land* series (2015), originally installed on Lundy Island:

