

Observer New Review Q&A
Antony Gormley

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Interview
Antony Gormley: 'In a digital age, sculpture is the antithesis to distraction'

Kate Kellaway



▲ 'Sculpture does not need a roof, label, institution to protect it': Antony Gormley. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

The sculptor on using his own body in his work and the advantage of being married to a fellow artist

Born in London, Antony Gormley is the best-known British sculptor working today. All over the world, life-size sculpted representations of his tall figure appear. A hundred Gormleys look out permanently from Crosby beach in Liverpool, he has situated versions of himself in the Austrian Alps and in São Paulo in Brazil, and stood sentinel on high buildings in New York and London. He is particularly celebrated for his 20-metre *The Angel of the North*, near Gateshead. He is married to the artist Vicken Parsons, with whom he has three grownup children, and is currently preparing for a retrospective of his work at the Royal Academy of Arts.

You grew up in a Catholic family, your father was a pharmaceutical magnate and you were the youngest of seven children. Did being the youngest affect your way of looking at things?

Fundamentally - I arrived last in a family that spanned the second world war. All important decisions about how life was to be conducted had already been made. I had to find my own way. I felt I'd been born into the wrong family - "these people, they don't need me". There was a degree of unhappiness and resentment yet I was lucky. I was the last and able to break all the rules.

Did you know at Cambridge University that sculpture would be your career?

I was a painter, film-maker, drawer at university. After I left, I paid for three years of travelling doing murals: Cambridge May balls, discos, the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth. I went around Britain on a motorbike with paints in a big box. I charged five shillings a square foot and made a thousand pounds. The shift to sculpture was because I realised sculpture was not about copying something else, it was a thing in itself. Sculpture does not need a roof, label, institution to protect it. It can simply be in the world and the world changes. That, for me, is an act of hope.

And "simply" is the point? There's a distinct lack of ornamentation in your work...

The work is about bare life. It is about returning people to bare life, which means an acceptance of death, the truth of being other to ourselves as well as another to others, the truth of the uniqueness of human existence. These things cannot be illustrated. They need a point of recognition.



▲ Watch a trailer for Antony Gormley's show at the Royal Academy of Arts.

How much have your artistic preoccupations changed during the course of your working life?

I began by thinking: here is a body that needs to be explored from the inside. I started with my own existence because it is the closest thing to me - the body is the only bit of the material world one actually inhabits. Then I guess the shift has been to encourage the viewer to do the same. From making factual, three-dimensional shadows that said "Here is the place a body once was" or "What is a body?", the work started to invite viewers not just in contemplative, meditative, internal observation but actually to see their own bodies as instruments with which to negotiate space and time.

In these figures of yourself, are you Everyman or are you just you?

I am both. The instrument is particular, the ambition universal.

What would you say in response to the charge that it is arrogant to place these images of yourself around the world?

If it was about self-aggrandisement, there would be better ways of doing this. I would say in defence of narcissism, if you don't examine your own life, you've no right to examine anybody else's. I go back to this: what is the typical view of the male sculptor? Take Rodin or Maillol - male artists who made idealised versions of female bodies. I was keen to start with reality and not speak about things apart from me but acknowledge the subjective condition of our experience. Statuary has historically been used to reinforce ideas of moral superiority, national identity, hero worship, idealised sexuality. My figures are here to disrupt your sense of the norm. I want to suggest that daily life and the things we ignore are worthy of attention.

Speaking of attention - what does your interest in Buddhism contribute to your work?

I'd like my sculpture to be an invitation to mindfulness. I don't have a formal sitting regime myself but the work I do is based on the idea of complete concentration and being there. In a digital age, sculpture - its silence and stillness - is the antithesis and foil to constant calls to distraction. I cherish it for that. I think that's its power.



▲ Powderhall Man, one of six Gormley figures that make up his 6 Times installation in Edinburgh. Photograph: Jane Barlow/PA

How useful has it been to be married to an artist?

Only another artist would put up with living with an artist. I couldn't have done what I have done without Vicken's help. My lover, muse, assistant - she is the maker of my life, really. She has been the most incredible companion creatively and emotionally. She remains absolutely inspirational. Right through those early days when it wasn't looking as if it was going to work out - my God, you know, we had three children and I had a two-day teaching job at Brighton but no gallery in Britain until 1993 - Vicken quietly accepted whatever came along and also supported me, did all the moulding, did the lion's share of child-rearing and never stopped working herself.

What makes you happiest?

Two things: being at the foundry, seeing a work realised. Until it is made, it is almost in the air because it is polystyrene - the lightest-weight material - it is still just an idea and then, in less than a minute, the void becomes solid and there is something totally, euphorically magical about that moment of transformation. The other thing is being out in a boat in a good wind, playing the elements against each other.

And drawing?

Drawing is about being with the materials: feeling the skin of the paper absorbing the scratch of a pen. In drawing, you can go to places you could never otherwise reach mentally or physically. It is another place of absolute joy and happiness.

- The Antony Gormley retrospective is at the Royal Academy of Arts, London W1, from 21 September to 3 December

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