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Nayeri, Farah. "An Indoor Sea and Miles of Metalwork: Antony Gormley's Crownning Moment." *The New York Times*. September 18, 2019.

The New York Times



Antony Gormley and his installation "Matrix III" (2019). Credit Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

LONDON — The seawater — nearly 9,000 gallons of it — fills the vastness of the gallery, up to about ankle level. Beneath the surface is a layer of light brown clay that forms a kind of seabed on the gallery floor. At the other end of the stretch of water is a closed door that stands like a gateway to the afterlife.

This is "Host," the culmination of a major new exhibition by the British sculptor Antony Gormley at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It's one of 142 works (including 36 sculptures) in the show, from the minute to the monumental, the natural to the laboriously engineered.

"I want you to feel, there, that you are on the threshold between the known and the unknown," Mr. Gormley said in an interview at the gallery, "to feel tranquillity and peace and silence and possibility."

He acknowledged that the show at the Royal Academy — "a significant institution" — was an important milestone. "I have just entered my 70th year," he said. "This is an opportunity for trying to find the core of what I care about."

"My ambition is that you could come in unknowing, and somehow, by the end of the show, perhaps know yourself better," he added.

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The exhibition certainly feels like a crowning moment for the sculptor. It's only the second major museum show he has ever had in London, his birthplace, after a Hayward Gallery exhibition 12 years ago. Mr. Gormley may be one of Britain's most widely recognized living sculptors — thanks to works like the Angel of the North, his towering landmark in northeastern England — but he otherwise owes much of his visibility to the international art market: fairs, auctions, and commercial galleries that show his work, secure commissions around the world and allow him to keep a busy studio.



"Lost Horizon I" (2008). Credit Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

The exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts spans his full career and features cast-iron sculptures of his body nailed to walls and ceilings, a huge coiling installation of three miles of aluminum tubing and a six-ton hanging work of intersecting steel-mesh cages that took 18 days of welding to set up.

Staging the show inside the Royal Academy's 19th-century building "was a major endeavor," said its curator, Martin Caiger-Smith, the author of a Gormley monograph. "Antony's project has physically pushed this building to its limits: It's literally going through walls, and is suspended from the ceilings," Mr. Caiger-Smith said. "Just in terms of weight and pressure, and flooding an entire gallery with earth and water: These are things that even a contemporary building might slightly have difficulty with."

Mr. Gormley is one of seven children of an Irish father and a German mother. During World War II (before he was born), Mr. Gormley's mother fled to Canada with her four eldest children to escape internment in Britain. When she returned,

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she “had to pretend that she was a middle-class housewife just like everybody else,” Mr. Gormley recalled, and she never spoke German to her children.

Mr. Gormley was raised a Roman Catholic. When he was badly behaved, he said, he was told that there was “a devil in me, and that I had to have it beaten out of me.” Sometimes, in dreams, he pictured his own soul, “the rotten bits of it, and it was frightening,” he added.

As a boy, he was sent to Ampleforth College, a Catholic boarding school in northern England. By the end, he said that he found the “heaven-hell double bind of Catholicism” to be “pretty untenable.” But Ampleforth did give him creative freedom: At 15, he had made a radio, benches and chairs, and two kayaks.

After studying archaeology and anthropology at the University of Cambridge, he spent a few years in India studying meditation, and almost became a Buddhist monk before opting to become a sculptor.

Sculpture “is an inert material thing that is still and silent and that invites your movement,” he explained. “You give it thought, feeling, and your time.”

“That exchange between the animate and the inanimate is also one that is, I believe, empowering to the subject who looks,” he added.

Mr. Gormley denied that his depictions of angels, figures with outstretched arms and bodies of water were linked to his Catholic upbringing, saying that he was now agnostic. Mr. Caiger-Smith agreed that the work was not to be viewed as religious, though Catholicism was “ingrained” in the artist: “A lot of what he’s doing is a kind of replacement of that,” he noted.

The centerpiece of Mr. Gormley’s first solo show (at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1981) was “Bed” — made of stacks of white bread that he’d nibbled to make two large imprints of his body.

He soon focused on putting his own body at the center of his art. This was at a time, Mr. Caiger-Smith explained, when “the figure had been set aside: It was not a dirty word, but it was considered to be an outmoded, worn-out convention.”

Mr. Gormley also started making participatory and public work. “Field for the British Isles” — an army of about 40,000 small terra-cotta figures handmade by members of the public — won him the 1994 Turner Prize.

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"Angel of the North" (1998). Credit Colin Cuthbert

Four years later came "Angel of the North," a 65-foot steel figure with outstretched wings, made for Gateshead, a former mining and shipping town in northeastern England. It was, he said, his response to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had identified "everything that had come out of the Industrial Revolution" as being "over."

In 2005, he installed "Another Place" on Crosby Beach in Merseyside, England. The work, which has become hugely popular, features 100 cast-iron figures standing on the beach and looking out to sea.

Such works are "proof that art doesn't just have to belong in collections, in galleries, in institutional contexts: that it can be out there for everybody, and that it can be a focus for life," he said.

The director of the Hayward Gallery, Ralph Rugoff, who co-curated Mr. Gormley's 2007 exhibition there, said the sculptor, who was known initially for such pieces as "a single figure upside down in an empty warehouse, or standing at the edge of the sea," was now making work that was "more architectural, and more about the experience of the viewer's body navigating a particular space created by the sculpture."

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In the show at the Royal Academy, an example of this experiential work is “Cave,” a giant, cuboid structure that visitors are invited to enter.



Credit David Parry/Royal Academy of Arts



“Cave” (2019). Credit David Parry/Royal Academy of Arts

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An earlier experiential work was “One & Other,” in which for 100 days in 2009, he invited members of the public to occupy the empty fourth plinth on Trafalgar Square in London for an hour at a time. Participants wore unusual costumes, spoke, sang, campaigned for causes, and, in a few cases, undressed.

“Somebody had to try that experiment sooner or later,” Mr. Rugoff said. “The difficulty was, a lot of times, you ended up with exhibitionists. Who wants to go stand on a plinth in Trafalgar Square?”

Mr. Gormley’s most recent figures are pixelated forms in a variety of materials. There are standing, slouching and reclining examples in the Royal Academy show. Viewed together, they have more impact than when seen individually at art fairs or in collectors’ homes, where they have proliferated.



Antony Gormley and his installation “Matrix III” (2019). Credit Suzanne Plunkett for The New York Times

Mr. Gormley acknowledged the commercial realities of working as an artist today — “We do live in a world that’s guided by art fairs: That’s the commodification side,” he said — but he noted that those activities allowed him to make his public-facing work.

“I feel that we need sculpture now more than ever, because we’re all in such a hurry,” he said. “Sculpture just says: ‘Take your time. Linger longer. Dwell a while.’”