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ART

Antony Gormley interview — the Angel of the North sculptor on his blockbuster Royal Academy show

The artist aims to challenge the viewer, not just the idea of sculpture, with his exhibition of new work at the RA, he tells
Louis Wise



Top of the form: Gormley at his King's Cross studio *FRANTZESCO KANGARIS/EYEVINE*

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Antony Gormley greets me in his studio looking exactly — and I mean exactly — as I expected: white T-shirt, beige chinos, desert boots, the regulation little round glasses perched on his nose. It's almost as if he was freshly cast this morning from a default day-to-day Antony Gormley mould — the one with clothes on, obviously. The one without clothes has colonised the cityscapes of London, Britain and much of the world, as Gormley has explored what the human body can do and where it can go. And he is at it again, with a brand-new exhibition opening at the Royal Academy that is very much exercising his mind. “The challenge was, I think, to keep the relationship between intimacy and grandeur,” he says. After an hour in his company, I sympathise.

Gormley's work isn't just bodies, of course — not just the Angel of the North, looming over Gateshead, or Another Place, those 100 casts on a Merseyside beach looking impassively out to sea. It's blocks of steel and masses of wire, rooms full of fog and silhouettes cut from white bread. The through-line, maybe, is their cleanness and sparseness: as tastefully neutral as the man himself. His great big gleaming white studio, just north of King's Cross, fits this aesthetic too. In the main bit, a staff of 25 or so are sawing and whirring and whizzing away; two external metal staircases lead you up to offices away from the din. Later, I realise this HQ should morph effortlessly into a museum for Sir Antony (knighted in 2014) once we have all sloughed off our mortal casts as well. But this feels like a bit of an indelicate thing to say, especially as Gormley, freshly 69, looks pretty fit.



Gormley's Angel of the North, near Gateshead STU FORSTER/GETTY IMAGES

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“Yes, 70 next year,” he nods. “I’m comfortable with it. I mean, I’m only annoyed when my knees start hurting when I’m climbing a mountain.” The last one he climbed was in Sichuan, but they didn’t quite get to the top and did a lot of it on horseback. “I still enjoy the same kind of trekking adventures that I did as a teenager,” he sighs. “But I’m slightly less capable. The spirit may be willing, but the body’s a bit worn out. Shame, but there we are.”

This is as far as small talk goes with Gormley. He is perfectly pleasant, automatically civilised — the youngest son of a pharmaceuticals magnate, he grew up in Hampstead, then studied at Ampleforth, Cambridge and the Slade — but this interview is about the show, and he certainly hasn’t forgotten it. He wants to impart every little detail, showing me maquettes and computer images and notebooks, almost to the extent that the amount of information obscures the view. The same goes for his general conversation. Gormley has an awful lot of thoughts about his work, as heavyweight as his multi-ton sculptures. He first started having these when, as a child, he was forced to take afternoon naps; the enforced rest was illuminating.

“The idea that, ‘My God, it’s quite amazing that once you, as it were, deny the world and close your eyes and just turn inwards, there is this infinity.’” This was only reinforced when he went and delved into spiritualism in India in his twenties, then when he started making work in the 1970s. “That sense of the potential of the body as a site of enormous transformative energy — I think I’ve had that for a long time.”

What may also have affected him was growing up in a strictly Catholic faith, which has its own obsessions with our mortal coils. “Catholicism is f***** up about the body, isn’t it?” he sighs. “It took me a long time to realise how sick it was.” He grew up “in a highly dialectic world”, and “I’ve done my best to try to collapse all that”. How far have you got? “Well, I don’t know. It’s a difficult project...” In terms of the afterlife, so you know, he’s more with the Buddhists and “an infinite ocean of becoming”.

Anyway, regardless of the creed, Gormley is always full of dizzying, contemplative questions, which are only ever brought back down to earth by his love of precise figures. “I think, for me, the excitement of the show is to see what sculpture can do these days,” he begins. “What it can make you think or feel. I suppose it’s a test for sculpture. How does it work? How can it work?” But then, he decides: “How does a gallery work, and what does it mean?”

This show is also, he thinks, a “test site” for the very idea of an exhibition. “Can it be more, in a sense, than a spectacle? Can it be a test site for the mind and the spirit? And then, can it be a test site for us, as viewers?” And on, and on, until: “Can we conceive of this as, in a way, a totality that only comes together after every visitor has made their journey through the sequence of 12 rooms?” A small pause, a look for some notes. “Actually, it’s only 10.”

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Actually, the catalogue tells me it's 14, but let's not get lost in that. What is worth focusing on is that he is really taking it to the Royal Academy — near-on torturing it, possibly in a bid to stop things from getting too safe and genteel. In one room, they are reinforcing the ceiling so that *Matrix*, a gigantic “mass of interpenetrating space frames”, can be hung, hovering ominously above the floor; in another, for *Host*, the entire parterre is covered with what Gormley gleefully calls “25 cubic metres of Atlantic seawater mixed with 25 cubic metres of Buckinghamshire”. In other words, mud. He has a nice dry sense of humour about the work. “At first, it looked dangerously like I was going to do a singular piece for each gallery, and I think that would have been tricky. I mean, it would have just been an assault course, really.”

You sense, though, that he wishes it was. Gormley freely admits he wants people to “work” at the show. “I want them to work hard when they come. I don't want it to be an easy run.” And this desire has surely only grown as his work has become more popular. He praises sculpture's ability to “resist the twin embrace of entertainment and spectacle” in modern life, but he does have to concede, with a chuckle: “This is going to be spectacular, yes.” He may dream that we'll all read the captions, but that's not feasible. You have to allow for different experiences, right?



Body talk: Gormley's *Lost Horizon* at White Cube, 2008 BEN STANSALL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“And that's important,” he nods. “The richness of everyone's subjective response to the world. And even,” he adds with vicarish fervour, “to have an amplification through the work.”

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It's striking how often he rejects harking back to the past, and how much he wants to look to the future. "I suppose the past is all we know, and I'm always interested in what we don't," he offers. Yet there are clouds on the horizon. A few weeks before, he had been at Tate, where everyone had agreed, "Culture had to declare a climate emergency. We've got a very short amount of time to do a really huge amount of work." The art world, he adds, "has to inquire into its own means. There's no question that the art fair is [up there] along with probably the arms industry". Just that morning he was talking to his fellow artist Jeremy Deller, "mapping the routes and the prevalence of arms fairs and art fairs".

The fact is, he goes on, "that art fairs serve a minute proportion of the world's population, and just the export and import and packing, and transport of all of the works, and then you add to that all the air fares of all the people who go to them, and there's no question this is a profligate use of resources." Has he stood a bit apart to that? "No, I've been absolutely hook, line and sinkered by it!"

Gormley is not terribly positive about the art world in general, either. "We now have this vast machine of cultural production where all the freedoms that art fought for — the authenticity of the individual voice that in some sense is speaking truth to power — have been ditched in this rush for the dollar." There are, he says, "endemic problems with the way culture has become specialised, institutionalised and commodified". Of course, you don't need to be wildly radical to wonder whether a blockbuster Antony Gormley show at the Royal Academy isn't part of that trend.

He gets there first. "I'm sorry, I've now railed against the profligacy of the culture industry in which I am embedded. But at the same time, as a result of that, it allows me to do things that stand completely apart from market concerns." He means the Angel, or Another Place. "And I think that's where my heart beats the fastest."

You'd assume his heart also beats fast when dwelling on his wife, Vicken Parsons, an artist who works with him closely, or indeed their three grown children. But we get nowhere near all that. In fact, his daughter, Paloma, features in the show: Iron Baby, a solid metal cast made of her when she was six days old, will sit in the RA's entrance courtyard. It's pointless to try to drag Gormley to how he'd feel about an image of his child, though. The spirit of the thing is so much further, so much higher away.

"I am asking you to reconcile the smallness, the vulnerability, and yet the toughness," he advises. "I mean, it's called Iron Baby. You can kick it and it won't dent." And that, I suppose, is Gormley right there. Rigorous. Unsentimental. Well processed. Why try to distract it from its greater purpose? You'd only end up hurting yourself.

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Antony Gormley, Royal Academy, London W1, Sept 21-Dec 3