

SEANKELLY

Editors. "Antony Gormley: I'd Like To Make Sure That In This Last Period I Make Things That Can Be Part of Everyday Experiences ... Rooted In A Community And A Place." *Christies*, July 20, 2022.

CHRISTIE'S



Antony Gormley: 'I'd like to make sure that in this last period I make things that can be part of everyday experiences... rooted in a community and a place'

Antony Gormley's north London studio, hidden from public view by a large grey gate, consists of several interconnected warehouses surrounding a vast courtyard. 'This is my play room,' says the artist. 'My experimentation space.'

Gormley built the 24,000-square-foot workshop with the help of the architect David Chipperfield in 2004, three years before work began on the transformation of King's Cross from an area of post-industrial neglect to an increasingly chic neighbourhood of penthouses, restaurants and boutiques. A nearby nightclub, famous for being one of the few in the city to hold a 24-hour licence, is perhaps the last remnant of the area's seedier past.

Inside the studio, it's pristine white. Across a floor reinforced with 140 tonnes of steel, the artist's team of 20 slide huge sculptures — human figures exploded into geometrical blocks — with such coordination and grace as to be almost balletic.

Above them, more metal bodies are suspended from the rafters, cocooned like silkworms in protective wrapping. The room has a meditative atmosphere — fitting for an artist who was schooled by Benedictine monks and who spent several years in India and Sri Lanka training in Buddhist mindfulness (a poster above his computer reads: 'Keep Calm and Attain Moksha').



Antony Gormley in his drawing studio. Photo: Stephen White & Co.

Yet despite the tranquillity of Gormley's atelier (one of three studios — he also has a foundry in Northumberland and a workspace at his home in Norfolk), he must be one of the busiest artists in the world.

In 2022 alone, he has exhibitions open in Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany and the Netherlands. Two venues in Italy include a show alongside Lucio Fontana in the Carlo Scarpa-designed Olivetti Showroom on Piazza San Marco, open during the 59th Venice Biennale.

In fact, over the past five years — and despite the world having been plunged in and out of lockdown for much of that time — Gormley has opened 29 solo shows: an average of roughly one every two months. If you take into account the number of group shows he has participated in over the same period, it brings the total to more than 70.

Pressed on the matter, Gormley — who is about to turn 72 — insists that the pandemic has actually helped him to slow down. ‘It taught us how we can work more effectively [online] with Zoom and Teams,’ he says. ‘And it was good because there wasn’t that thing of the work going immediately out the door. We were able to listen to what it was trying to tell us. We lived with it, and that was fantastic.’

All of Gormley’s sculptures begin their lives as a drawing. Pulling out a passport-sized sketchbook from his back pocket, he reveals pages filled with black-ink stick men and abstract shapes, along with lines of text in tiny handwriting.

‘These are odd continuations of how block-works might go,’ he says, pointing to one illustration. ‘I am trying to get a feeling, trying to get a fix on a state of mind carried in a body.’

Generally speaking, he explains, it takes around 18 months for one of these drawings to be realised as a sculpture. After that, he says, ‘Most of the things have to spend at least three months living outdoors, getting their oxidisation.’ The weather’s effect on the surface of his works is a key element in how Gormley visualises them.

When Gormley talks about his processes he can sound like a modern-day alchemist. He describes how he experiments with placing sand on tables that vibrate at a frequency of 18 hertz so that the grains organise themselves into new shapes, and pours iron heated to 1,400 degrees Celsius into vacuums, vaporising their interiors.



Antony Gormley, *Frame II*, 2021, Aluminium, square tube 5 mm. Installation view, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Italy. Photo: Eia Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. © the artist

Surprisingly, casting can be one of the quickest steps in the realisation of a sculpture, taking as little as 60 seconds. But with the power to create something that will last hundreds of years, Gormley adds, comes ‘a responsibility to make sure that it’s worth doing’.

Gormley spent much of his career famously — and uncomfortably — making iron casts of his own body, for works such as *Testing a World View* (1993), which won him the Turner Prize in 1994. These days, he prefers to use digital scanning technologies to create his forms.

This transition was aided by Roberto Cipolla, Professor of Information Engineering at Cambridge University, who happens to drop by the studio during our conversation.

Cipolla is here to show Gormley one of his sculptures in augmented reality. On his iPhone screen, he places the work in the middle of the room, then walks from one side to the other, demonstrating how it can be viewed in the round.

‘That’s amazing,’ exclaims Gormley with a laugh. ‘Now you can sell this as an NFT!’



Installation view of Lucio Fontana / Antony Gormley, *Negozio Olivetti*, Venice, Italy, 2022. Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio. © the artist

But the idea of exhibitions being made redundant is one that the artist finds dispiriting. Is his worry that, for all the wonders of augmented reality, audiences won’t be able to appreciate his works’ materiality?

‘Of course,’ he says. ‘I use these technologies to pull things out into the palpable, the real. But yes, the idea of disappearing forever into some kind of metaverse is really scary. We have this reflective faculty, but on the whole that’s not what virtual reality does. It does the opposite — it tricks us into thinking that we are in particular spaces. My basic philosophy on this is: use whatever tools you are offered, but use them to bring things into the world and not to virtualise them.’



Isn't this technology at least a useful tool for reaching new audiences?

'Sort of. I'd rather they looked at a photograph of my work and then went and viewed the work, if they liked what they saw.'



Antony Gormley (b. 1950), *Another Place*, 1997. Cast iron. 100 elements: each 189 x 53 x 29 cm. Installation view, Crosby, Merseyside, UK. Photo: Stephen White & Co. © the artist

Accessibility is at the forefront of Gormley's mind as he grows older. He says he wants to create more site-specific sculptures. 'If I've got a fifth or a sixth of my life left to live, I'd like to make sure that in this last period I make things that can be part of everyday experiences. I would like to do far more works rooted in a community and a place.'

'If I think of what I am most proud of and most engaged by, it's the works that have somehow taken their place — whether that's *Another Place* (1997), *Exposure* (2010) or *Angel of the North* (1998) — in a landscape and a collective imagination.'

Gormley also wants to create more permanent works in order to reduce his carbon footprint. 'That's part of my responsibility in terms of facing the truth of climate change and the sixth great extinction. Works that are embedded are more justifiable.'

With longevity in mind, does he have any plans for a 'Fondazione Gormley' of the kind some artists have established in Venice?

'No,' he responds without hesitation. 'We have already endowed a charity called The Foundation Foundation. Its present responsibilities are to encourage and support emerging artists' first exhibitions in a museum or public gallery.'

‘When I die, it will take over looking after my estate, and we will see how those two things — the philanthropic interest of supporting the emergence of art in the future, and a responsibility to keep my work in the public eye — cohere. But it doesn’t take up a great deal of my time or consciousness.’

After a moment of reflection, Gormley stands up, thanks me, and returns down a stainless-steel staircase to the courtyard of his studio. Waiting at the bottom are several of his assistants, eager to discuss plans for his trip the following morning to the Netherlands in order to install yet another major retrospective.