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Antony Gormley on His Epic "Human" Exhibition in Florence



Antony Gormley HUMAN Forte di Belvedere, Florence, Italy, 2015 Photograph by Antony Gormley (Courtesy Galleria Continua and White Cube © the Artist)

The Forte di Belvedere in Florence is hosting a remarkable exhibition of works by renowned sculptor Antony Gormley. Titled "HUMAN," the exhibition brings together more than 100 works by Gormley in the inner rooms of the villa, the bastions, the staircases, and the terraces to occupy every side of the 16th century fortress.

Gormley explains, "The Forte di Belvedere, its function as defensive fortress and its expression of temporal power are the basis of this exhibition. Overlooking Florence, a city that typifies an urban ideal, this site offers a place in which to consider how architecture serves to shelter, protect and dominate people and space."

At the core of the exhibition is two arrangements of the work CRITICAL MASS II (1995) which comprises 12 body forms derived from moulds taken directly from the artist's body. Each form was cast five times to produce a total number of 60 works. Originally conceived for a disused tram depot in Vienna in 1995, the work acquires a new potency when placed in the context of a renaissance city.

"HUMAN" is at the Forte di Belvedere in Florence from April 26-September 27, 2015. To find out more about this amazing exhibition, BLOUIN ARTINFO got in touch with the artist and asked him a few questions. Gormley was kind enough to take time out of his busy schedule to explain the inspiration behind the exhibition and how he engaged with the unique location.

The basis of your exhibition “HUMAN” in Florence is the site in which it is situated. What defines the site and how did you respond to it when you were developing the exhibition?

It has been an extraordinary experience being here at the Forte di Belvedere for a week, installing over a hundred works — a very intensive engagement with the site which is in itself an extraordinary piece of sculpture: the hill has been re-shaped and it's difficult not to think of it as a vast body with four extended sharp-cornered limbs with the Palazzina as some kind of head. This is emblematic architecture, making it clear who was in charge of the city during the Medici era. This fort and the Fortezza da Basso to the west of the city were the Medici family's two main defensive positions. The Belvedere, simply because of its strategic position and altitude, is more about showing who is in control to the citizens rather than any defence of Florence from outside forces. In contrast to its original purpose, it is now a place of peace and tranquillity, and a most lovely place to look out on to the city of Florence. From its vantage point the city itself becomes a model. What I have tried to do — by keeping all the works at human scale and some of them as models of the human body in the language of architecture — is create a dialogue between the cellular texture of the city and the increasingly cellular nature of the 'bodyforms'.

The Forte di Belvedere reminds me of one of the mid 1930s Giacometti pieces, a design for a square with hollows and bumps. Here, the turrets and the small tower over the well court, the batteries and the entrance to the lower part of the Palazzina are all declivities. The terraces and some of the lookout towers are read against the sky. I have used the closed and open spaces where the dungeons contrast with the huge panoramas. The whole thing is a great cubist abstraction. I have undertaken a form of acupuncture, placing works across the site that revitalise its form while interrogating its attitudes.

What was your aim with the exhibition in terms of viewer experience and how did this guide the works you selected for the exhibition and the way they are installed?

I am not sure that I ever want to guide the visitor experience. There is not one way to experience this exhibition. Each viewer will make their own narrative, carrying the memory of the last piece on to the one they are approaching.

The primary proposition is the dialectic between the linear progression of twelve 'bodyforms' (that are part of the 60-piece work, "Critical Mass," 1995) that are arranged for the first time in an evolutionary 'ascent of man' line that starts with a foetal crouching figure facing the ground and finishes with one with its head up, looking at the sky. This line is countered by a pile of bodies from the same "Critical Mass" work that refers to the shadow side of the 20th century in which any idea of the perfectibility of man is countered by the proliferation of war. We have seen this most recently in the Yemen but also with ISIS in Northern Iraq. In this respect, this millennium has been no better than the last and we can count Pol Pot, Srebrenica, the Jewish holocaust, and Rwanda as examples within living memory of the body as detritus.

This dialectic between the standing and aspirational body and the fallen body runs throughout the exhibition. If you come to the east entrance there is a body sitting very upright and alert on the parapet of the building and another lying work with its head stuck against the bottom of the fortress wall. Between them both there is a crouching figure contemplating the world. That same crouching figure is at the north entrance of the installation and is soon countered by three fallen bodies on the slopes of the lower terrace. This dialogue between the alert and aware, and the abject, is developed through a subtext in which body positions in Critical Mass are re-considered as stacking block matrices and increasingly, as you go through the show, these blocks become more cubic or basic in their rectangular volumes. In the two dungeon rooms there is a cube work of a body on a box. This is a direct reference to Abu Ghraib or to the humiliation of a prisoner and is seen in relation to a lying figure with its head turned towards us as we come into a room that will only be lit by the light coming from a barred window. This theme continues upstairs in the rooms and loggias of the Palazzina. But they are not all sad! Some are just positioned playfully, like the one head-butting the corner of the Palazzina, or the one sunbathing against its wall.

The work “Critical Mass” was originally conceived for a disused tram depot in Vienna in 1995. What approach did you take with the work in its new site in Florence and how does it resonate with the space in which it is installed?

This is the first time that the 12 positions of Critical Mass have been displayed in a didactic way and it was the lower terrace that allowed me to do that. We have put in a lot more gravel (dredged from the bottom of the river Arno) and now it reminds me of the zen gardens in Ryōan-ji or the raked gravel in Daitoku-ji: an opportunity to meditate.

The show is called HUMAN and you could take these works as meteorites or industrially made fossils that invite us to reconsider the human condition.

“HUMAN” is the largest exhibition of your singular body forms. What is it like seeing such a large group of your works in the one place? What thoughts and feelings does the exhibition evoke for you in terms of the nature and development of your practice?

Well, it was a wonderful opportunity in this place that is, after all, the birthplace of the Renaissance and indeed, of Alberti’s notion of human proportion in architecture and sculpture. It was a good context in which to re-examine Humanism and an opportunity to ask what the legacy of the Renaissance is now? Can we believe that man is the measure of all things; do we believe that we are an exemplar of divine proportions? The answer is a firm no. We need to reconsider our position and ask that central question — can human nature be part of nature, or has our culture changed us forever? And will we therefore always be toxic to the biosphere?

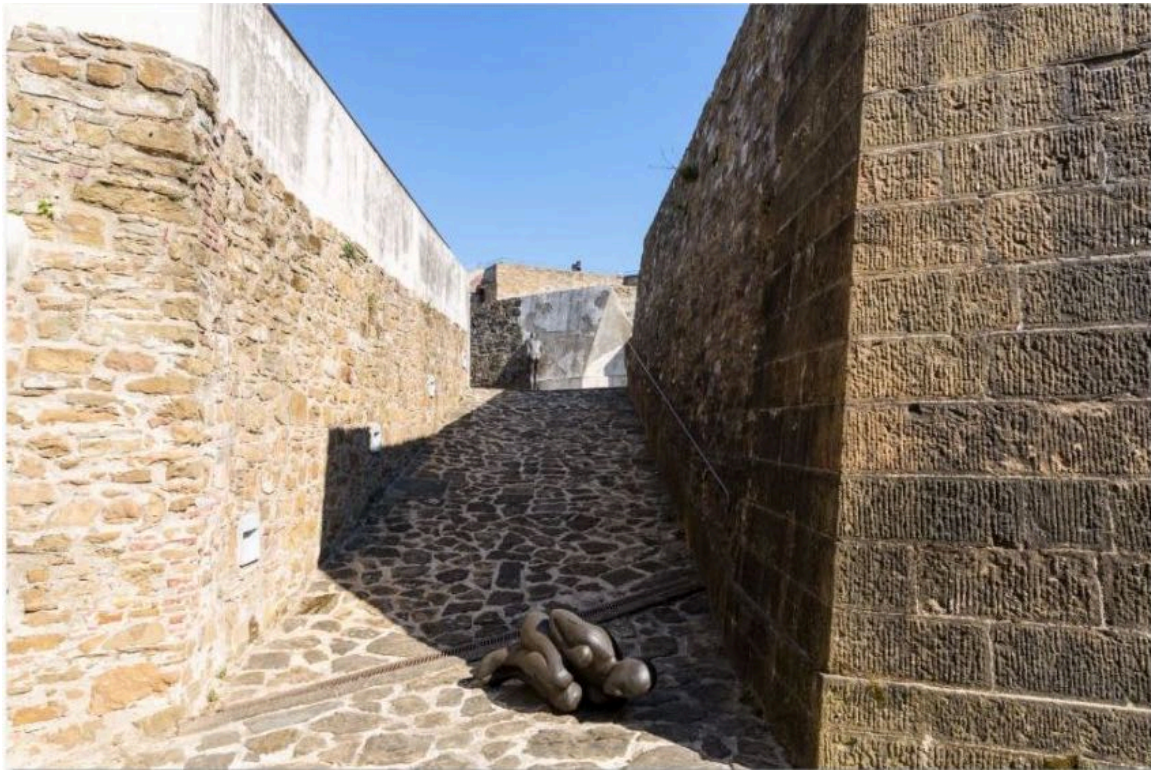
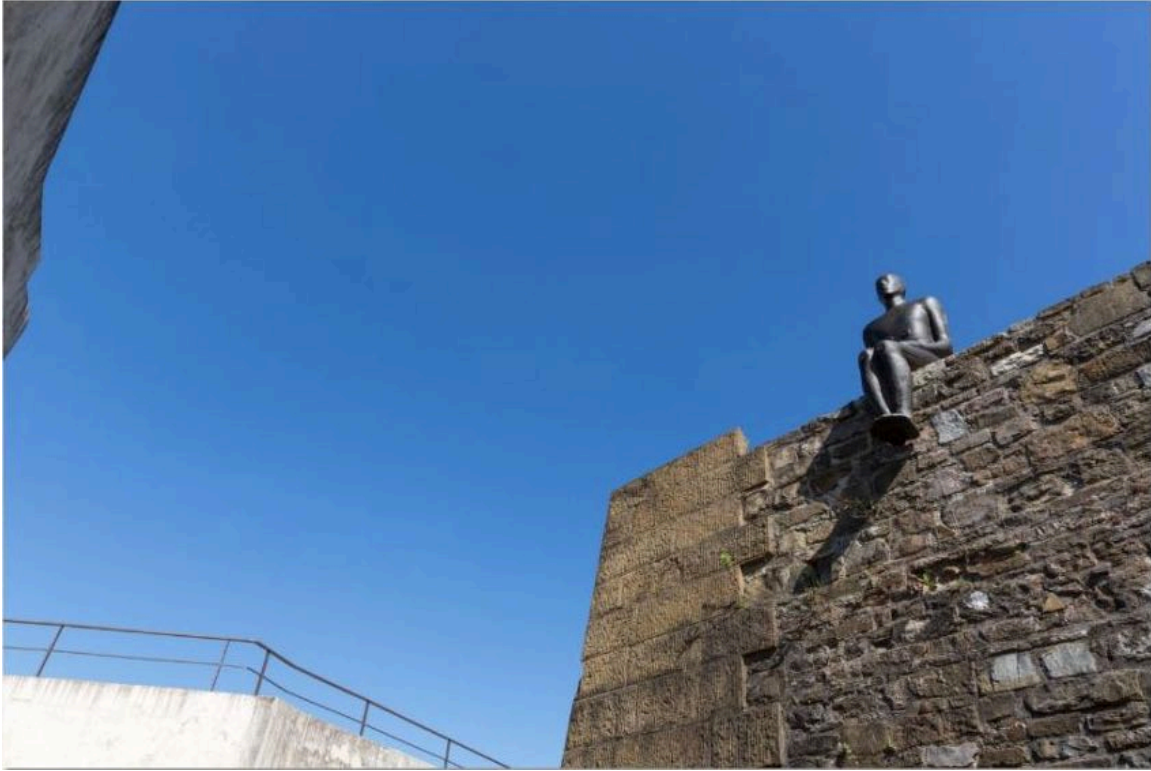
I have no idea whether people want to meditate on these issues but this is a very good place to do so!

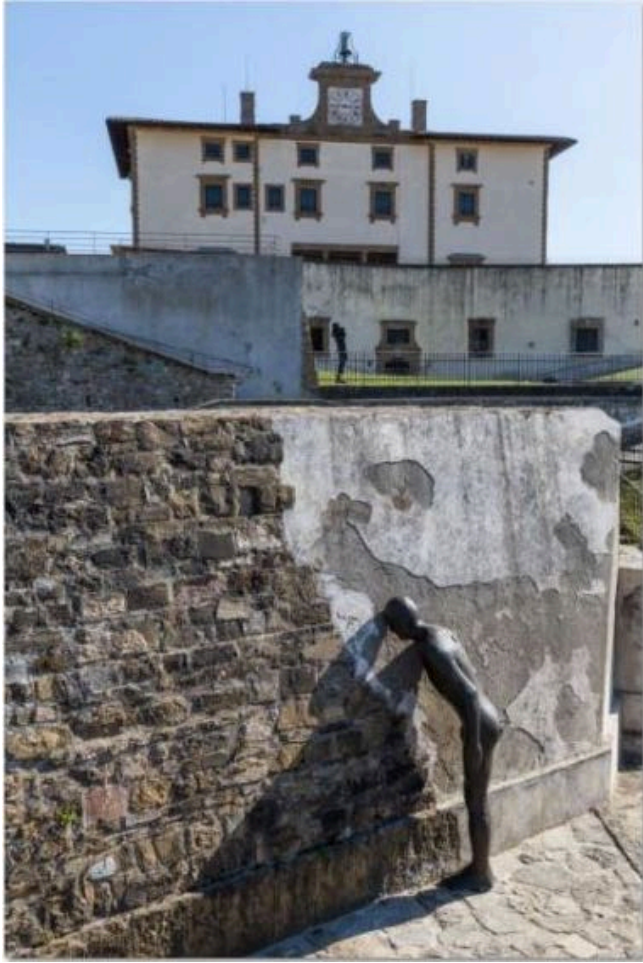
You said that the dialectic between aspirational and abject is the tension that runs throughout the exhibition. Why did you choose to present the exhibition in this way?

Well, I think that I have just answered that. There is no question that climate change is the single biggest challenge we face but also the most singular creative opportunity: we have to change our consciousness, we have to work with nature. James Lovelock thinks that the best hope is that the warm and wet conditions of the living organisms of this planet will now give way to a cold and electronic new cyborg era. He suggests that the best the human race can do is to be the midwives of a new lifeform into which our technology and human experience can be transmitted electronically. I am not sure I share this vision, but as we know, there is a lot more energy in the sun and we are very aware of the toxicity of our actions that result in the ever depleting diversity of the biosphere. We have very little time to stop using the 3.7 billion years of photosynthesis that is held within oil and coal and to move towards a direct photosynthesis of our own. It remains to be seen whether we will meet this challenge. The hope is in doing that so we change from an exploitative, extractive species to one that can indeed live in balance and harmony with nature.

What was the most difficult aspect of developing the “HUMAN” exhibition and how did you overcome it?

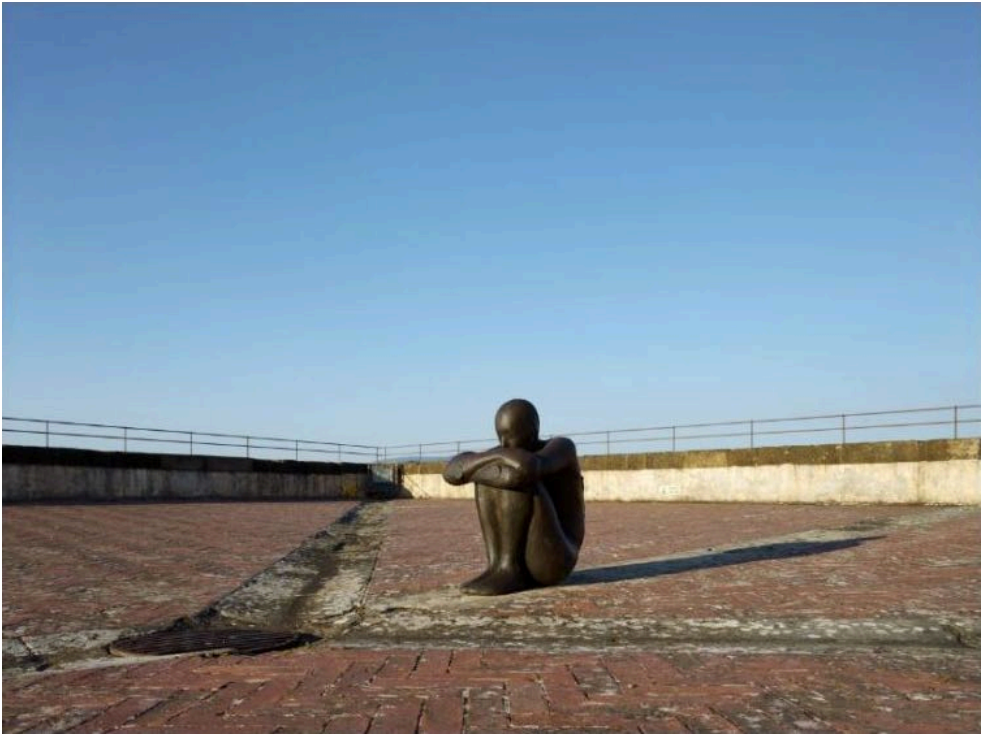
There have been no difficulties mounting this exhibition: it has been a thrilling adventure.

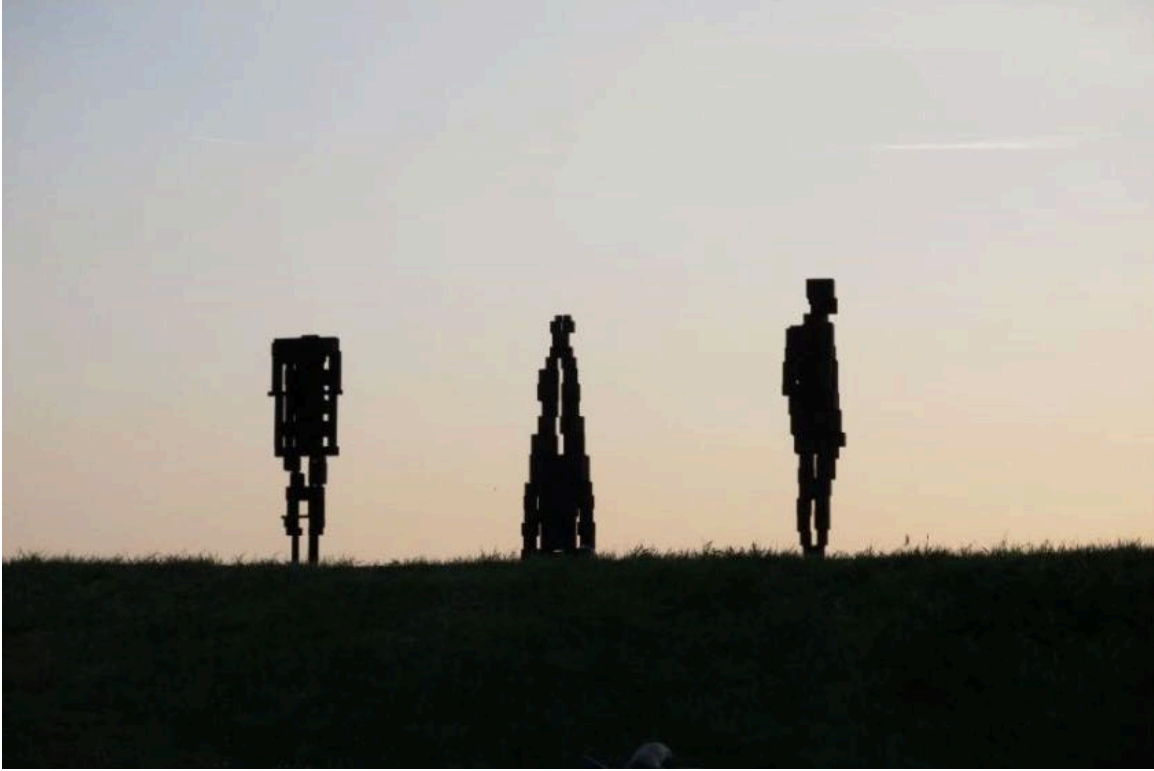








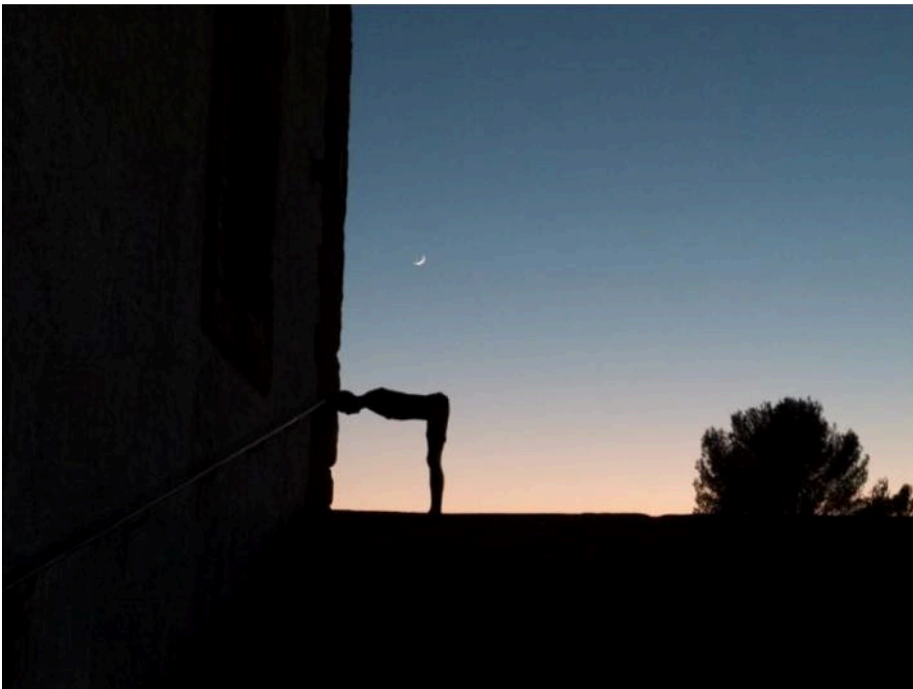
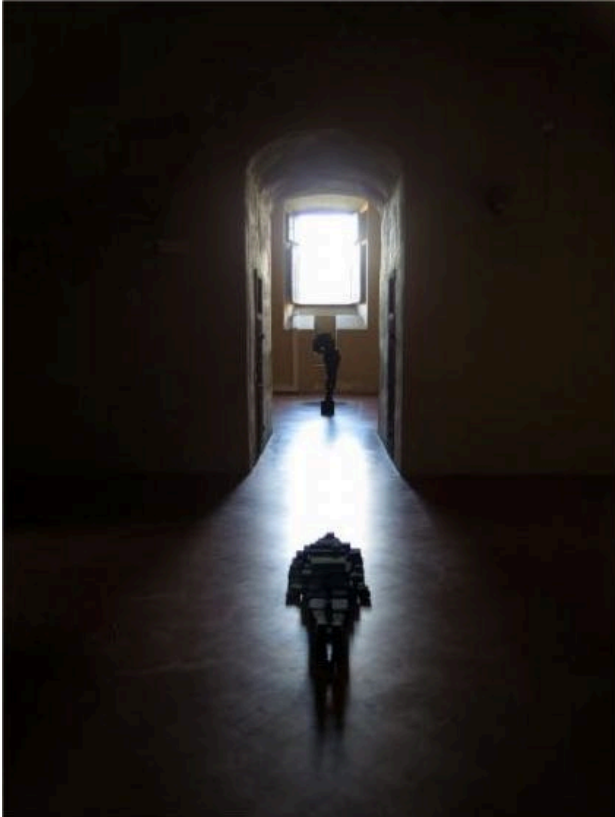












All Images:
Antony Gormley
HUMAN
Forte di Belvedere, Florence, Italy, 2015
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