

SEAN KELLY

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Interview

THE BODY OF ANTONY GORMLEY



Influenced early on by philosophy books ranging from Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* to Marcell Mauss's *The Gift*, Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, artist Antony Gormley explores notions of the mind and body through delicate sculpture. These books, however, while influential in thought, no longer directly impact Gormley's methodological practice. "I don't trust books anymore; I don't trust book-learning," the London born and based artist says. "For me, the whole desire to become a maker was that I want to think by material."

Gormley received his BA from Trinity College at Cambridge University in 1971, later receiving MAs from both Saint Martin's and Goldsmiths. Now, using materials like steel, lead, and fiberglass, the artist deconstructs and re-presents the human form. "I want to make propositions," he explains. "Let's look at the world not by making a syllogism, but by making a fact that sits in the world and people can fall over it."

Currently on view at Sean Kelly Gallery, the exhibition "Construct" presents a range of these sculptures, opening with *Bridge* (1985) and *Scaffold* (2015), giving way to five new "Big Beamer" pieces and two new works that are part of his "Stretched Blockworks" series. Though each piece retains its unique form and function, as a whole, the show encourages viewers to consider the mapping and mass of one's own body. Just before the opening of the show, Gormley spoke with his friend, experimental theater director and playwright Robert Wilson. When Wilson had to return to rehearsals for an upcoming performance, Gormley continued to speak about the show with *Interview*. —Emily McDermott

ANTONY GORMLEY: How are you doing, Robert?

ROBERT WILSON: I'm great, how are you?

GORMLEY: I'm really well, apart from the fact that I only have one functioning foot.

WILSON: Oh no, what happened?

GORMLEY: It just gave up, so I had to have it remodeled. I have flat feet; I had to have my left one done, and now my right foot had to go through the same thing. I think I'll be a proper bipedal mammal in about four month's time, but for the time being I'm in a wheelchair and on crutches. I'm in the country, sitting in my drawing studio. I've been making a few things out of clay, drawing, and watching the lambs and the horses. You must be doing a production.

WILSON: I'm doing a production in Oslo. I just came from Brazil—I had a production there with Brazilian actors and musicians, very colorful and sexy. We met the musicians in a really tiny club and asked them to come and work with us. We wrote the piece rather quickly. It's great company.

GORMLEY: I did three shows in Brazil a couple years back. There's so much vitality, and it's musically incredible.

WILSON: The actors, it's amazing, so well tempered with humor. And you have this music that's infectious. The audience comes in and they're dancing with the actors. It's very different from Germany, where I work often.

GORMLEY: I think watching capoeira or those amazing bossa nova clubs, the whole culture lives with a rhythm that's infectious and beautiful.

WILSON: So you're not able to travel now?

GORMLEY: No—my doctor's given me some extra pills. My blood is going to be so thin it will flow with hardly any impediment. I've got to be careful not to pick up sharp instruments, because apparently if I cut myself now, I'll bleed to death. But it does mean I can fly. I've got the show in New York and a permanent piece at MIT that I'm going to go check out because I've only seen it in model and photo form. It's 40-feet high, my reply to Brancusi's Endless Column, made after the DNA helix and string theory. So it's this very lightweight, completely translucent, nesting polyhedral goes from the ground to the skylight. I'm so proud of it, Bob.

WILSON: I'll have to go see it in the beginning of the summer. Tell me about the beautiful early work you did, The Angel of the North.

GORMLEY: Somebody rang me up from Gateshead, [England] city council. They had an international competition and said, "We don't think we've got quite what we want. Can you have a look?" I said, "Where's the site?" and they said, "It's right next to the A1, the extension of our oldest and longest motorway, the M1." I said, "I don't make art for motorways." They said, "Don't be so snobby and pompous and silly. We're going to send you a photo."

They sent me this photo and immediately I felt, "This is an incredible site," so I went and it was indeed incredible. Geometrically, it was a fantastic place. I was walking up the mound and the counselor said, "What we need is one of your angels." I had been making these grounded, materialistic, body-sized, body cases, where the arms are replaced with wings. I said, "If you're serious about having an angel, it'll have to be at least three London double-decker red buses high, because the whole principle of this site is that you want to see it as you cross the Thames." One thing led to another and I made this model, we put it in the back of a van, and talked to engineering firms. Finally we found a firm that was capable of doing it. It was an unbelievable privilege, making that work. I know that's what I'm best known for, but in a way, it's the odd man out because I haven't made a career out of making totemic, monumental works. But it was necessary. It was a reactivation of an idea about art as a tribal thing.

WILSON: You also have a Roman Catholic background.

GORMLEY: Yeah, I was brought up in a family where we all said prayers in the morning together, and at night my dad would often turn the lights out and we'd say prayers together in the dark. Then I went to a monastic school; after university I didn't have the confidence to say, "I'm going to be an artist," so I went off to India. It took me a year to get there, then I spent two years in India, and the last three

months were spent in monasteries in Sri Lanka. I spent a lot of time sitting on my bum meditating. That was a linking back to experiences about embodied space, which was really, really important.

WILSON: As a child, did you want to be an artist?

GORMLEY: I was always an artist. I made myself a kind of laboratory workshop in the shed on the side of our house, where I had my chemistry set and my drawing materials. I got all the painting and art prizes at school. At 13, they asked me to paint a mural at the end of a corridor in Ampleforth [College]. To get that support so early, and to have it shared in the school for everyone to see, was incredible. Then the school bought work from the show I had when I was 17 and finishing [school] in order to decorate their guesthouse... I got into Cambridge and everybody thought that was a bit surprising. I did anthropology, archaeology, and the history of art. I did a lot of painting and sculpture and filmmaking at Cambridge, but then I wasn't sure what to do after, so I went off to India. Eventually I had to decide to be a Buddhist monk or try to be a sculptor, so I went back to school at age 24 with a bit more life experience, and now I've got two MAs. It was the best way for me, because by the time I got to art school I was hungry and impatient.

WILSON: Antony, it's been great talking to you, but I'm in rehearsal and was due to be back about five minutes ago. Best wishes for your show.

GORMLEY: Take care, Bob. See you soon. [pause] So that was a lot of the personal. Do you want to talk about the show?

INTERVIEW: That would be great. "Construct" has been described as a show in which you engage the grid to invoke the experience of inhabiting a human body at the otherside of appearance. I'm curious as to what you mean by "the other side of appearance"?

GORMLEY: In a very body-conscious, appearance-obsessed world, I'm very concerned to present the other side of the story, and to do it in the belief that our primary experience of being in the world is not as a thing that other people look at. The fact is that our appearance belongs to others; it belongs to that which is not us. The degree to which we become obsessed by our mirror image, or what the Lacanians call the mirror stage, means that we're stuck. In psychological terms, I think the mirror stage is very important in recognizing that we have a separate existence. The truth of our existence is that we live at the other side of appearances, and that's what I'm trying to evoke.

How something feels is far more important to me than how something looks, even though I recognize that visual art is about looking. I'm trying to use it in a way in which representation is a secondary issue, and that the feel of something is of primary interest. In all of the works in "Construct"—which has lots of innuendo meaning—I'm playing with balance and unbalance, using really basic means of stacking and propping. The "Beamer" works substitute some kind of architectural construction for anatomy, but nevertheless call upon our empathy in order to engage with them. Modernism abandoned the body, but also asked us to attend to formal issues—in other words, the way things are composed or constructed. That leaves out one of the most potent things that art can do, which is allow us to feel things we wouldn't otherwise.

INTERVIEW: So what are the feelings you hope to evoke?

GORMLEY: I'm not trying to make people feel something specific. I'm wanting for the space that the work displaces or activates to become the place where feelings that are intrinsic to the viewer, rather than intrinsic to the work, arise. But having said that, I'm wanting them to become aware of their jeopardy, that we are not invulnerable and that life is a precious thing.

Sculpture deals with measure. It deals with mass and space, but in quantum lumps. I think it invites you to sidle up to one of the works, or in the process of looking at it, feel your own scale and your own movement in relation to this proposition, this measured construction. I'm not trying to illustrate emotion. Far from it. I'm simply trying to put the conditions together—objects to space, and object to object—through which emotion can arise.

INTERVIEW: I want to go back to how you said our appearance doesn't belong to us, because I don't think many people think that way. I feel like people believe their appearance is who they are and is one of the few things they can control about themselves.

GORMLEY: But of course it isn't. The minute you start trying to control it, you're lost because there's no end. The idea of constantly trying to be in the position of the apprehender, you turn yourself into a work. The body is the vehicle, but it has its own agenda; it has knowledge and a richness that we can never fully understand. The idea that you possess a body is crazy. It's just a little bit of the incredibly complex transfer between mass and energy that you happen to have the temporary consciousness of... I'm now sounding like some kind of moral philosopher. The fact is that the mind/body problem is simply a workshop problem; we are given time, space, and material, a body, to hopefully find new coordinates of connection. We will leave traces, we will make lines of communication and inquiry that have to be carried on by others, but the idea that "I am coeval with my body and who I am is what I look like" is an untenable proposition.

I'm really talking about an obsession that exists very potently in the western world with bodily perception.

INTERVIEW: At what point did you adopt this perspective?

GORMLEY: From the age of five to eight or nine, from 2:30 to 3:00, I'd have to go upstairs and have this enforced rest. I think that was my introduction, lying there totally still, keeping my eyes closed, and becoming aware of this very claustrophobic hot red space behind my eyes. Over time, I learned how, if you stay in that space long enough, it became cooler, darker, bigger, and it was without objects and was infinite. If we forget the world and the things that we have to do in it, we are released into this zone of extraordinary freedom—that exists inside each of us. For me, this darkness of the body, the void within, whatever you want to call it, is a source of energy, imagination, power, potency, and strength. The ego has absolutely no place in this space. It has to be left behind.

So what has this got to do with sculpture? I've been trying to say the body is a place or a space over and above its existence as an object, and this is, in a sense, the mystery of our being. That infinite space of the darkness of the body is as boundless and unknowable as deep cosmic space. We're on this mind/body journey in which we have to somehow make an account of our existence. For me, that's meant trying to map this inner space, and you might say I've done it very literally.

For instance, in "Construct," I'm showing an early work called Bridge. It's an entirely enclosed lead carapace with a head that's tipped backwards and looking upwards. It has a perfect register of my body on the inside that's been strengthened with fiberglass and covered with beaten lead. As far as I'm concerned, this was my early literal mapping of this infinite space of consciousness that exists within the bounding condition of the human body. That concern is a total obsession; it runs through the whole show. The tallest work in the show is made out of hundreds of beams that make a very unstable form, and I want you to feel that. The one thing you need apart from a body and its faculties is empathy. Without it, these things would just be boring bits of engineering. With it, they begin to resonate.

INTERVIEW: When you started making work, the internet wasn't really a thing. Now, considering the proliferation and constant presentation of appearance through social platforms and the internet at large, how has your thought process changed?

GORMLEY: The internet is one of the most absolutely brilliant tools ever. I went to Obama's town hall in London last week and I agree with him: Never have we had so many tools to potentially change the world. The issue for me with the internet and the digital revolution is, let's use it for what it's good for, which is swift calculation and swift connection, but let's not live in it. We've got to pull things out of the virtual and make them real. The whole of the studio depends on and runs with digital capability, it's made an incredible extension in being able to think three-dimensionally, but you have to keep pulling stuff out and making it. Yes we make printed models, but we also make models in clay, wood, fiberglass, plaster, polyester, and polystyrene. The virtual allows us to plan and aim our researches, but in the end, the researches have to be physical. The real research is "what does this feel like when we're making it?" We don't want to get sucked into a virtual world. It's what you can pull out of the virtual into the real that's valuable.

"CONSTRUCT" WILL BE ON VIEW AT SEAN KELLY GALLERY THROUGH JUNE 18, 2016.