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Schama, Simon. "Antony Gormley: 'What you see is what you get'." *Financial Times*. September 13, 2019.



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The artist tells Simon Schama about his ambitious forthcoming show at London's Royal Academy

About to show me round the installation of his Royal Academy show (itself a massive engineering manoeuvre) Antony Gormley worries out loud that visitors might miss the first item: his "Iron Baby" (1999). Cast from his baby daughter at the age of six weeks, there it lies, foetally snug on the floor of the courtyard outside the main entrance, with only the statue of Sir Joshua Reynolds as babysitter.

The standard style in courtyard come-ons is high-pitch theatrical, so much fist-brandishing at the Royal Academy's imperturbable neoclassical façade. But Gormley's human bud on the ground is an intimation of the unfurlings of humanity into space and time that have been his life-long obsession. It's the plaintive opening note before a symphonic storm of a show crashes down on you. But it's also, as he says, an invitation to consider the show as "an arena where people think for themselves" and to consider "who we are and where we're going". This, he adds, "is everybody's job".

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For all the sly modesty of the baby on the paving — “a statement about scale”, he adds — there’s nothing reticent about the challenge to the classical tradition which, Gormley explains, is a major force driving his show. He has been an Academician since 1993. He is well aware that the founding of the Academy in the mid-18th century constituted a statement about the continuity of that tradition in which the idealised form of the human body was taken to materialise an abstract notion of beauty. Academic life drawing was held to be the indispensable making of an artist, and sculpture its consummation.

Gormley is famous for replacing that idealisation with material, biological reality — “what you see is what you get” — and for reimagining human monumentality as intensified by being scaled down to natural dimensions, rather than forever duelling with the hulk of Michelangelo. His figures, whether erect or bent, overlook their surroundings in contemplative dialogue rather than taking possession of them; they are players not statues, and all the more emotionally and philosophically potent for that.



'Body and Fruit' (1991-93) © Antony Gormleyt/Jan Uvelius, Malmö Konsthall

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The Royal Academy exhibition dramatises Gormley's resistance to the imperial figure, but also to the self-referential echo chamber of the contemporary art world. From the start, his immersion in anthropology and spirituality set him aside from the obligations of obsessing over Modernism, Postmodernism and the usual suspects. Instead there was a search for embodiments of the elemental. Periodic considerations of the human condition have always seemed urgent. "It's a reality check," he says of this exhibition, a vision of what and where we actually are, right now, in a world agitated or disfigured by industrialisation and its derelictions; the rupturing of space and the staining of nature.

So instead of confident figures posed for passive contemplation, Gormley shoves the visitor into a sensory expedition, a sharpened, sometimes tortuous, apprehension of how we move through space and its obstructions; grids that dislocate rather than locate us; openings that turn out to be the caverns of our own bodies, booming with inner echoes. This isn't a show where you file through galleries peering at objects hanging on the walls: expect to stoop, clamber and generally get bent out of shape, conceptually as well as physically.

The meshes, passages and whorls of coiled steel are not offered archly as some sort of high-minded obstacle course, but what he explains to me as a "co-production" between visitor and maker. Gormley's instincts for participatory creative democracy were on show 10 years ago in his project for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, "One and Other", where over the course of four months people were invited to do their own thing. Parting company with the assumption of an artist as an authoritative "producer" of "high-value objects", Gormley wants to reconceive his pieces as needing the full participation of the visitor (no longer a "beholder") to complete the work.

The ask is important. Gormley says, "I'm not interested in the making of spectacles that depend on special conditions and highly tuned technology and that point you to attend to the rainbow spectrum or the ancientness of a piece of ice. I want to leave people alone to attend to themselves." In the bigger pieces like

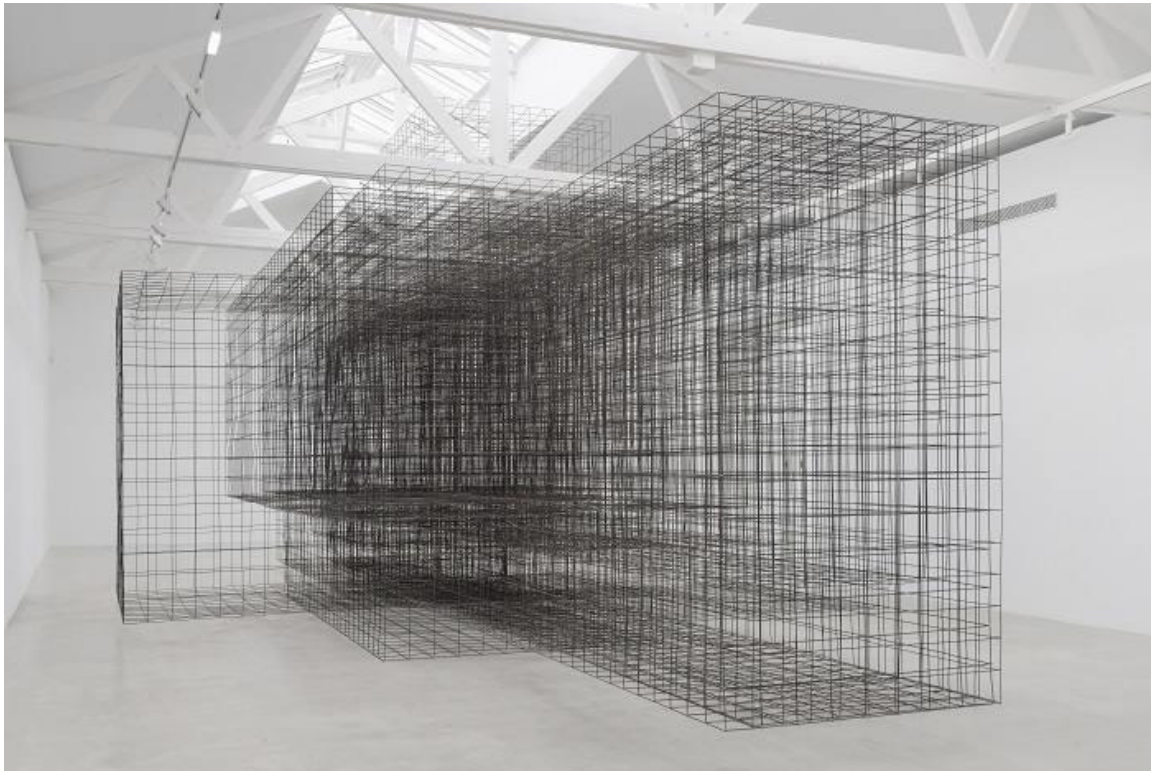


'Night-Time Plinther In Red Dress' at 'One And Other' (2009) © Getty

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“Matrix III” he’s not, he says “going to give people much of a handle . . . other than their lostness.”

That visceral encounter — and the ducking, crawling, navigating, negotiating that goes with it — unfolds most powerfully in a few mighty installations at the core of the show. “Clearing” unfurls seven kilometres of a single line of steel “without beginning or end”, coiled into hoops and vortical spirals and then lifted so that what he calls its “horizon” will be some two metres above the floor of one of the Academy’s rooms, many of which have been deconstructed and rebuilt for this show.



Matrix II © Antony Gormley/Charles Duprat/Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac

“Matrix III” hangs massive grids of mesh in densely intersecting cage-like layers reaching to around two metres from the floor. Staring at or through the grid immediately scrambles optical orientation: “The destruction of single-point perspective by perspective.” At the heart of the multiply walled cage lies an empty space, a resting point for the agitated gaze, comparable to the heart of a maze but here inaccessible from any point of entry.

These big pieces most obviously demand every kind of exertion, but even in the quieter rooms, Gormley wants our intuitive receptors to kick in with an active awareness of how our bodies structure our humanity. At first sight “Slabworks”, a room of 14 constructions of figures disarticulated into card-like building blocks, seem abstracted translations of anatomies caught in horizontal or vertical action or slumped repose: gym time in Cubist Pompeii. Gormley wants people to come

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into what might look “like a builder’s yard”, the slabs pinned but not fixed, “their deadweight doing its stuff”, so that “your intuitive understanding of how it feels to inhabit a body can be projected on to the works, and can become yours”. This might end up being suggestive “of the weight of a body against the floor or the way we clasp our hands across our chest when lying on a beach”. Even so, the figures “aren’t pictures of something”, but “something you have to make sense of . . . a collective image”.



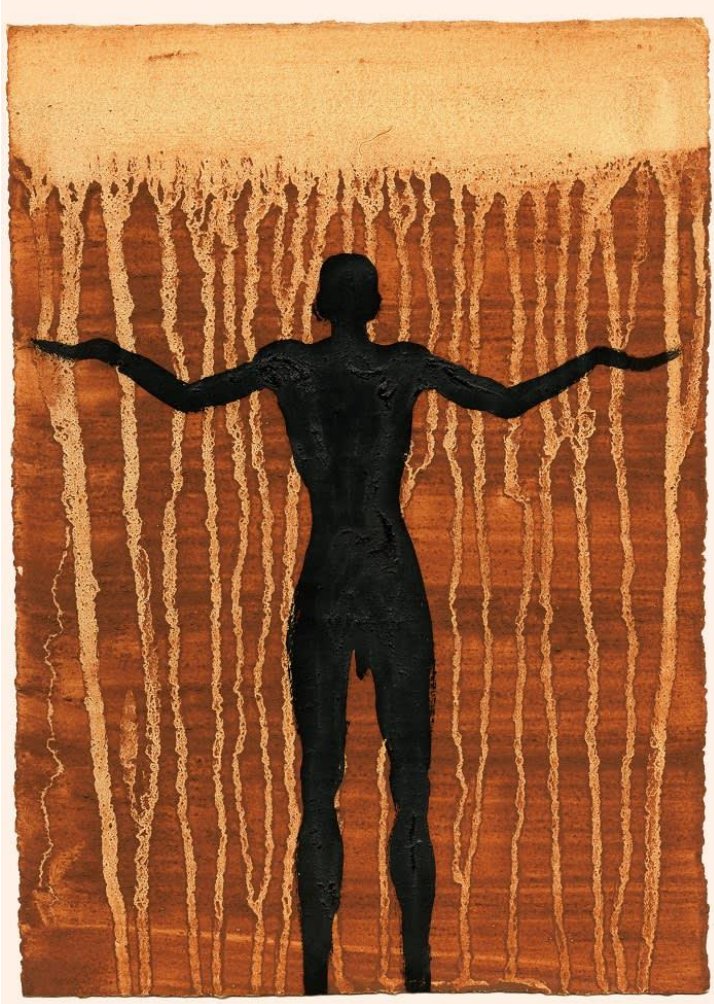
'Full Bowl' (1977-78) © Antony Gormley/Stephen White, London

Gormley declares more than once that he wants his work to face the future rather than stay tangled up in art memories, but his reflections on our present condition are sieved through absorption in prehistoric time. Working on a television documentary about paleolithic art, in the inner depths of ancient caves he was moved by the realisation that, tens of thousands of years ago, our ancestors already commanded the gift of drawing. They carried the trace marks of visual memory deep into the caves, where they transcribed the lineaments of those visions on to the face of the rock in near total darkness.

Gormley’s sense that this would have been impossible without some sort of instinctive fit between inner rock and inner body, housings and passages, went to shape his enormous “Cave”, constructed from steel spaces embodying head,

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trunk, limbs, through which visitors feel their way aided only by two sources of low, glimmering light. We do a clamber-through, banging on the interior walls: that thunderous acoustic, drum beats from within the body like the rush of a pulse heard through a stethoscope, is integral to the sensory drama.



'Earth, Body, Light' (1989) © Antony Gormley

“Cave” may be the climax of the show but, as befits his yogi-like attentiveness to pace and tone, there is at the end of the line a contemplative yin to the clangorous yang. “Host” — named to suggest something sacramental — floods a gallery floor with 25 cubic metres of clay, which is then irrigated to create a red primal soup over the entire space. “The largest watercolour in the world,” he jokes. It’s akin to his friend and early mentor Walter de Maria’s “Earth Room” in New York, but while that characteristically American production is fiercely sanitised to pre-empt intruding bugs, Gormley’s primal matter — a marriage of the elements of water, earth and air with which he began his career 40 years back — is allowed to sit undisturbed by anything other than the shifting radiance of natural light and the gaze of visitors through an opening in the gallery wall.

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After all the strenuousness of what has gone before it's a perfect coda; a silently self-contained glimpse of both origin and destination, the flow of time and the work of process. These have, after all, been Gormley's life-long preoccupation; he continues to illuminate them with magical gravity.

September 21-December 3, royalacademy.org.uk