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THE TIMES

FIRST NIGHT | EXHIBITION

Antony Gormley review — engaging body of work has all the fun of the fair

Royal Academy of Arts



Antony Gormley with his work *Lost Horizon*, taken from casts of his body *TIMES* PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

★★★★☆

There is certainly some fun to be had. As Britain's most popular sculptor, Antony Gormley, takes over the august spaces of the Royal Academy with [his biggest exhibition in a decade](#) as he invites us to enjoy a few fairground-style sprees.

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You can duck, weave and high step, scissor, clamber and crawl through the rattling metal loops of a massive three-dimensional metal scrawl that fills an entire gallery with its madly gyrating swirls. You can blunder about in an angular maze of steel caverns, every bash sending sombre reverberations through the blackness. You can stand on the brink of a briny expanse of water, looking across a room that has become a lake, pondering the gloopy red mud that lies thick at the bottom and, even perhaps, one of the tiny, translucent shrimps that, when I visit, an assistant is doing his best to fish out with a net.



Antony Gormley getting to grips with his new piece, Matrix III TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

But what more than mere entertainment can Gormley's work offer? A couple of rooms provide a quick summary of what is now close to a 50-year career. A few early experimental works, dating back to the Seventies, establish his basic interests: the body's physical parameters, the expressive possibilities of scale, the tension between stillness and motion, the relationship between interior and exterior worlds. A handful of other pieces, most strikingly his 2008 *Lost Horizon* in which a crowd of his trademark figures (all cast from his own body) are installed in a single gallery, sprouting from floor, ceiling and walls, record landmark moments in the elaboration of his ideas.

The emphasis, however, is on new works. When the Royal Academy was founded, 250 years ago, the classical ideal as it could be encapsulated by the human body was considered the very paradigm of beauty. Gormley challenges this standard: not only by taking his own form as a model but increasingly by encouraging us, the spectators, physically to participate. He sets out to return us to the unique truths of our human existence.

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On one level it is incredibly straightforward. Gormley strips things down to their bare essentials: in one installation three steel bars crisscross the bareness like the x,y and z axes of a mathematical graph plotting our position in time and space. But like many simple things, they create room for any amount of complexity.

How much you take from this show depends on how much you are prepared to put in, that is if you even get there. A little iron baby lies hunched in the courtyard like a tiny foetal trip-hazard. Someone is sure to go flying – probably one of the more doddery Royal Academicians. But then, maybe that too is all part of the fun and the philosophy of this fair.

The exhibition runs from September 21 to December 3