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Antony Gormley's work of 40,000 terracotta figures goes on show

The eyes of the figures are asking: ‘What kind of world are you making?’ says Antony Gormley. Photograph: Martin Dalton/REX/Shutterstock

Art Council’s largest single work, installed in Essex, ‘never more relevant’, says artist

Antony Gormley regards the 40,000 tiny, otherworldly terracotta figures staring helplessly out at the viewer as a call to our conscience. “They are asking: ‘What kind of world are you making?’” he says.

The artist was in Colchester on Friday for the unveiling of one of his most popular works, named Field for the British Isles, which contributed to him winning the Turner prize in 1994.

“It’s wonderful, I love it,” he said, bounding up to the precarious installation in the town’s Firstsite gallery. “It’s never been in a wonky building before.” The gallery, designed by architect Rafael Viñoly, opened in 2011.

It is the largest single work in the publicly-owned Arts Council Collection and is selectively loaned because of its size and the challenge of installing it.

The terracotta figures were made by volunteers in Merseyside. Photograph: Martin Dalton/REX/Shutterstock

All the figures were originally made by more than 100 volunteers from St Helens, Merseyside, who were asked to make figures from a mountain of brick clay which followed three simple key rules: "Hand-sized, stand up and have eyes."

The instructions for installing Field for the British Isles are that it must be done each time by the local community. In this case that means local students, members of a Bangladeshi women's group and Gurkhas.

It's a work by Gormley, but in a way not by him. "My name in big letters, it's rubbish," he said. "This work is a collective work made by the collective hands of a collective people. It was made by people who did it just for the sake of doing it."

Gormley said he was proud to see it in Colchester. "It has never been more relevant than now," he said.

"We live in a time of mass migration and the issues of how we are going to achieve social justice in a time when money and goods are allowed absolute free passage globally and yet somehow people are not … why are we going backwards?"

The figures are all mouthless and mute and the idea is that the viewer is God.

"I think of this as a reservoir for unspoken feeling," Gormley said. "It is a turning of the tables – here the viewer is made the subject of the art's gaze. The eyes are asking what kind of world are you making?"

Sally Shaw, the director of Firstsite, said it had been a rewarding experience. “The people who installed it all loved it, they all slowed down at the end because they didn’t want to finish.”

She particularly wanted to show the work because it has 40,000 figures and Colchester has 40,000 children and young people in its population.

Antony Gormley says Field for the British Isles evokes questions about migration. Photograph: Simon Ford/REX/Shutterstock

“You don’t get to see an entire group like that so for me this is a visualisation of those people.”

About a quarter of them live in poverty, she said, and many of those same children take part in the gallery’s holiday programme, which provides activities and free lunches during school breaks.

The work, which has been at venues including Salisbury Cathedral and the British Museum, is expected to be popular. Without a barrier between the public and the figures, anything could happen. But Shaw is optimistic.

“Apparently kids behave the best,” she said. “A lot of the time they come up close and just lie down and look across them. Kids are great … it’s the adults.”

• Antony Gormley: Field for the British Isles, is at Firstsite in Colchester, 15 November-8 March