

Powell, Neil. "The Art of Natural Intelligence." Wall Street International. December 3, 2019.



## The Art of Natural Intelligence

Thoughts on the work of Antony Gormley



***Antony Gormley, Bed, courtesy and copyright Royal Academy of Arts/The Artist***

I remember seeing Antony Gormley's work for the first time at the Slade when he completed the MA in Sculpture there as a mature student in 1979. His *Bread Bed* has since become the stuff of legend, but essentially even then one could not fail to be grabbed by the intimacy, his grasp of the visceral and aesthetic that came to make him the art superstar he is today. To my mind and from the get go, his success was a deserved inevitability.

Before the opening of the RA show, I asked him, in terms of his overall career, if he held any regrets? He simply stated: "I wish I had started earlier". His output, productivity and eye for spectacle are quite possibly unsurpassed. I have tried really hard at times not to like Gormley's work, but frankly, if you are serious about art, there is nothing there to dislike. Sure, a number of artists decry Gormley as being assimilated too easily into the establishment, the mansplaining mainstream even, as if success is always accompanied by the certainty of creative capitulation. Sour grapes I'm afraid, if you

*Last Updated: 17 December 2019*

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don't find some kind of resonance or affinity with his work, I would cite simple envy or lack of attentiveness as the most likely cause.

The RA show confirms Gormley as a giant of creativity, he is fearless and cunning, the vulnerability of the works on plain display play out as the work of an artist so accomplished, so knowing, so exposed, that we sense invulnerability. I hardly, if ever, write gushing reviews, it runs against the grain of my natural scepticism, and I went to the Academy with a view (hope) to being disappointed; didn't happen. The reasons why it didn't happen are manifold; Gormley has been around making art for a good while, and for those of us who follow, we've seen figuration, abstraction, exquisite drawings, monumental statuary and works juxtaposed poetically in fabulous locations. What I am getting at here is that the name 'Antony Gormley' is not a short cut to a monotheistic visual identity, and nor does it emblematises the typecast artefact often conjured by other household names that I will tactfully refrain from mentioning. One absolutely has to look at the RA show holistically against the backdrop of, and within the context of, his body of work as an accretion of understanding, manufacture, material aplomb, placement and dialogical dynamics. In all honesty, few artists hold a candle to his output over the past 4 decades.

The point I have come to here is that the work in the show at the RA, brilliant and enthralling as it is, adds to a corpus of work that is overall, extraordinary – the whole in Gormley's case genuinely being greater than the sum of its parts.

*Clearing VII* uses the material attributes of steel as a giant spatial doodle, audacious, cheeky and slightly threatening, redolent of razor wire barriers and the madness of intimate graphite squiggle-cum grand sculptural gesture. *Lost Horizon I* is bonkers/disquieting, fraught with difficulty, straddling the madness and improbability of a weighty weightlessness and a disorientation one might more frequently associate with *I-Robot* type sci-fi.

*Slabworks* and *Subject II* I found equally scary, perhaps it's just me, but my encounters with these works reminded me of the reductivist quality of satellite and UCAV footage in serving to render humankind to little more than pixelated targets. The ominous and brooding presence of *Matrix III* reinforces this sense of foreboding and the show effectively challenges the idea of Gormley as mainstream as he acts to subvert. The subversion here is of the establishment, and one wonders to what extent the prevailing curatorial narratives around the show accounted for the latent and implied menace that have entered, Trojan Horse-like into the airiness of the RA.

The show is near its conclusion as I write, but if anything, this is not an admonition to see it last-minute, more a plea to a readership to look at what has gone before.

*Last Updated: 17 December 2019*