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Sutherland, Julia. "Shaping the World – a refreshing invitation to rethink sculpture."
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Parinirvana Buddha, a 14-metre statue at Gal Vihara rock temple in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka (11th-12th century) © Sygma via Getty Images

What is sculpture? We think we know - whether the first things that come to mind are toppled slave-traders, luscious Bernini marbles, pickled sharks or Parthenon marbles. Yes - but why is it there? What is it doing? If you want to rethink your ideas about sculpture, this fascinating book, *Shaping the World: Sculpture from Prehistory to Now* will give you pause for thought on just about every page.

That is because the two authors, or perhaps more accurately the two "voices" -since the text is in the form of a reported dialogue - have been wrestling with these questions for many years. Martin Gayford is an art historian, author and critic, whose incisive writings have encompassed everything from sitting for a portrait by Lucian Freud to a deep-dive into the life and works of Michelangelo. Antony Gormley is a contemporary British sculptor whose works span the world from China to the Australian desert, the Americas to an industrial British shoreline. It would be easy to say that he needs little introduction,

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but perhaps he does, since he now reappears as one of the most eloquent and thoughtful voices on world art.

Their book is very refreshing. It contains - *gratias deo* - the minimum of art-historical terminology, and almost no "isms". It's a mighty, lusciously produced tome of some 390 pages; it weighs a tonne; every page is gorgeous. You can lose yourself in just looking at the illustrations, which might be from 14,000 BCE or of Willem de Kooning's "Clamdigger" of 1972, a Rodin or a Michelangelo or the sandstone Theban necropolis in Egypt, or a Chinchorro mummy from Chile.

Don't get too distracted by all this beauty. The text is really worth reading. The two authors, who are documenting a conversation that began between them some 20 years ago, have kicked away all the usual support systems of chronology, geography and genre. Instead, their chapter headings begin with "Bodies in Space" and move on through some more specific sections - "Mounds, Fields and Standing Stones" or "The Age of Bronze" - and some far more abstract - "Light and Darkness", or "Time and Mortality", or "Fear and Fetishism".

They attack their subject from the bottom up - that is, from the basics. Gormley, as we might expect from a maker, a practitioner, describes sculpture as "a form of physical thinking". He says his passion for sculpture was somehow about getting away from words - and indeed when describing the visceral act of making solid shapes, it seems "the first surviving shaped stones may even predate the advent of language". We're invited to think about shaping and moulding and carving and bending, the creation of 3D objects around us, as something that runs deep in our psyche, a fundamental part of our need for expression, ancient and earthy. Of the "Venus" forms we know - the very early earth-mother female figures - one is quite literally made of mud .

Gayford, who is equally deeply immersed in decades of careful looking, talks more theoretically perhaps about "shaping the raw materials of the world to give them a human significance".

If this makes us fear a vague, wishy-washy grasp on the general beauty of the subject, you can kick that idea into touch. Both these writers have spent a long lifetime looking, intently and analytically, at what they are talking about. Yes, some of it is on the vague side - "James Turrell presents us with light as an experience" - but there's a vast range of concrete, learned, fascinating knowledge here too - about how Romans could be "present at their own funerals", because of their habit of making life-casts of their faces, or more grisly details than you wanted to know about how the 18th-century anatomists skinned their cadaver models, or Aztec gods, or the carvings of Giambologna, or Louise Bourgeois, or Marc Quinn's head formed of his own blood - or the Statue of Liberty.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the book, and the aspect that most stretches our view of ,what "sculpture" is, comes in the chapter called "Actions and Events". After so many excursions in the preceding pages into the relationship between sculpture and the human form, it's not so hard to accept the argument that living, moving bodies can be

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enfolded into the wider category of sculpture. Dance, ritual, performance - all forms of non-verbal communication that lie at sculpture's heart. A Holy Week procession in Salamanca, with those terrifying white pointed hoods; a 19th-century ritual mask used in dances in Cote d'Ivoire; a photograph of a performance by Joseph Beuys in 1974 (or the same artist explaining things to a dead hare in 1965); Richard Long's "A Line Made by Walking" - plus Gormley's own body being cast for one of his sculptures - all these, and more, enter the argument.

This long and detailed chapter is possibly the highlight of the book, giving as it does both the most fuel for thought and discussion, and the most opportunity for scepticism. The final chapter, "Shaping a Changing World", is once again a mind-bender, moving from anthropological adventures deep in the Amazon to the Forbidden City in Beijing, from temple carvings in Tamil Nadu to Rodchenko's "Spatial Constructions" in 1920s Soviet Russia. Follow it if you will. You won't be disappointed.

'Shaping the World: Sculpture from Prehistory to Now' is published by Thames & Hudson (£40)