

SEANKELLY

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Antony Gormley: 'I am beginning to learn how to make sculpture'

For his latest series, Antony Gormley has installed an iron man at each point of the compass in the UK. When Hannah Ellis-Petersen joined the artist for a whirlwind tour of his work on Lundy, she wasn't expecting to build fires, break chocolate and contemplate humanity from a deckchair in a howling gale



Points west ... Antony Gormley's Land figure gazes out from Lundy Island. Photograph: Antony Gormley

Standing on a granite precipice, with the churning Bristol Channel stretching out endlessly before him, Antony Gormley throws his arms wide. "Isn't it utterly magical?" he roars into a gale force wind so strong it almost knocks the breath from you. "You feel like all the silliness of the world has just been blown out of you." Laughing, I follow his lead and throw out my limbs, letting my body be battered by the elements. But Gormley is already off, bounding with admirable agility down the treacherous path to get a better view of the nesting birds below us.

We have only been together on Lundy, the tiny former Norse settlement 12 miles off the coast of Devon, for less than an hour but one thing has become apparent. While Gormley's sculptures have, for almost four decades, been firmly rooted in the physicality of the human body, he finds the natural world in its raw, untameable form just as intoxicating. He grabs armfuls of the white granite pebbles at our feet, marvelling at their milky colour; runs his hands over the rough lichen coating the rocks; and delightedly walks me over to a drystone wall where ancient ivy had grown into strange pointed shapes "like penises blowing in the wind". Later, in the evening, he insists we collect wood to build a fire, and takes to breaking fallen branches with the enthusiasm of a huntsman.

I haven't just come to this stark granite outpost to admire the view, though. The three-mile-long island recently became home to a work from the sculptor's latest series, Land. A modernist figure, of human height and made from stacked cubes of weathered iron, the piece was installed right on the edge of the island, peering westwards over Lundy's dramatic natural landmark, Devil's Limekiln. The sculpture is one of five body forms that Gormley has erected across the UK to mark the 50th anniversary of the Landmark Trust, which rescues buildings of historical merit and repurposes them by renting them out. As well as the west-facing figure on Lundy, Gormley has crafted a bodily sculpture to stand on three other isolated coastal spots: Saddell Beach on the Mull of Kintyre (facing east), Clavell Tower on Dorset's Jurassic Coast (facing south) and the Martello Tower in Aldeburgh (facing north).

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-Antony Gormley

They are, he says, places "potent" for contemplation, where the sculptures and any visitors stand fully exposed to the natural elements and the expansive horizon. One final sculpture will be placed inland, looking down into the canal lock at Lengthsman's cottage in Warwickshire, a nod to the exploitation of nature for industrial means. "In many senses, I want these sculptures to be markers, 21st-century standing stones," says Gormley. "Rather than being representative or narrative, I just want them to be catalysts for retrospection."

Indeed, as we first reach the figure on Lundy, Gormley insists we just sit on the clifftop in contemplative silence. With the distractions of phone and 3G signal a resolute 12 miles away, I oblige and together we perch at the feet of the sculpture, following its gaze westwards. For 10 minutes, neither of us exchanges a word.

It is only later, when we take shelter from the wind in the top of the island's old lighthouse and sit in two shabby deckchairs sharing a bar of chocolate and some mixed nuts, that Gormley elaborates on why he took on the project. "I just love the philosophy of the Landmark Trust, that idea that these rural and isolated places – that would otherwise have fallen into disuse – suddenly become imaginative spaces. You can come and live in a lighthouse like you've always wanted to. I'm interested in the future but I think the future is made by an engagement with what has been."

The relationship between past and present preoccupies these five Land sculptures: they're rooted in Britain's industrial heritage – yet also address the current restlessness of the human condition. He is vocal in his disdain for the "perfect and shiny" work of his contemporaries such as Jeff Koons, describing them as a "road to nowhere" as they are so distanced from real life.

"I am aware that many of the things I used to make this work are in peril," he says. "We have outsourced English language, we no longer build ships, we no longer build locomotives, we no longer believe we should be making things. I think it is a profound mistake that we have accepted this secondhand world. I'm shocked we have let our manufacturing industry decline to the level it has. I wonder what we lose when we no longer make things?"

Sculpture and the implicit silence of sculpture have, he says, a vital role to play in society today, where moments of uninterrupted self-reflection are rare, which is why he insisted on those 10 minutes of silence when I first encountered the statue. "The reason I was so keen we didn't fill the time and space with words was because I want this to be about experiencing something beyond that," he says. "With Land, I'm more interested in people just stumbling across these works and thinking, 'What the hell is this thing doing here?' This then leads to that reciprocal question, 'What am I doing here?'" He pauses. "We spend so much of the time on our smartphones, engaged in this easy communication which isn't really communication at all. Communication is touching and feeling and registering and I think that's what sculpture is good for." Laughing, he adds: "Sculpture is the absolute antithesis to a selfie."

Despite his aversion to such shallow distractions, Gormley has come to embrace technology in his creative process. While he still uses his own body as the basis of all his sculpture, instead of moulding himself through a laborious process of Vaseline, clingfilm and plaster as he has famously done throughout his career, he now uses an advanced 3D scanner to build the form. It has revolutionised his work, he says, allowing him more flexibility with how to pose his pieces.

It may be our arcadian backdrop, or the fact that he has just returned from installing a show in the idyllic 16th-century Forte di Belvedere in Florence, but for a man who has battled accusations of pandering to populism throughout his career, Gormley seems at 64 to have made his peace with his craft. “I am only beginning to recognise what sculpture can do and it is very humbling. When I see the reactions I have had from people on Lundy, having been here less than 24 hours, it is extraordinary. It proves you don’t need the gallery or the catalogue or the explanatory label. It’s simply about people looking at something and it changing the way they feel.”

Placing a last piece of chocolate in his mouth with a soft smile, Gormley says: “I think I am beginning to learn how to make sculpture.”



Antony Gormley. Photograph: Stephen White



The Land figure at Saddell Bay, Argyll and Bute. Photograph: Landmark Trust