

SEAN KELLY

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Antony Gormley in Florence: torment and triumph of the body



Figures from Antony Gormley's 'Critical Mass II' (1995) on the parade ground of the Forte di Belvedere, Florence

A metal figure lies face-down, bent at the waist in an impossible angle, half-balanced, half-falling down a flight of stone steps. It's a strangely upsetting sight.

At the foot of the stairs in an ancient subterranean archway, another figure crouches in a corner, lonely and apparently bereft. A third, glimpsed through an angled vista, stands in the same gawky right-angled bend, turned away from us, its head against the wall as if penitent, weeping, in despair.

These are just three of the 103 varied forms that make up *Human*, an ambitious exhibition by British sculptor Antony Gormley that has been running through the summer in the Forte di Belvedere in Florence. His forms are placed around and inside the great fort, which is perched on the heights of the Boboli Gardens, towering over the churches and monuments of the city below. This giant and gloomy structure, complete with its mighty walls and ramparts, is a dark reminder of the city's warrior past; built in the 16th century as a defence of the Medicis' riches and the city they created, it has a grand palace at its centre — a typically Tuscan marriage of luxury and brute force.

Such paradoxes provide a resonant backdrop for Gormley's work; the emotions raised by his sculptures can be just as contradictory. Within the stark empty rooms of the palace, the artist has placed small, spare, quasi-abstracted block works: figures huddled bleakly in a corner and lying along a skirting board, as if to suggest that there was never domestic happiness in this place.

In fact, there is precious little contentment, or even comfort, anywhere to be found in this disturbing, moving and brilliantly made exhibition. If one essential theme of Gormley's project as an artist is to explore what it is actually like to live in a body — the troublesome, vulnerable carapace we are forced to inhabit — and by extension what happens to that body in the space surrounding it, then *Human* is a show that vividly explains and extends those thoughts. Even though we have seen some of these pieces before, their relocation to this remarkable setting lends new layers of meaning, fresh echoes.

Here are figures that seem hollow, desolate and empty as shells on a beach, their awkward physicality like the remnants of a hopeless burden yet bearing the ghost of the powerful human feeling that may have departed. Positioned as if they have been tossed aside like the toys of some bored and petulant giant, they elicit a strange pity.

Others are quite different in feeling and impact. In “Critical Mass II” (1995), a line of life-size figures marches diagonally across the parade ground, a sort of “Ascent of Man” beginning with a foetal curl, then a crouch, then a squat, rising to a sit, then on to a semi-upright — culminating in a triumphant stance at the point of the ramparts, full face to the great city below. The piece seems to celebrate the way the human spirit can come to dominate the frailties of its covering body, as well as commanding the space in which it stands. It takes on the world.

Appropriately, three of these small pieces nestle in the grass at the back of the fort, where the view is of rolling hills and the manicured landscape suggests settled bucolic peace, in contrast with the city view at the other side.

It is said that the fort is joined to the city by underground tunnels and passages. Even if such secrets are only hinted at by mysterious arches and entrances, the labyrinthine structure adds to the pleasures of wandering around the huge site, discovering works half-hidden or around corners, suddenly visible in the distance or up close in a narrow passageway, each one creating a mood-world of its own.

This is a brilliant and complex exhibition. It is spectacular yet full of clandestine moments; bold yet intimate; endlessly provoking of contradictory and dark thoughts under a bright blue sky. Its location makes for an unequivocal confrontation — a sort of battle of the titans between a contemporary artist and the great Renaissance project displayed in all its glory below. The city of Florence — home, after all, to Michelangelo’s “David” — is probably the most significant in the whole history of western sculpture, as well as being a cradle of humanist thinking; it surely presents an artist of today with the ultimate challenge. *Human* is not only Gormley’s eloquent response to this challenge but also a rich and worthy contribution to the narrative of western sculpture.