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Sir Antony Gormley: the art world's favourite supermodel

Sir Antony Gormley is famous for using his own body as the basis for his sculptures. So why has he decided to stop casting himself?



Antony Gormley photographed at his studio in King's Cross, London
ROBERT WILSON

Only an older sibling would dare tickle so close to the bone. Sir Brendan Gormley, the former chief executive of the Disasters Emergency Committee, once joked that the "family line" on his brother, the famous, and famously articulate, sculptor Antony, was that he was a "better bullshitter than he is an artist". Now, as Sir Antony Gormley and I begin talking, I think Brendan could not be more wrong: wrong in his assessment of his brother's art, and wrong about his eloquence.

Escorted by an assistant around his white workshop north of King's Cross in London, I see Gormley's genius in every corner. The artist's body, so often in the past represented by sculptures matching their creator's exact dimensions, may now be discerned in a few Picasso-like rods, strings of metal globules that could be chains of DNA, figures that remind you of precarious Jenga towers, giant Giacomettis. I stand before a poleaxed man and feel his agony. He is part of a series called Gut.

Yet now, upstairs in his private studio, having performed his own little tea ceremony for me with a tiny teapot and teeny cups, he is talking to me about his new exhibition. Called Subject, it opens shortly at Kettle's Yard gallery in Cambridge. The problem is I don't understand a word of what he is saying. The first exhibit, a new one, Co-ordinate IV, seems to consist of three taut steel lines, two horizontal, one vertical. In the gallery next to it, Edge III (2012) is a solid iron body, standing bed-high on the wall at 90 degrees. (Imagine Donald O'Connor halfway up the wall in *Singin' in the Rain*, but not making us laugh.)

"The question I'm asking is, 'Bodies occupy space, but do they also contain space?' And what is sculpture's potential for activating space internal and external? So, you could say Co-ordinate suggests

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that somehow the conditions of mean or measurement are ... Well, they are capable of carrying on infinitely.”

Immanuel Kant comes into this debate pretty soon after.

Fortunately, Gormley does not go on like this for much longer and when we zoom out to consider bigger questions, clarity and candour creep in and, finally, rule. Fortunately, too, most of us do not connect with his work through our intellects. I would say his figures remind us of our physicality and provoke a certain melancholy in the thought that they, inanimate and silent, will endure after we are rendered permanently inanimate and silent.



Sleeping Field (2015-2016) at the White Cube gallery in London
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Some want to mess with them. His Angel of the North was accessorised with the Newcastle United shirt of Geordie footballer Alan Shearer. For a while, some of the 100 cast-iron figures wading the waters off Crosby beach in Merseyside were cheered up with bikinis and hard hats. Last year, when Gormley set up Lost Horizon II (2017), a forest of 5,000 silk lines, in a Tuscan gallery, the locals walking through indulged in what one journalist called “horizontal bungee jumping”.

So when he says that Co-ordinate IV does not so much measure the space as “tune” it, I wonder if people will take that as an invitation.

“Well, I imagine that some people may want to twang it,” he admits.

They tend to do things like that with his work, don’t they?

“They do. It’s absolutely true that people do like to interact, and I want them to interact. I’m not sure that it’s necessary to touch them, particularly.”

The question asked by this exhibition, he explains (more comprehensibly now that I have deflated him a little), is what the subject of art actually is. “And I’m suggesting that the subject is actually you and your experience as a viewer.”

I am encouraged by this, encouraged to ask what all his art has been about over the past 40 years. It is easy to fathom what is not its subject. “It’s not about telling stories. It’s not about heroism or sexuality” – by which he means, in this context, his being a man. He has always insisted he regards his body as a “found object”. Twelve years ago, when we last met and when the charge of phallogocentricity was hanging around, he explained plaintively, “It wasn’t my idea to be born with a penis.”

Nor is art about jokes. At 67, he is only some 15 years older than the ageing generation of Young British Artists such as Damien Hirst, but he has almost nothing in common with their irreverence, their insistence, with Marcel Duchamp, that art can be funny.

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“You could say that a lot of the motivations in modernism were to strip aside pretensions about profoundness, and I think that was very necessary and very healthy. It doesn’t mean it necessarily has to go on for ever. I mean, I was always really upset that when I went to Germany and all of the big collections, whether it’s the Ludwig [in Cologne] or the Hamburger Bahnhof or Haus der Kunst in Munich, somehow had to contain pop art.”

Nor, even superficially, is his only subject the human form, although his wife, the painter Vicken Parsons, whom he met studying at the Slade, must have encased his body in clingfilm and plaster to make the moulds hundreds of times. He points out that another tradition in his work concerns the space. As early as 1981 he made Room, an enclosure at the Whitechapel Gallery that used strips of his clothing – socks, underpants, shirt, everything – to define an area. Ten years on there was Host, a room filled with mud and seawater from Charleston harbour in South Carolina.

Yet it is the notion of the space within our physiques that inspires his best or best-known work, the idea that we are all trapped in our own bodies – although he would dispute the “our” and “own” there.

“When you say, ‘my body’, I don’t possess this body. It has its own agenda. It exists in time. It is subject to entropy. It gets happy. It gets sad. It gets sick. It gets healthy. It gets fit. It gets weak.”

An appreciation of all this came to him very early. Born into a well-to-do family in Hampstead Garden Suburb, the youngest of seven children of a devout Catholic businessman and his German physiotherapist wife, he had a disciplined childhood. Aged seven or eight, every afternoon he was made to take an hour’s “enforced rest”. He was not tired, he was often stiflingly hot, but he endured his confinement by tricking his mind into thinking he had escaped it.

“I think that it’s a good idea to encourage people to be aware of the space within themselves. In other words, just ask that question: ‘Close your eyes. Now, where are you?’ You’re in a space that has no objects, that is without dimension, that is dark but also free, open, ever extensive. The enforced rest was my threshold to that.”

Was he not claustrophobic?



Field for the British Isles (1993),
for which Gormley won the
Turner prize in 1994
TIMES NEWSPAPERS LTD

“I was very, very claustrophobic as a child. I’ve just come back from riding in the Tibetan grasslands of Sichuan, and we were up at about 4,500 metres and I was in a polar sleeping bag where you literally are like a mummy because it’s quite cold outside. You’re on the ground. It’s snowing. And I got really terrible claustrophobia. I had to tear it off and unzip the tent and just say, ‘Calm down. Calm down. Calm down. It’s going to be all right. Don’t worry.’ I hadn’t had that for years and years.”

But what an extraordinary thing for a claustrophobic to do – spend so much time encased in plaster!

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“But that was my challenge to myself. I can remember the two things at school [as a boarder at Ampleforth College in Yorkshire] that I had to do to get over my claustrophobia. One was my homemade kind of anti-claustrophobia, which was going into my bed the wrong way around. So, you know, tight, hospital-cornered dormitory bed, winter time, slightly damp and fighting my way to the other end and feeling this very enclosed tight little space. And then, the other thing, going caving, which we were offered at school.”

He compares the caving expeditions to the manhood initiation rites of the indigenous Warlpiri people of Australia. This gives you an instance of how he thinks, which is not the way most of us do. He is, crucially, body-obsessed, but not in the way our culture is. His sculptures are not in the least comparable to, say, Andy Warhol's repeated self-portraits or Tracey Emin's autobiographical bed, let alone the rest of the world's selfies.

“I just go on and on about this, that what we look like belongs to the world. The accidents of our journey through life and our inherited DNA have given us the body that we've got, but actually that belongs to the world. We live on the other side of appearance.”

Gormley is dressed in blue chinos, a white T-shirt and navy sweater. “I try to be as practical and as straightforward as I can, so most of my clothes come from Gap. The T-shirt is Gap; trousers are Gap. Socks are wool because they're comfortable and they have no elastic. I hate elasticated socks. Shoes are Scarpa. I've never worn anything else for the past 10, 15 years.”

He is a tall man – 6ft 3in – but unstooped, in good trim, no one's idea of an OAP. His short black hair, with its occasional flecks of white, adds weight to the exculpation that he is an ascetic rather than a narcissist. His life, he says, has been all about his work.

And his wife and three children, I prompt.

“Oh, yes, sure. I mean, the work has always been the prime drive, but along the way, what extraordinary things happened! You know, falling in love with Vicken. She's been absolutely extraordinary. I couldn't have done what I have done without her. I mean, really, you know, what an amazing artist, what an amazing woman, what an amazing mother, what an amazing partner!”

But where is that love, any love, in his work?

“Yes. That's a good question. I think it's interesting. Where is the joy in the work? I think that I love what I do. I love this tribe of creative people that I interact with every day, the life of the studio. I think there's a love of materials. I love all the earthy materials. I love the iron and I love that I've done so much in stone and these, you could say, ordinary everyday materials, glass, concrete or iron. But the question about where joy, love and celebration come in is, I think, really, really important. I suppose I'm frightened of complacency and I'm frightened of, in a sense, feeling somehow satisfied.”

I suggest Field for the British Isles (1993), that expanse of little figures that won him the Turner prize in 1994, is affectionate. The viewer feels well disposed to the Gorms.

“Well, it's interesting, isn't it? The question that I think Buddhism poses is, is it possible to have love without a specific object? In other words, can you feel wellbeing to all beings?”

The only direct sex to be read into his work, I say, is from those casts that feature his erections (that and a few works on paper stained with his semen, which we shall tactfully pass over). He counts the stand-up guys.

“Peer, Meter, As Above So Below. What's the fourth one?”

Maybe there are just three.

“Oh no, no, no, there's Over the Earth, which is the one that balances on its penis. You know that one?”

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Yes, I say.

“I’m very proud of that. Very proud of that.”

He is different though, isn’t he, from Picasso, who as the current exhibition at the Tate attests, could pour his erotic love for a woman into more than 100 works?



Angel of the North (1998), Gateshead
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“They,” he counters, “are about possession as much as love and I’m not convinced that I would want to use Picasso as my exemplar. I think there are a lot of artists in art history who have, in a sense, used and abused their relationships. There’s a very parasitic relationship between artist and model that I find very problematic. In Rodin I find it problematic. In Lucian Freud I find it problematic. In Picasso. This sounds like a moral position, which we’re not allowed to have.”

Has he ever made a cast of his wife?

“Yes, I did once, but only once. She was pregnant. It was a necessary experiment, but it wasn’t to be repeated and it didn’t become a work.”

Does it still exist?

“No.”

Did he destroy it?

“Yes.”

Why?

“Just because it proved to me what I didn’t need to do. I think that, you know, the basic truth-claim of the work – if that isn’t putting it too haughtily – is that this is an indexical trace. In other words, it’s evidence of a lived moment of human time that is of its nature highly subjective.”

He loses me for a few sentences, but ends strongly.

“And I think that there’s a question also about using. I don’t want to steal other people’s bodies.”

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He stopped making physical casts of himself around 2012. My thought about this is that there may have been medical reasons. He suffered a collapsed lung from too many encasings, and lead poisoning from the process of creating his early lead body cases. Today he tells me that surgeons have remade his feet. He lifts his left boot to show me.

“They fused the three bones in the arch of my foot together, drilled a hole through the middle, put all my little toe tendons through that and sewed it on to the bottom of my foot, cut my heel off and moved it outboard, no, inboard, by 15mm and then screwed it back in.”

An accident in the foundry?

“No. I just had flat feet and it got worse and worse until the whole foot was what they call pronating.”

The reason he gave up casting himself was technological. Scanning his body electronically was simpler and less messy. Nevertheless, he cannot avoid the fact that his body, his found object, is ageing. Perhaps I am merely illustrating what he says about art being what the spectator brings to the party, but I mention that as I look at his newer work I increasingly see as many corpses as bodies. The 700 charcoal grey blocks in *Sleeping Field*, shown at the White Cube gallery in 2016, could be a cemetery.

“I’m very aware that I’ve got less life to live than I have already lived, so I’ve got to spend my time carefully.”

And is that in the work?

“I don’t know. I think the work has always been solemn, for better or worse. I think the issue of mortality has always been in the work.”

“I think,” he adds later, apropos those four erections, “I’m less interested in sex than I am in death, probably.”



Over the Earth (1987), at
White Cube
REX SHUTTERSTOCK

It is not as if Gormley is actually an unworldly man, still less the Buddhist monk he once contemplated becoming before art drew him back from his travels in India. His work, he says, is about physics, not spirituality. He talks about high energy fields, not souls. He is also an establishment figure, an OBE, a Royal Academician, an honorary fellow of the RBA. He is a member of the Arts Council, a former trustee of the British Museum and was knighted in 2014. He likes the company of artists, although he and his rival Sir Anish Kapoor, the sculptor whose work is as shiny and reflective as Gormley’s is matt and gnarled, no longer talk. Why not? “Because he lives on a different level.”

We can assume he is well off, too. He owns a second artistic base in Hexham, Northumberland, and in 2010 bought an 18th-century mansion in Norfolk for £3 million.

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“Yeah. Bloody hell, a mansion in Norfolk! I mean, you know, that’s not a bed of roses. Nobody did it to me. I did it to myself and I just thought it would be useful to have a place that wasn’t in town, where you could make art under different circumstances. And we never intended to buy a bloody great pile. It’s a beautiful place.”

Why is it not a bed of roses then?

“Well, because it was a bloody nightmare! We’re still doing it, but it’s been seven and a half years so far, putting the place to rights and turning it from this kind of grand home into being somewhere that is really useful, where you can work.”

Does worldly success mean much to him?

“I don’t know what success means. I mean, it’s all so extraordinarily provisional, isn’t it? I think if my work does what I would hope it can do, which is make people feel more alive, or sense their own being more intensely, then I think that’s a success. I don’t know about any other sort of success.”

And then, when I ask him about the sidelining of creative art in our secondary schools, which angers and depresses him, he returns to the title of the show, *Subject*.

“If you expose a child to art and say, ‘What’s this making you feel as you sit here in front of these waterlilies by Monet? Just talk to me about what you see,’ they’ll start saying, ‘Well, I see purple and I see green.’ ‘Well, what are they doing to each other?’ ‘Well, they’re kind of fizzing one off the other ...’



With his wife, the artist Vicki Parsons
GETTY IMAGES

“You realise that actually the child, or anyone, has gone on a journey of discovery. They have discovered, in exactly the same way as climbing up Helvellyn or canoeing down the Wye, an adventure. You discover things. If you’re given the encouragement to look and to engage with that looking, you will discover things for yourself that maybe the artist didn’t even know was there.

“I think that idea, that the subject of art is not in the art, it’s in the person who looks, is intrinsic to this show, but it is also why art is so important as a liberating agency.”

Maybe I have had too much Tibetan tea, but Sir Antony Gormley no longer sounds vague or abstruse or pretentious to me. It sounds not like BS, but as if he has delivered an aria.

Antony Gormley: Subject is at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge, from May 22 to August 27