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Artist Antony Gormley turns mud into glorious work



The artist Antony Gormley's installation will feature a mix of Atlantic sea water and red Buckinghamshire clay

The Royal Academy of Arts is putting on an exhibition this month that will be fit for a hippopotamus — a room will be flooded with mud.

Visitors to the gallery in Mayfair, central London, are more used to wallowing in art than a mixture of clay and water, but the artist Antony Gormley wants to bring the outside inside during his first solo exhibition at the Royal Academy (RA).

One of the pieces will see the gallery's famous Lecture Room filled with "25 cubic metres of Atlantic sea water mixed with 25 cubic metres of Buckinghamshire" to a depth of 9in.

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Gormley's team spent months researching the colour and quality of different clays until they found their favourite version in the Buckinghamshire town of Bellingdon. It has already been quarried in time for the show.

"It was particularly the red colour and the fact that this clay was unprocessed that was the deciding factor," according to the RA.

Gormley fans will be familiar with the muddy ponds that he has created in America, China and Germany, but it will be the first time he has attempted such a piece in the UK.

"With a vast expanse of sea water and clay, evoking the depths from which life emerged, it offers a confrontation with elemental substance, an experience that changes as the hours of autumn daylight diminish," Gormley said.

Asked why he had chosen sea water from the Atlantic, the gallery said that he had a "preference for the Atlantic because it is a greater expanse of ocean, more wild and pure".

The artwork, titled Host, is so vast that the RA had to ask structural engineers to assess the total weight of the work and whether the Lecture Room could hold it.

The installation, which is on display until December, is essentially a stagnant pond and gallery staff will keep a close eye on any bacteria.

"There may be some organic matter in the water," the RA warned.

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