THOMAS MCEVILLEY - SEEDS OF THE FUTURE: THE ART OF ANTONY GORMLEY

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Antony Gormley's works reflect and embody a tragic paradox. The artist's response to questions of human survival and the meaning of life, they are both passionate and reticent. As with the poetry of Sophocles, currents of tumultuous feeling swirl beneath a serene and composed surface, reflecting a duality inherent in the human condition. Underneath the cold surface of lead is the heat of a human body threatened with immolation: faced with this conflict, the work attempts to mediate between oceanic feeling and finite form. The life-size lead figures for which Gormley is primarily known float on that ocean with a hopefulness that belies their impending mortality. The work posits the reality of a kind of universal soul which can be encountered only through the body; while it transcends and survives the body, it is still somehow dependent upon it for self-realization. It is this that is threatened in the tidal sense of historical endgame that has engulfed human destiny in this century, and that is the underlying subject of Gormley's work.

In Field, the centerpiece of the present exhibition, 35,000 small terracotta figurines, roughly hand-modelled and baked in a brick kiln in Mexico, totally occupy an exhibition space, leaving no room for the viewer, who gazes at them from a doorway. Loosely composed like pebbles left by high tide on a beach - and, also like pebbles, each slightly different from all the others - the hand-sized figures gaze upward at the viewer in a way that is expectant rather than accusatory, as if awaiting some summons or announcement. Their eyes, black holes dug into the clay, are startlingly alive; staring upward, they stand out starkly against the terracotta. Their surfaces vary in darkness depending on how near to the fire each figure lay in the kiln. The resulting marks are parts of their identity, their skin roasted and darkened by the fire, while a luminescence retained from it glows as if from underneath. They are almost solarized, burned by passing through the sun and retaining something of its glow and heat. Yet they come from deep within the earth, from beneath the visible surface of things. On the one hand they derive in a continuous way from Gormley's earlier work, while on the other they represent a radical departure from it. One must return to the beginning to trace their path into being.

In his early twenties before he made art, Gormley lived three years in India, a formative experience for him. There he worked intensively with the vipassana meditation teacher Goenka, who is known for stressing the body as a channel for awareness. Vipassana is a type of meditation that emphasises what is called "bare attention," through a direct non-mediated attention to bodily states, perceptions, and feelings that progressively counteracts the acculturated impulse to contain them in conceptual categories. There is something ahistorical about it: bare attention to the present moment removes one from the sense of specific cultural conditions and replaces it with a timeless relationship with the immediate presence of the body and its function as the site for the flow of events. At the same time, it creates feelings of dematerialization, as the body's boundaries seem to open up or dissolve (a paradox which relates to ideas underlying Gormley's sculpture). Returning to England in the 70s, at a time when art and the discourse about art were highly focused on language, Gormley's meditation experience, along with his sense of the endangerment of the physical life and the oceanic soul on which it rests, led him to focus his art on the body.

Land, Sea and Air I, 1977-79, conveys a sense of global urgency and desperation in a small and reticent form that anticipates Field. Three mute and inexpressive-looking objects were made by wrapping lead sheets around an egg-shaped stone and filling the resulting hollow vessels with, respectively, the stone itself, water, and air. The egg-shaped packages, suggesting birth and growth, are protected caches of precious elements threatened by ecological and nuclear reduction. Within them are "sacramental" traces of the phenomenal world, removed from the perils of historical time and stored up as seeds with which to recreate nature in a post-nuclear future. Insulated by their leaden exterior, they appear inert, yet contain the stirrings of a future for which they represent a kind of prayer of hope. In their muteness is their eloquence, and in their immobility lies an urgency to act. The leaden membrane screens radiation, keeping the elements pure, as a ciborium protects the eucharists of the Catholic sacrament.

At the same time, the leaden surfaces suggest alchemy, the desire to transmute lead into gold, as do the three elements, which recall alchemy's emphasis on mercury, sulphur and salt. In alchemical theory a substance can be stripped of its qualities by a special burning, returned to featureless prime matter, then drawn out of prime matter again with other qualities - reborn, in effect, as a new substance. The process is analogous to art, in which one form of experience is transmuted into another. Land, Sea and Air I extends the analogy to include nuclear burnout: the nigredo, or blackening and cooking phase of the alchemical process, implies the nuclear burst; the putrefactio suggests the disintegration of a form of civilisation so it can re-arise in new form, and so on. The muteness and smallness of Gormley's sacramental seeds only emphasise their tragic implication. They are not yet burnt residues of a world once fresh, but they are prepared to become so. It is their mute immobility that speaks and reaches out to the viewer. The fourth traditional element, fire, the instrument of transformation, resides in the viewer's imagination, where the alchemy of transmuting old modes of consciousness into new ones can take place.

Though lead has become a significant art material in the last generation or so, no other artist has used it with such single-minded consistency as Gormley. For about fifteen years, it has been a kind of signature material for him. In the system of occult correspondences on which alchemical approaches to materials are based, lead connects with Saturn and melancholy; as it absorbs light, it is also associated with darkness - the darkness of potentiality, in which gold lies latent in lead; or of the body, in which the spirit lies latent in the flesh; or of history, in which the future lies hidden as a seed within the present.

Fruits of the Earth, 1978-79, again presents three small lead-wrapped objects that, in this case, look vaguely like vegetation or fruits. At the same time, even more vaguely, they seem to present themselves as cultural objects. They hover ambiguously at the edge between culture and nature, which is again that perilous edge where the product threatens to destroy the matrix that produced it. Inside the lead wrappings are a bottle, a machete, and a pistol, each wrapped several times with lead sheets, the objects just verging on becoming unrecognisable. As in Land, Sea and Air I the wrapped objects begin to lose their personal identities and become like one another. Here it is cultural identities that are lost and the process of becoming parts of nature that melts them down. The human passions for pleasure and destructiveness both threaten nature and are threatened in turn by reabsorption into it. Land, Sea and Air I and Fruits of the Earth both examine the unsteady relationship between culture and nature. In the first, nature - like the figures of Field - hopes to survive the threat of civilization; in the second, nature receives matter back into its unifying matrix after the brief imprint of culture has passed.

Three Bodies, 1981, again shows three lead-wrapped forms, this time considerably larger; from outside they appear to be sculptural representations of a shark, a pumpkin, and a boulder, implicitly dividing the continuum of material forms into animal, vegetable, and mineral. But these leaden forms

are filled with soil; their inner natures are revealed as identical, or as identically founded upon the nourishing matrix of the earth. Earth appears as a kind of prime matter that assumed these various forms outwardly while retaining its inner identity as a loam of potentiality (that loam from which, later, Field would emerge). The secret nature within the different forms implies that a principle of unity underlies things more strongly than the principle of diversity that parades itself on their surfaces.

In these early works nature is seen as a substratum on which culture depends and feeds. Out of prime matter, by a process of nourishment and growth, the life-forms develop. Into prime matter they will return. Meanwhile they are poised perilously on an ontological edge in which not only their identities but the natural substratum on which they subsist are threatened with annihilation.

In 1981 Gormley began making, from plaster molds of his own body, hollow leaden figures which, strengthened with fiberglass, were wrapped with lead which was hammered with a wooden mallet and joined with a grid of soldered seams. The use of his own body was a performative element of the work, and the lengthy and dramatic process of wrapping the body recalls mummification, the process intended in Ancient Egypt to maintain the integrity of the body as the site of the spirit. In the finished, lead-wrapped stage of the works, which are left hollow (or air-filled), the artist seems to have expired into the ambiguous emptiness, an emptiness that can be seen either as a sign of the spirit's triumphant escape or the tragic residue of a failed humanity. The tragic sense in Gormley's work is underlined by the dual nature of the figure's emptiness - it is both a container or vessel of spirit and an empty husk. There is a suggestion here of the ancient Orphic idea of soma-sema, according to which the body is the tomb or prison of the spirit, which is located in yet destined to escape or transcend it. The heaviness of lead emphasizes the body as a gravitational tomb, while at the same time its alchemical associations affirm the latency of spiritual realization within the leaden weight of the flesh. But in the vipassana tradition, spirit is approached by way of the body; its desire to escape from or transcend the body necessitates the ruin of its own instrument.

In working the lead around the plaster casts, Gormley erases details, joining the toes and fingers and smoothing off the facial features. The leaden men become universal figures of humanity, free from time, place, or other cultural attributes, and devoid of individual personalities. Their nakedness further removes them from culture and affirms their more fundamental placement in a nature which is, comparatively, timeless or ahistorical. It also (again anticipating Field) reduces them to childlike vulnerability. Deprived of both individual personality and cultural insignia, they too seem latent, representing a state both before personality has developed and after it has been erased; they have been called zombie-like, and compared to survivors of an apocalypse.

But the paradox of their dual nature does not allow these figures simply and unequivocally to affirm the universal. Despite their featurelessness, they are placed in a world through the gridlock of the soldered seams of the lead plates. Suggesting cartographers' lines, the grid locates the figures firmly within the web of causality, though the time and place of that location are left unspecified. The grid also calls forth the overlay of cultural methods of categorisation and analysis on the indefinite continuum of life forces. Here again is the tragic inner polarity. Universal in its life force and its hope for the future, the figure is bound finitely to a perilous conditionality which can destroy its universality along with its body.

In a stillness that reflects meditational experience, the figures sit, stand, crouch, lie down, bend over, walk. Yet in the midst of these real life functions they bear various stamps of an Orphic or metaphysical otherness. Some (for example, Three Ways, 1981) are pierced with holes at their highest points, escape openings for an upward flow of energy that is impelled to leave the body behind by a destructive transcendence. One (As Above, So Below, 1988) is spread-eagled as in the astronomical mandalas of the Renaissance, crucified, as it were, on the intersection of the universal and particular, as he floats upside down above the floor.

In other cases the arrangement of figures, or their placement in natural locations, involve theatrical implications portending the apocalypse as a theater of black burning loneliness. In one classic photograph the three figures of Land, Sea and Air II, 1982, stand, lie or crouch on the beach of the ocean like last lonely remnants of a dream of human life that the tide of a cyclical destruction is about to erase. They seem engrossed in bare attention to what is happening, or about to happen, to them, offering their awareness as the only power they have in the face of an overwhelming desolation and abandonment.

For Gormley (as for some other recent artists) art in general and sculpture in particular - with its special claim to non-illusionistic reality - is potentially an evolutionary tool, reflecting the Jungian (and Teilhardian) model of evolution as a process that moves from matter to mind. By the mid-1980s, Gormley began to focus on the idea of a mind-generated rebirth and this motif, in turn, led to a second essential material, terracotta, which has since gradually taken over, displacing the less organic lead. With connotations of prime matter or primeval mud, terracotta recalls the potter's clay out of which, in an ancient theological metaphor, the creating deity fashioned the first beings. A motif repeated in a number of works is the emergence of a smaller figure or object from a larger one, usually from the head, as in The Beginning, the Middle, the End, Out of this World, 1983-84, and Idea, 1985. The small emerging figure, of terracotta, seems a metal excrescence or dream creation of the larger lead figure. It is the dream of the future about to emerge from the fact of the present.

Field represents a radical change in Gormley's work, in its reduction in scale of the figures, elimination of the artist's body from the process and with it the element of lead, and vast proliferation in number of figures. The terracotta figurines, seemingly connected with the primacy of consciousness and hence associated with a hopeful prognostication of the future, represent a new era of feeling. The half-formed tiny beings never challenge the legitimacy of the leaden giants they are replacing, but offer themselves to the world with a greater intimacy and warmth. Field is a place of feeling, a place for the feeling of the future.

The installation has occurred in four versions from 1989 - 1991, the number of terracotta figures dramatically increasing from 150 in the first version to 35,000 in the present one. In each case the earlier lead figures are tacitly replaced by the consciousness of the viewer. Excluded from their space and their company, the viewer is nevertheless summoned by them; they constitute a kind of seed-bed, or place of becoming, whose fulfilment is the responsibility of the viewer.

The present version of Field involved a collaboration that was a constituent element of the work - not merely of its physical presence but of its meaning: it arose through a collaborative engagement with Third World humanity, to whom the future, on current demographic projections, seem to belong. Gormley worked on the 35,000 terracotta figurines with the Texca family of bricklayers in Cholula, Mexico. Each small rudimentary figure, from 3 to 8 inches high, was handmade, sun-dried, then baked in a brick kiln. Gormley was intrigued by the fact that this family of artisans lives in rural Mexico, works out-of-doors in an agricultural manner and yet mass-produces a standardised urban product for the nearby metropolis of Mexico City. For the first time in a career that has involved various collaborations, Gormley turned the most intimate and meaningful parts of production into the hands of his collaborators. In previous versions he had insisted on making the head and eyes, the seats and expressions of consciousness, himself; in this case each artisan made his or her own figures completely. The work became a reservoir of feeling into which many related

personalities poured their vibrations through their hands. The subject, the material, and the process of production were thus interlinked in their human implications.

In the New York installation of 1991 at the Salvatore Ala Gallery, the viewer first encountered empty space. Then, after wandering quizzically through an empty room, found in the large room at the back the overwhelming mass of small figures, all gazing up through their hollow black eye-sockets and arrayed on the floor like an irregular tide. Like late Neolithic and early Bronze Age figurines from Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and elsewhere, they have an infantile innocence and vulnerability in their rudimentary, barely formed bodies. Seemingly awaiting some call, they mass in intense upward gazing, as if pleading for honorable survival. Facing them, the viewer may become aware of the oblivion of a future, which will arise from his or her body yet replace it; and at the same time recognise his or her responsibility toward the future, which will inhabit the world that the humanity of the present makes for it. Their look of mute expectation and restrained beseeching reminds us of our role as custodians of the earth and preparators of its destiny.