

ANTONY GORMLEY

ADRIAN SEARLE - FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES

Pamphlet: FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES, Hayward Gallery, London, UK, 1996

Antony Gormley's FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES is a startling and arresting sight: thousands of unglazed, fired, small clay figures, standing closely together, all staring towards the viewer and filling a large enclosed space. There are more figures than can be counted, more still disappearing out of sight into a further space. Their number seems to be endless.

Antony Gormley is best known as a sculptor who uses his body as a template for single works and small groups of life-sized figures. These sculptures - originally plaster moulds re-enforced with fibreglass and covered with beaten lead skins, and more recently, cast solid in iron have dealt not with human expression of narrative, but with the junction between the interior and exterior of the human form. Gormley is interested, he has said, in the human body as both a thing and a place. He regards his lead sculptures as cases, hollow containers for the space a human body occupies. His iron sculptures are displacements of human volume and mass.

The several versions of FIELD mark both a departure from Gormley's habitual working practice, and a different way of looking at human presence. FIELD's figures have been made, in this instance, by a community of families, in Humberside, under Gormley's direction, using brick clay. Other versions of FIELD have been made by families of brickmakers in Mexico, by children in the Amazon basin, by students and families in Sweden. While the very first versions of FIELD displayed smaller numbers of figures in radiating circles, the Mexican version was the first in which the figures were arranged as a solid clustered mass all facing towards the spectator. The siting and arrangement of Gormley's other sculptures are always precise and dramatic in the way they articulate both themselves and the space, yet, FIELD simply fills the given space. 'FIELD is like a living organism,' Gormley has said, 'like water, it settles in place, it doesn't organise it.' But like all Gormley's work, FIELD deals with the world both as made up of things, of objects and bodies, and of space, physical space and the space of consciousness, the limitlessness of the human imagination.

Clustered so close together, entirely filling the bounded space beyond the viewer - a space we cannot enter, except by sight alone - the figures which make up FIELD FOR THE BRITISH ISLES present a singular image of humanity. We stand on the threshold of their territory: we cannot walk around or between them. They hold us at bay. And yet they are only little lumps of clay, shaped and misshaped by human hands, formed and smoothed by the most primal, fundamental means. Lumps of clay, dug from the earth, that have been grasped, squeezed, pinched, pummelled and rounded, clay that has been warmed by the hands that moulded it. Two small holes pushed deep into the clay form rudimentary, empty eyes, which look straight ahead, though some, which Gormley refers to as 'Stargazers', gaze upwards. These are placed in the front rows of FIELD as though to greet us as we approach. Some figures stand out, groups of four or five, of fifteen or twenty: a clump of taller ones, a ragged group whose colour is a little darker or greyer than the earthy terracotta red of the rest, giving the impression that these are standing in the drift of a passing cloud shadow, though they are all lit by the same flat light, and stand in a room rather than out of doors. The ceiling overhead is their only sky.

One loses oneself in the contemplation of FIELD as one does in Monet's pond, or in the expanse of colour in a monochrome painting, or in the vista of a landscape; the field become a world. FIELD is a desert seen from afar, an endless beach, a glimpse of how many of us there are. One is left with the sober thought that there are more people alive now than have ever lived in the past. The world's population doubles within the span of a single human lifetime. Gormley has said that one of the resonances of this work is that it is a reminder that there is only one humanity.

This close-packed crowd, a field, a sea, at one's feet, is a reminder that the world's entire population, could stand on the Isle of Wight, or on Zanzibar, shoulder to shoulder, if they were packed as closely as this. One thinks of huge outdoor rock concerts, sports events and of vast political rallies and demonstrations, or of refugees, of the unknowable, unpredictable, mentality of the crowd. Gormley has said that FIELD is an image of people yet to be born. We might also be reminded of the living dead, Midwich cuckoos, a bewitched, hypnotised horde of automata. Just as in Cold War sci-fi movies they might be coming to get us, given the chance. The viewer might think too of the thousands tightly packed in cattle trucks, herded towards their final destination.

The experience of FIELD is more than a little un-nerving. It is also captivating, mesmerising, an occasion, perhaps, even of wonder. It is a complex visual event, and it can invoke strong emotions and associations. One alternates between thinking of these figures, each so similar yet each entirely unique, made by ordinary people under the artist's instruction, as endearing, oddly misshaped beings, little Munchkins or golems for whom one feels a certain empathy. They can also provoke - with their concerted, mute, blank, gazes - feelings of violence. The work might be more powerful and more peculiar, than either the people who made field or the artist himself could have foreseen.

One of the unexpected aspects of the work is its capacity to make the viewer acutely aware of his or her apprehension of it. We become conscious of the activity of looking even as we look, and conscious too of various states of looking, of the pleasures (which are not entirely unmixed) of looking. Whereas staring at the field of figures in its entirety is as mesmerising and as consuming as looking at the sea - an image of endlessness, engaging us in the contemplation of a fragment of infinity, an ungraspable plenitude into which the viewer seems to dissolve - it can equally make us feel acutely self-conscious. One's sense of one's own body, and perhaps of one's identity, loses itself in what the mind is trying to comprehend; we become only an eye, reaching into the distance; but it is an eye whose gaze is returned, multiplied, reduplicated thousands of times. Who is beholding whom? The figures of FIELD gel into a single undifferentiated gaze (however an individual each figure might be), and, it turns out, the body the gaze is fixing on is the spectator's. We talk of devouring things with a look, of possessing with a glance, as though the very scrutiny of an object, a view, or of another person, somehow gives us possession of it. In Gormley's lead and iron sculptures, the faces are frequently blind, the eyes, so to speak, turned in on the hollow void within themselves, the implication being that the world, somehow, is not out there, but within us. FIELD appears to be contemplating us as much as we contemplate it.

Looking at art is never a passive act. It is we, the spectators, who must do the work of bringing these forms to life, and in doing so discover something about our own lives, our own space and place in the world. One wants to go down on one's knees - even to lie full stretched on the floor - and meet this mass of little clay people at their own level, to see them as though with the eyes of a child, or to see them with the eye of the ones who arranged them here; perhaps, even, to join with them, to see as they see, or so we imagine. The look they give us, after all, can only be one of blankness.

We give these rudimentary beings personalities where none exists. They have been shaped from the earth, from formless matter, the most base material, and fired in a kiln, baked hard. To imagine them as ourselves, as having personal histories and inner lives, emotional states, cares and desires, foibles and failings, is a fallacy, and it is entirely our own imaginations which are at work in the baked clay forms.

The cumulative presence of FIELD - 40,000 figures, 30 tonnes of clay, a space vast enough to hold them all - is a presence which both consumes and resists us. FIELD is not a didactic work, but one with multiple presences. Most importantly, the presence at the heart of the work is our own. This is its power and the reason why one would wish to return to it.

The work is a return both to old pleasures and old fears. Who has not stood and contemplated the sea with a sense of wonder, and who has not regarded the mass of a vast crowd of humankind without a certain fear? What both experiences have in common is that they question our place in the world. The question either affirms us and our place in the scheme of things, or denies us, because there is no scheme and because our history is a succession of violences and outrages. Antony Gormley's FIELD in its quiet way, dramatises the question.
