

ANTONY GORMLEY

ANTONY GORMLEY TALKING TO PAUL KOPECEK

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Paul Kopecek: Throughout your work evident presence of yourself has increased - you talk of the importance of putting more of yourself into your work...

Antony Gormley: I think that there has been a radical shift in the work, and I think it is for the better.

P.K.: Radical shift, i.e. the presence of the moulded figure?

A.G.: No, no it's more than that. That is the most literal aspect of it. It indicates a shift within my own self... I realise that work dealing only with objects is incapable of carrying the kind of feeling that I want. I am now trying to deal with what it feels like to be a human being. To make an image that in some way comes close to my states of mind. My body is my closest experience of matter and I use it both for convenience and precision. I can manipulate it both from within and from without. I want to recapture for sculpture an area of human experience which has been hidden for a while. It is to do with very simple things - what it feels like to look out and see, what it feels like to be cold or frightened, or what it feels like to be absolutely quiet and just be aware of the passage of air around your body...

I want to talk about the relationship between the space outside and the space inside the body - all you have to do is close your eyes and you are in a world which is infinite. As infinite as the sky. That is very exciting. The figure work is much more subjective, but I hope that that subjectivity can be experienced by everybody.

P.K.: One could suggest a more universal language is being spoken by the works that could be accommodated by any people of any generation or possibly of any time.

A.G.: Well I hope so. Every artist at some stage has the ambition to make a work that could be read for five thousand years. I have just bought a book of women poets and there is a poem by an Egyptian lady of 1500 BC and she is talking about how she feels about her lover. The delight in her love is as real today as it was on the day she wrote the poem. The extraordinary thing is on the one hand the consistency of human feeling and on the other hand the infinite variety of ways in which it is expressed. That's what interests me now.

P.K.: I think this is what attracted me to your work. The recognition that you were presenting a situation, by the use of the human figure, which demonstrated very powerfully the importance of the inner experience, an inner experience which has a dialogue with the outside world.

But that dialogue is a somewhat difficult one. In some cases the inner experience seems much stronger than the relationship to the outside world, to the space around.

A.G.: I have only just scratched the surface, I have an awful lot more to do. The works are very different and function in different ways - take for example LAND, SEA AND AIR II [1982-3] and a work I have just completed called BOX [1983]. LAND, SEA AND AIR II uses the body as an agency to experience the elements. So, for instance, the standing figure has its eyes open: holes that connect from the outside to the inner space. It is a vessel for an experience of the horizon. The other work which is called BOX was inspired by a figure in Blake's copperplates for Jerusalem. It is a hunched figure with its head between its knees; the body becomes like a capsule, it is very internalised - the attitude and feeling of the figure is inward turning - an external sign of a human being coming to terms with the void within.

P.K.: You have made reference to Egyptian poetry, to Blake and also to the recent sculptural context. Are you aware of your historical context?

A.G.: Yes. I think it is impossible to be an artist today and not be, but I think it can be very dangerous because immediate cultural references and certainly references to other forms of art rather than being the inspiration of new art can become the subject of the work - and a recondite language whereby the cognoscenti are made to feel that they are sharing a special experience, I am not interested in that. I am tired of art about art. I am trying to discover what art means for me. I look at all the art of the past and present: it can all inspire me but the challenge is to make something new that doesn't rely on its antecedents for its power. It has taken me a long time to rid myself of the dogmas of art history. I must use my heart as well as my head. It is important too that I enjoy what I do - there should be a celebration, which is also an exploration, a kind of journey, a risk taking. Art cannot be an exercise done at arm's length to a formula about what art is or what it should be, or even any idea about formal beauty. It is so straight forward, you have just got to make art new for yourself and in the process you discover yourself.

P.K.: Do you enjoy sculpture because of the tangible control you have over the materials?

A.G.: Using my hands has always been terribly important. When I was making more formally conceived work the ritualised aspect of making was part of the work. Maybe ritual is a silly word to use. The fact that I was touching those things and was always responsible for how thick or thin they were... For me the good thing about sculpture is that you are dealing with the palpable world, the world that surrounds you all the time. Everything has proportion, mass and volume. Like gravity, sculptural qualities are an intrinsic property of matter. What I am interested in is somehow unlocking those qualities so that they become active in a way that promotes vision. (That has recently meant using the body to deny the body.) Vision means vision inside and out: both for me and the spectator.

P.K.: So there is an opportunity for the spectator to develop experience through your work as a vehicle: does that explain why the figures are devoid of features and distinguishing characteristics?

A.G.: Yes. I don't want the work to distract by suggesting a likeness or giving form to features: I want to make you aware of the whole. I want the work to deny the particular in itself so that it can be supplied by anyone who is looking at it. I want the work to function as a vehicle. Sculpture, for me, uses physical means to talk about the spirit, weight to talk about weightlessness, light to refer to darkness - a visual means to refer to things which cannot be seen. The fact that the works are cases that enclose space is important. They start with matter and end up as space.

P.K.: That important factor is readily understood as soon as one comes into contact with your work. One is conscious of the space within. A space into which one can project oneself.

A.G.: Good. My work is silent. It is about states rather than actions. I hope that people will use its space for feeling.
