

ANTONY GORMLEY

SILENCE AND STILLNESS: ANTONY GORMLEY INTERVIEWED BY ENRIQUE JUNCOSA

From ANTONY GORMLEY, Antony Gormley interviewed by Enrique Juncosa, Lisa Jardine, Michael Tarantino, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 2002

Enrique Juncosa: One of the first things I found interesting about your work is how you are able to use the figure in a new way. It is not representational or expressionistic, but something else. Do you see yourself as part of a generation in relation to artists like Juan Munoz, Thomas Schütte, Katharina Fritsch or Stephan Balkenhol, or even painters like Luc Tuymans or Marlene Dumas? This is the generation of artists I wanted to group in LA REALITAT I EL DESIG (Reality and Desire), the show I organised for the Miró Foundation in Barcelona in 1999, where I included one of your works.

Antony Gormley: Well, I think we all were faced with the same legacy, the legacy of the seventies, with its conceptual rigour and minimalism. I think that each of us responded to this legacy in a different way. So far as I'm concerned, being interested in questions of identity (which I think are central not just for art but also for life), the body has to be there. But I'm interested in the body as a zone rather than an object, or as a process rather than a thing. I'm not so interested in the body as an image and that's what's at the root of the paradox in my work. What you see looks like a body but I'm interested in what lies at the other side of the skin.

EJ: It is clear to me that your sculpture is not about representation. One sees the body there, or images of things, like weapons, food or buildings, but there is no attempt to copy things from nature. Are your sculptures meant to be seen as archetypes?

AG: One recognises what is there because it has been isolated from what is not. But it's certainly not an attempt to make a likeness in the way that a Bernini portrait is a likeness. My project is more to do with enquiring into being - what does it mean to be in a human body? - than it is an attempt to make a statue.

I do not respond terribly well to this idea of archetype, or to that of the everyman, or to the idea of a generic figure. In other words, I'm not interested in the symbolic. I'm interested in art's ability to bear witness, and I start with what I know, the bit of the material world in which my consciousness is embedded: my body. And I try to present that bit of material (to myself as much as to anybody else) in a way in which its trace is registered. So my work always starts with the idea of a body at a particular moment in a particular position, fixed by a negative just like a photographic negative, except that this is a three-dimensional negative and we call it a mould. I still think of a mould as being the most magical and mysterious thing. The mould is a testament, a proof of the existence of an object or a body and, for my sculpture, the particular body that I inhabit. Now, the reason that I'm suspicious and slightly worried about symbol, archetype, Everyman - those three words - is that they all suggest that we can make a symbolic equivalent, and I am making a very specific case - a physical object that is like a box, but it is also a case as in an argument made with forensic evidence.

EJ: I actually prefer metaphor to symbol. I don't like a work of art that demands a unique reading. I prefer the potentiality of openness. In this way I found it very interesting how your works change within different spaces.

AG: Completely. They catalyse space and change according to where they are. Anyway, I love metaphor - I mean, I think I am sensitive to poetry, the way that metaphor works in poetry - but if we are trying to look for a linguistic equivalent of what I'm trying to do, analogue is better than metaphor and certainly better than symbol. I'm trying to - in a way this is the difference - I'm trying to represent something, take something that already exists and find a way of making open. And that doesn't mean to say I want to change it. I want to try to find a perfect parallel thing that allows you to re-see what you imagine you are seeing. You take something that already exists and you make it into a mental object. This is, in a way, the root of my project. How you make everything that we already know - the trees, the mountains, the fruit, the body - somehow into an object for the mind.

EJ: Do you often use lead because it helps to give this mental idea? In fact it unifies all images into some sort of sameness, besides suggesting weight, permanence, toxicity... I would say it suggests even neutrality.

AG: I like the neutrality because it's paradoxical. It can be very powerful. I don't know how it can be both neutral and powerful, but it is. I like the fact that it's toxic but it's also an insulator. So it's protective but it's poisonous. I like the fact that this is a base element. It has very strong associations with transformation but it's not just in a historical poetic analogy with alchemy. We know it from the nuclear age, we know it from visiting the doctor, having an X-ray. We know that this material has very specific properties, special properties that have to do with life in danger and I like this association. I also like the fact that it's an ordinary material used in buildings. I started to use it simply because it seemed to favour a statement about time: trying to engage with time. And yet it's very common. It's an everyday vernacular building material.

EJ: In any case, it gives the works a very strong, serious and timeless presence. I would say they have something that we can find in Buddhist art. They are also both futuristic and timeless.

AG: They deny their present-ness in order to make you have to work quite hard to think with them. They're all time capsules, all the lead are time capsules and they slow things right down. The two qualities of sculpture that are most important are silence and stillness, and lead gives that, so does iron. I moved from lead to iron. Iron works in a very different way. Lead really makes things quiet. It is the quietness of the tomb.

EJ: Tombs, paradoxically, deal with ideas of permanence.

AG: Well, one of the earliest works in the show, LAND SEA AND AIR I, is an entombment but is really an expression of fear. This is made at the time of "Protect and Survive". Did you have this in Spain?

EJ: What is that?

AG: This was a government handout at the time of the cold war where you were told how to make a nuclear shelter out of your kitchen table, or how to make a nuclear toilet which was an old chair with a bucket. And it told you all the things you should do in the event of a nuclear conflict. You had to put brown paper on all the windows! [1] Many of the lead works from the late seventies onwards had this idea of trying to protect in order to make

things survive: LAND, SEA AND AIR was these three elements protected from the nuclear holocaust. When there was nothing left that wasn't irradiated by fallout then there would be these three constituents of the world as we know it. Three basic elements out of which life can possibly come. It works as a relic but it is also the seeds of the future. This is the balance that the lead brings to you.

EJ: Some of your titles are very descriptive. This is not the case here though.

AG: Yes, it's true. They've become more poetic in the last works. ONE AND OTHER, TOGETHER AND APART, HERE AND HERE are more allusive. But then NATURAL SELECTION is very ironic. Often, I use words that are at once nouns, definite articles and transitive verbs so like PASS, HOLD OR CONCENTRATE. There are a lot of single word titles that function descriptively but they also have this idea of process involved. Titling is very important to me. I think the LAND, SEA AND AIR title is a real challenge. You see these three completely meaningless lumps of stuff, you know, which are dead, as you say, and dark and boring and you give it this title: this is the world! Here is the world in three lumps of poor stuff. (Laughter) So the challenge is to imagine them. The lead is the agency through which these sacramental bits of matter are released into imaginative space, which is of course the most important place for them to exist.

EJ: I think that the title makes it much better. You spent three years in India. Can you tell me anything about that trip?

AG: Well, I spent one year getting there and was away for three years altogether. Today it would not be possible, as I spent five months in Afghanistan... Anyway, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if I hadn't had this experience. In India there is an unbroken connection with history. They didn't have the Reformation; they didn't have a Revolution. In India there is an idea about continuity of values that is absolutely fantastic, very inspiring. I'm not interested in making cultural transitions or translations, like taking some formal influence. But I do like ideas of Buddhism in relation to reality and illusion. The idea that there is nothing permanent, the idea that real knowledge doesn't come out of books but comes out of being attentive, of being aware of being itself. This was a fantastic eye-opener for me. I think of my work as instrumental. My sculptures will be seen as very boring objects if you look at them in terms of Western art history, or a kind of desire to make beautiful objects or a "picture" of reality. But if you look at them as instruments then they can become vessels, empty things that can be used for a type of thinking or a kind of feeling, then they begin to get more interesting.

EJ: Do you think there are formal relationships between your work and Buddhist art?

AG: I am interested in some aspects of Jain sculpture. I remember the Dilwara temples in Mount Abu where you find 108 identical Tirtankhas all sitting at their Sadhana. This is a wonderful way of undermining the aura of the icon, the unique and special object that you might be encouraged to bow down to and worship. Once you have 108 you don't know which one you're going to concentrate on! (Laughter) I like this attitude and hope that is also in my work. There are formal influences also from Christian art, but it has been subverted. You can find, for example, a classic position of the mourner, like St John at the foot of the cross in a mediaeval cruxifixion, which is turned upside-down and it becomes a saltimbanque. The same piece, reoriented again, becomes like a funny kind of gym exercise. In Critical Mass I've taken these twelve body positions, some with the postures of spiritual exercise of Buddhism and Christianity, some maybe more to do with regression or aspiration, but the "traditional" iconographic readings have been voided by allowing the pieces to fall in any orientation and the body has been returned to a sort of primal state: a floating emotional subject. You can for example find a traditional Christian praying position turned on its back so that it becomes an arch of hysteria. In this exhibition we will have nine of these postures from the twelve, but in arrested fall, in suspension, in gravity, in the air.

EJ: You have said somewhere that your figures represent somehow the collective subjective. Could you explain this?

AG: The body is, in a way, the primary instrument through which we experience the world and through it we give whatever we have to express back. So the body is a subjective instrument but also an example of the collective human condition.

EJ: Your bodies are normally without movement...

AG: Yes, because I don't want narrative and I don't want you to expect it either because I'm interested in being, not in doing. I think actions are an escape from the question that's always there: "Who am I?" This terrible existential question that would be with us all the time if we didn't have things to do. I don't think art has to do with reproducing action, that's what happens on television. Just being is quite a lot to deal with anyway. I think that the whole trajectory in sculpture in the west was to do with finding a convincing way of making marble moments in a marble movie. This is a really bad idea because sculpture's greatest quality is that it is static. Frozen moments of dramatic action in the end look very silly. They don't really engage you at a very profound level. You might recognize the story and you might think that's very well achieved. You can maybe try to involve yourself with the emotion as you might watch a movie but you can't. The really extraordinary experiences that sculpture offers are all about time and duration. What is it like to be a rock? To be still? That's more of a challenge. It's more fruitful. Sculpture can re-orientate the mind-body relationship rather than being a distraction.

EJ: I think that the new works that you were showing me, like the QUANTUM CLOUDS, also have an oriental quality, being, in a way, images of static movement and radiance.

AG: This has to do with that old thing, the oceanic experience - this feeling of being at one with the pulse of things. And that's not about narrative. It's to do with duration. Bergson talks about the difference between time and duration. In some way we can identify and be with the arising of things which is a kind of imminence that has nothing to do with cause and effect. It isn't a narrative story. He did this and then that happened and then she got unhappy and he died. It's much more about recognising, I don't know, an energy that is vibrating in everything. This is India, meditation. You still the body and in the process of it being concentrated on, its edges begin to break down. You're no longer sure about where something that you call me, my, mine, I, starts and stops and you become aware that human consciousness can be dispersed and have no edge and be a kind of field awareness. That process interests me a lot.

EJ: I have also read somewhere that your series of INSIDERS were about pain.

AG: I didn't think: I'm going to make this sculpture about pain. But when I look at them I think of pain. Pain as the thing that constitutes personality more than anything else. The INSIDERS are both vulnerable, painfully diminished, but also like spears or sharp things that can hurt. The sculptures become an implication of that part of yourself that shrinks when attacked. Where does it go (AG draws breath, between his teeth) - when we have to pull back because we were frightened or we were attacked? That's what I found in this ready-made that is at the core of the body. When you look at the moulds that are at the origin of the INSIDERS you know it's a process of analysis that brings them to light. And you could say well this is arbitrary but it isn't arbitrary. Basically, we took the widest point, the narrowest point and a few points in between in anyone limb segment (so even the legs are

not identical in terms of how many cross sections there are), and then they were very carefully measured and condensed. So this was a body that passed through this absolute abstraction of mathematical determination and then passed out the other side. So, this is an analogue of the British public school system! (Lots of laughter from both) Oh dear! But it's also a "found object" - a fact.

EJ: Another of your subjects, connected with the body, is the house or the dwelling.

AG: Yes, ALLOTMENT II, for example, suggests that maybe life is to the body what the body is to architecture, so that architecture in some ways is a second container of life. Can we substitute the second body for the first? Each room in ALLOTMENT II was made for a different person: they are architecture used to describe precisely the minimum space necessary for one person to be protected. Every one of these mouths is different, based on the dimensions of the real mouth. The positions of the genitals and the anus and are very measured and precise and so are all the earholes. When you get to know these works it's like going into another zone: a bunker matrix. You begin to be sensitive to whether the head-box is a little this way, or that, whether the volumes are wide or thin. You begin to feel something. Each one is different. The difference really matters, particularly with the children. You begin to see the eager ones, the sad ones. In the installation in CGAC it will be like a street with houses down each side, and you'll be able to walk between the rooms. What does this tell us both about architecture and about the body... and about life? About all three? And this is the question, you know. How do we explain the fact that we are the only animal to live in this abstract environment, this absolute vertical and horizontal articulation? When we think of ourselves in a photo for example, or in any kind of formal situation we always place ourselves in relation to this frame. And I think it's become like that inside our minds... You could say that architecture is a form of physical philosophy. Ninety percent of the human race lives now in the cities. So we have chosen to live within a built world, not in an inherited organic world.

EJ: There's another work I'd like you to talk about and that's SEEDS. You normally use bodies or things from nature, but this work is pile of bullets...

AG: But in a way they are like bodies aren't they? You can say that each bullet in SEEDS represents a life, in the same way that every grain represents a possible plant.

EJ: A life less...

AG: Or a life saved?

EJ: OK, yes... (Laughter)

AG: I also made a lead case for the largest bullet ever made. It's called REFUGE. I was fascinated by this.

EJ: It's a real bullet. You moulded it?

AG: Yes, I went to the Imperial War Museum and made the case there. The bullet weighs one ton. I like the fact that it was almost precisely human scale. It was purposefully photographed, between rows of trees in an orchard. I was trying to touch on how Paradise was lost and regained. The Garden of Eden is a very important model of a relationship with the natural world. The paradox, of how we express safety; what we think of a sensuring continuity always ends up being aggressive. SEEDS is my benign little protest work. I'll make a cup of tea...

EJ: Lastly, I would like you to say something about your outdoor works.

AG: This is the big question. Has art become entirely dependent on the special intellectual and physical conditions of the museum and is it limited by this? A museum is for the conservation of objects that have had a life, and what's happened so much in the late 20th and early 21st century is that all artists aspire to the conditions of this special kind of environment and the work never has a life in the "outside" world. For me the biggest challenge is somehow to put something out on the street, on a beach, on a mountainside, on a rubbish tip even, and see what it can do, feel how those spaces and places change it and it changes them. Right from the very beginning I have put my work in the world. Few of the works when illustrated are images from an exhibition in a museum. I'm not so interested in formal validations of work, where people called artists make something called art that belongs in a gallery. It's tiny the ecology and economy of the art world. Art is not simply human communication or a way of explaining ourselves to ourselves. I'm interested in art that speaks of our vulnerability in time, in the same way that a figure on Easter Island looks up at the sky somewhere above the horizon and is evidently not a substitute for me speaking to you. It's not about communication between human beings; it's about communication between human beings and deep time and deep space. This is the broader horizon that I'm interested in positioning the work against. I want to make an art that has to do with survival, that thinks about where human beings fit in the chain of being, that asks who we are, and where we're going...well, these big, big questions. In making these bodies take up positions where they are like aliens, like foreign bodies, like an infection, in a sense I'm testing my sculpture, but I'm also testing an idea of what art is, of what it can do, and who it's for and where it might belong.

NOTE

1 This government slogan was subverted by the left, which countered it with the slogan "Protest and Survive" (see essay 'Antony Gormley in retrospective' by Lisa Jardine in ANTONY GORMLEY, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 2002, pp. 68-87).
