ANTONY GORMLEY

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES PUTNAM

From A SECRET HISTORY OF CLAY: FROM GAUGUIN TO GORMLEY, Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, UK, 2004

James Putnam: I suppose a good way to start would be to ask you what is your first response to day as a working medium?

Antony Gormley: It is the most immediate material that sculpture can use. It is also one of the oldest. Just think of those caves in the Dordogne or in the Haute-Garonne such as at Montespan where there is this loosely modelled bear sculpture formed from the wet clay - still wet - and completely covered in holes where the Cro-Magnon speared it ritually.

JP: There are also many caves that have these wonderful marks left from fingers pressed in the soft layer of day that covered the rock.

AG: Yes, on the roof at Rouffignac, the 'spaghetti' traces of fingers on the roof of the cave that go on for three kilometres. Those ochre hand silhouettes in Peche Merle seem to celebrate the fact that clay is so formable. When I first began using clay I just wanted something that actually carried the sign of touching, of an event between a receptive material and the hand. But I was suspicious of the 'Rodinesque' and the virtuosity of modelling. I want things to be directly made, and in as raw a material as possible. I have always used clay straight out of the ground. I get fantastic clay from a brickworks in Essex, just outside Southend. It's a lovely colour. When the loam comes off the surface you come across this sedimentary layer composed of the oldest igneous rocks that have been broken down to this very, very fine particulate and have sat there, amalgamating over millions of years. I like that, it's as if you're touching the flesh of the earth just like those Palaeolithic hand impressions.

JP: Do you think you will come to use clay more in your work?

AG: When I first started using clay I was experimenting with it and I really liked the way it behaves in its different forms, dry and liquid. But since making FIELD I haven't been able to think of any better way of using it. FIELD seems to combine this direct touch, bodies formed not as representation but as event - this act of squeezing in the space between the hands. It is the impression of this moment that gives the form, not an idea about the articulation of an anatomy. Then it is a register of a whole range of touch because FIELD is made through many hands. It's also important to me that the clay we use is liberated from its destiny of becoming a brick. I still want to do a big work in clay: a building in human form.

JP: You're referring to your BRICK MAN, whose maquette is in the collection of Leeds City Art Gallery?

AG: It was originally proposed for Leeds but they didn't want it, so now I want to make it in China, quite differently, in a more personal way with each brick made by hand so that everybody has a chance to make a part of it. People would write a message or just sign their names on individual bricks and build up this hundred-metre-high building in human form of several million bricks. I quite like the idea that this thing is made from uniform, absolute clone-like units but somehow each one carries an identity and that those identities together make this collective body, in one place, one object.
JP: To come back to this current exhibition I suppose what may be an underlying issue is clay's place in the hierarchy of art materials. Probably before the twentieth century it tends to be viewed more as a process material.

AG: But that is not true, is it! When you look at Renaissance art and the work of Della Robbia and Donatello, they did some amazing things in terracotta like that fantastic portrait in the V&A.

JP: But it's more about how clay is less appreciated due to its fragility and sense of impermanence, so that the preliminary clay model is often less valuable than the finished bronze cast - it's like how a drawing usually commands less market value than a painting,
AG: I am not sure that I accept that, but I suppose in the conventional hierarchy of materials bronze and marble are at the top, lead and wood are in the middle and plaster and clay are at the very bottom. But I think that has all been turned on its head in the last hundred years. When Richard Long poured liquid china clay on the floor of the Tate 's Duveen galleries in 1990, there is a work that is absolutely recognisable as a great work of art, and yet it is swept up afterwards and there is nothing left. I think our attitude to time in objects has changed radically so that we can now appreciate things in terms of fragility and temporality and their relationship to an event as much as to their sense of permanence and monumentality.

JP: Surely this runs contrary to the notion of monumentality that seems to characterise some of your works, like the colossal ANGEL OF THE NORTH or your proposed BRICK MAN, or even with FIELD its sheer mass evokes an effect of the monumental?

AG: It is funny but I think of FIELD as an anti-monumental monument. It has no inscription, it is not memorialising anything in particular and the reading of it is open - it is a space where what you think and feel is the real subject of the work. I think it asks more questions than it presents certainties. Traditionally the monument has been a bulwark against amnesia, to resist the effect that time has on dissolving certainties. FIELD has in-built entropy, it is a fluid, provisional and uncertain thing and is formed by the space it is in.

JP: Going back to the immediate appeal of clay, we could say it has an 'honest', down-to-earth quality to it. Yet its abundance and availability count against it in this hierarchy of fine art materials, also the fact that throughout history it was most frequently used in the manufacture of utilitarian artefacts.

AG: But that is why it's so wonderful, because it is inherently democratic.

JP: Clay obviously has more appeal to you in its natural state than in its more finished, glazed ceramic form.

AG: Yes, I want it to be earth. I am very keen on the colour the redness of the clay being something to do with the iron in the earth, which is also the iron in our blood, which somehow makes a connection between flesh and planet. That connection is very important. FIELD suggests that the earth holds the memory of our ancestors and also the promise of the unborn. It has a life, a memory and a conscience.

JP: This exhibition would seem to provoke the ongoing debate about the differences between art and craft - do you think we are experiencing an increasing blurring of these boundaries?

AG: It is very simple to me what the difference between art and craft is. Art questions the world and therefore makes life more complicated; craft is there to make life easier, more liveable. Craft is a reconciliation between the needs of human life and the environment around it. This is a supporting role. It has to do with comfort, shelter, and the support of the body. Art is about complicating things and about providing the mind with alternative avenues of thought and feeling, and can often be contradictory. The two cannot be confused.

JP: So when you look at exceptionally fine ceramic objects, in the Oriental porcelain tradition, of superlative form and glaze, do you think they could eve r transcend their original utilitarian function and be regarded as sculpture?

AG: I think your question relates to the idea of looking for art in everyday objects. That was the Bauhaus ideal, that virtually everything we touch and use every day should be the subject of the same amount of thought and creativity as art - a great idea, good for design but a disaster for art (look what happened to Kandinsky!). Maybe the distinction I've just made between art and craft is truer for the twenty-first century than in any previous era and I think in our time it is as well for the health of both pursuits to keep them very separate. I am often horrified by the things that are supported by bodies like the Crafts Council, there is a sense in which these are objects that have lost their determination to be useful. Aspiring to the condition of the beautiful, they end up in some limbo - vases that refuse to hold flowers, that aspire to the condition of sculpture but don't actually achieve it - burdened by their over-considered surfaces and a design philosophy that has abandoned utility.

JP: There is this distinction between the form of the vessel and its surface decoration. As you mentioned, you would like to see some of the magnificent, animated drawings on Greek black-figure ware liberated from their grounds. If we take Picasso's ceramics, perhaps many people rate his paintings on their surfaces as being more successful than the forms.

AG: Except when he does those brilliant things when he gets his thrower to throw him a vase and he sort of squeezes it and turns it into a dove. I quite like those pieces where he is morphing the utilitarian object into something else - it's an extension of his bicycle seat becoming a bull's head.

JP: Let's return to the fundamental appeal of using clay through the ages. I recall when we were handling and discussing those ancient Mesopotamian fertility figurines in the British Museum you were talking very passionately about clay's direct and symbolic link to mother earth and creation myths.

AG: It is extraordinary how universal and similar these ideas about creation are - from the book of Genesis, to the Akkadian and Mesopotamian myths, the Nag Hammadi Gnostic gospels and the Chinese creation legends. This idea of some primeval matter from which man is created by the spit or breath of God. It's rooted very deep in our psyche that a god-like figure creates us from the earth and that we return to the earth.

JP: An ancient Egyptian creation myth describes the ram-headed god Khnum as a potter who models on his wheel the egg from which all life was to emerge. There is also the idea of him modelling in clay all the forms in creation - living creatures, plant life, as well as the purely geographic features of the world.

AG: One of the things that intrigued me most when I was doing FIELD at the British Museum was this infiltration of individual FIELD figures in some of the museum's exhibition cases, finding a relationship between these lumpish, not-modelled things and the ancient clay figures. Recently when I was in China working on FIELD I was taken to a holy site near Baya'tun in Gansu province, caves that had been visited by pilgrims from the earliest times to the present. At the deepest part of the cave, I was invited to put my hand into a hole where I felt this muddy clay. Then I was told to squeeze and remove the lump I had formed and place it up on a natural rock shelf where there were millions of these impressions that other visitors had made over the years. I hadn't seen that anywhere before and it was absolutely like FIELD - uncanny.

JP: As a sculptor, your work involves moulding and casting rather than carving, so I suppose you can relate very closely to that expressive quality of clay.

AG: If you are interested in traces, you are interested in the shortest possible bridge between life and the record of life, and so as a medium clay is one of the best things that you can find. There is a feeling when you use it that you are repeating some primal transformation of the unformed to the formed. When you return it to the fire it becomes like stone. That is a very primal alchemy, like commending experience to memory, a fossilisation or fixing of a moment and unlike any of the other techniques - such as 'lost wax' - it is totally direct. I would like to reverse the old hierarchies in that sense too, because clay is a medium that can become an extension of the flesh in a way that no other material can.

JP: So, do you think we are going to see an increased use of clay in contemporary art?

AG: I don't make predictions but when people have an idea that needs this medium, it will be used and I can't see clay as ever being irrelevant.

JP: Do you think clay will become more appreciated as a medium in an era where we have so many synthetic materials? Is it more comforting to get back to such a basic material because it is so natural?

AG: I don't think it is an issue of it being natural. Clay has always been the most commonly, universally used material to make the vessels that carry food (nourishment) to bodies, so it assists in sustaining us on the inside while it is also used to make the constructed world and shelter our bodies on the outside. All those visions of the future where we are seen living in plastic houses and surviving on pills have been proved to be complete rubbish. Bricks have great insulation properties, they breathe and are effective in such a range of climates. The brick is the unit, the weave of settled life and it is very much the scale of the brick that is a universal measure of settled human life on this planet. The brick and the pot have been the two things that determine the immediate environment which contains our memory outside our neural structure. This is the most receptive, most telling place of inscription of human experience, and this actually overrides anything I might have said about the distinctions between craft and art. And I don't believe that is ever going to change. I think every, every architect and every sculptor will have to deal with clay, one way or another, for as long as human beings walk the earth.