

ANTONY GORMLEY

VESSEL, GALLERIA CONTINUA, SAN GIMIGNANO, ITALY, 2012

28 April - 15 September 2012

In a sequence of twelve new solid iron 'Blockworks', Gormley put the formal purity of Modernist abstraction to work to evoke and provoke inner states. These works use the language of stacking, propping and cantilevering, and mass, to objectify the experience of embodiment and to produce a somatic sense of containment or conditioning that exists within urban man.

Blurring the distinctions between content and context, the twelve massive castings are contrasted with the space frames of a new BREATHING ROOM I [SAN GIMIGNANO] (2012). Sited in the empty tower at the north of Galleria Continua and constructed from seven interconnecting luminous frames all of an equal volume, the work encouraged self-observation on the part of the viewer, within a luminous matrix. The work is a concentration chamber for an abstract and temporal evocation of the second body: that of architecture.

The exhibition contained some foundational works: BASE (1993) is a two-metre-square solid concrete slab that encloses a void impression of an absent body, identifiable through the holes created by the soles of the feet, palms of the hand and the brain cavity. Also on view were two versions of EDGE III (2012), installed perpendicular to the wall, providing a haptic destabilisation of the architecture.

The fulcrum of the show was a large-scale work entitled VESSEL (2012), which also acted as a trait de liaison between the exhibition project at San Gimignano and Gormley's project for Galleria Continua's French venue. At Le Moulin, his investigation of the different variables in the relationship between the human body and living space was articulated in SPACE STATION (2007), a vast 23 tonne sculpture enterable by a small passage in the side of the work. VESSEL is made out of 39 interconnecting rectangular steel boxes that reverse the renaissance trope of the city in the form of a man, by making a man in the form of a city. This recumbent anti-monument, perhaps seen at first as an off-kilter work by Donald Judd, now provokes greater questions about the social and inspirational role of sculpture and its potential to provide direct bodily experience.

Four new works used the bubble-matrix principle to explore the way in which bubbles, the most fugitive of forms, coalesce to create cloud forms. Here is a language derived from the structure of matter and applied to the body to illuminate its temporal nature. They are complimented by SUM (2012), made from an association of solid polyhedral forms expanded and arranged directly on the floor.

In the gallery's garden, Gormley installed a double sculptural work in marble. The work tests the evolution of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, transforming bone, skin and muscle into a finished work of crystalline geometric rigour, not dissimilar to the structure of marble itself. As in 2 x 2 (2010), shown at the 2010 Carrara Biennale, Gormley created the image of a body that is inspired by the great artistic tradition of the nude, but at the same time reflects our new knowledge about the sub-optical properties of matter.

Recalling past projects such as FAI SPAZIO, PRENDI POSTO (MAKING SPACE, TAKING PLACE) from 2004, the exhibition continued outside the gallery and into the streets and cells of San Gimignano with an invasion of six identical body forms, including one placed on a tower close to the town's main piazza. This installation, realized in collaboration and with the patronage of the Municipality of San Gimignano, considers how the social role of sculpture has shifted from that of memorial and heroism to that of a reflexive object which encourages the viewer to be aware of his or her own position in space and time.

This installation and exhibition saw the artist trying to reconcile the subjective space of the individual with the idea of the expanding universe, questioning how the human project fits into the scheme of things.
