

# FT HAS COPYRIGHT 2012

## INTERVIEW ANTONY GORMLEY

By Dina Medland APRIL 19 2012

Antony Gormley's sculptures of the human form appear here, there and everywhere – in cities, in fields, in the sea, on top of mountains. But ask their creator how he got where he is from where he started, and he replies: "I'm not sure where 'here' is."

He says he has never been aware of making a career choice: "There was just the gradual realisation that an artist is what I was and I didn't have any choice, really. I could never have imagined 30 years ago that this would be 'here'."

To everyone else, "here" for Mr Gormley, OBE, is being internationally renowned as an artist with work on display worldwide. His giant Angel of The North sculpture, which spread its wings in 1998 in Gateshead, in the north of England, remains one of the most talked about pieces of public art ever produced, seen by more than 150,000 visitors a year, as well as anyone driving along the A1.

We meet in the vast, light-filled space that forms his studio, tucked away near King's Cross in London. In the courtyard a team is adding the final stain to a collection of 12 solid iron blockworks making up Vessel, an exhibition of new works at Galleria Continua, opening in San Gimignano in Italy this month.

Born in 1950 and brought up as a Roman Catholic, he went from London's Hampstead Garden Suburb to boarding school at Ampleforth in Yorkshire, where he embraced nature and fresh air and felt "incredibly lucky".

"Father Felix taught me carpentry and Father Martin taught me painting. I had teachers such as John Bunting who threw Ezra Pound and TS Eliot and Wyndham Lewis at us and, at the age of 12, I also managed to sell them some paintings and do a mural at the end of the passage," he says.

He went on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he read archaeology and anthropology and then history of art. "It was a wonderful time to be at Cambridge, but I had no intention of curating," he says.

During his first "long vac", he went to India. Why?

"Maybe it was the taste of the Alphonso mangoes which my father was sent from India every season. He had set up penicillin factories there," he says. He was to spend about three years in India, drawn to meditation, and became affiliated to several Buddhist monasteries.

“I had to decide whether to stay in India pursuing meditation as a central focus in my life. It just seemed there were two problems with that – one, it seemed selfish and the other was that it meant, in a sense, abandoning my own history and taking on another culture’s context,” he says.

Returning to England he applied to art school, with three years of drawings and travelogues as a portfolio. The artist Cecil Collins asked the question that burnt itself on his brain at his interview at the Central College of Art and Design in London – “Why do you think anything you have shown us is creative?”

“It opened up, for me, the distinction of making a picture of something and interpreting something. And that has been the challenge since – trying to create work that goes beyond appearances,” says Mr Gormley.

After a year, he switched from Central to Goldsmith’s College and then on to a post-graduate degree at the Slade School of Art, where he “started all over again because I felt my work had become far too complicated.”

“I decided I was going to abandon metaphor and just look at the way things were, which actually then defined much of my work to come,” he says. So Bread Line 23 – a Mother’s Pride loaf “redefined in the manner in which you experience it” – was born.

Bread Line consisted of an entire loaf of Mother’s Pride, laid out one bite at a time, turning 23 slices into a straight line about two and a half metres long.

On the practicalities of being an art student Mr Gormley says: “The hardest bit was getting a grant. I can remember very well going to County Hall [the seat of London’s local government at the time] – wearing all my Indian kit, Nehru jacket and pyjamas, and facing these po-faced people across the large mahogany table.

“But they were kind and gave me £3,000 – a fortune in those days. It was a maintenance grant, fees were paid – and I also had a grant to go to Cambridge. It feels like another age.”

He lived on a boat in London’s Paddington basin and then in various squats in King’s Cross, spending eight years in the end in a factory with 22,000 sq ft of space. “There were 18 artists – from stained glass artists to printmakers to hat makers – it was a wonderful community,” he adds.

At the Slade he also took on a part-time teaching job. Having married the painter Vicken Parsons, he says that between 1978 and 1986 “as a family we were living on the salary of a two-day teaching job paying £6,000”, he says.

He felt his creations at the Slade, including Bread Line 23 and Land, Sea & Air, “had achieved an equation between matter and imagination”, which led to his next steps. “I realised I had to use my own body as the object,” he explains.

The next Mother’s Pride loaf was shown “eaten away to the volume of my body – and the

void carries the punch". It was works such as these that prompted Nicholas Serota, who was then director of the Whitechapel Gallery, to offer him a show there. It was a career turning point.

"I have always been political," he says. "There was a great sense at Cambridge of youth finally finding its voice and demanding a participatory role at every level. When you take the broad principles of social justice and political freedom into the art world, art must be for everyone," he says.

One and Other, London's Trafalgar Square Fourth Plinth project, is a recent example where "the thrust of that work was to democratise the hierarchical convention and tradition of statuary".

He has had fun, too, with Still Standing, at the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia (2011-2012). It is the first time a living artist has been allowed to "mess about" with the classical galleries and he has placed several "humanly made gods and goddesses" on the same level as the viewer.

The job of the artist now is "less to make objects look like things that already exist but to make things that question the way we look at things", he says. It is a duty of social responsibility that he clearly takes as seriously as he always has done. But it is imbued with a deep sense of gratitude and humility in being part of a greater human "whole".

"On every project at every level I have been helped by so many people. We live in a capitalist society where energy is equated with money – but energy is the real commodity. If people see a spark of energy they are immediately attracted to it," he says.

## **Secret CV**

### **Who were your mentors?**

So very many – Nick Serota, Lewis Biggs, Sandy Mann at the ICA. Also, when you are given the opportunity of working with a curator it's like having another mind to work with that helps you to see things you don't see yourself.

### **Your first big break?**

When Nick Serota offered me the show at the Whitechapel Gallery.

### **What else might you have done?**

I would have loved to be a trek guide in the Himalayas, an offshore fisherman in the South China Sea or a prospector for Bradshaws (the earliest known rock and cave art) in the Kimberlies in Western Australia.

### **Best career advice to others?**

Don't give up. Attend to your inner voice and intuitions, and never stop looking at, and interrogating, your own work. It will, in the end, speak to you and begin to reach others. The most extraordinary thing of all is that people will help you share that story