

**Antony Gormley is an internationally acclaimed artist whose work centres on the human body and its relationship to space. Born in London in 1950, he studied for a degree in Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University before training as an artist at the Slade. His many awards include the Turner Prize (1994), the South Bank Prize for Visual Art (1999), the Bernhard Heiliger Award for Sculpture (2007) and the Obayashi Prize (2012). In 1997 he was made an Officer of the British Empire (OBE) and was made a knight in the New Year's Honours list in 2014. He is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, an Honorary Doctor of the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Trinity and Jesus Colleges, Cambridge. Gormley has been a Royal Academician since 2003 and a British Museum Trustee since 2007. This interview with Jessica Hughes was recorded in the artist's London studio in January 2013.**

The full illustrated version of this interview for *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* is available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2014/gormley>

**JH.** I thought that we could start our discussion by talking about the history of your interaction with classical culture. Did you learn Greek and Latin at school, and were you interested in classical art when you were doing your training?

**AG.** We bloody well did! We did the first steps of the Latin primer. I just hated Latin so much. But we were taught by J. R. R. Tolkien's brother, who was my Latin Master at school, and he made it really fun – he translated *Winnie the Pooh* into Latin. And then we had this other brilliant teacher who was called Mr Damman, who taught us Ancient History, and who got us writing 'I am Darius, King of Kings' in cuneiform. We used to have to prepare clay tablets, and then he would give us square sticks, and we had to write in cuneiform on our soft clay tablets, the various laws of Hammurabi, or whatever. And that was all fun and an immediate 'link'. And then of course I did the Gallic Wars....

**JH.** Did you do ancient Greek as well?

**AG.** No, we didn't do Greek, only Latin. I think Catholics have a penchant for the Latin. But I think what really got me going was reading *The Bull from the Sea* and *The Persian Boy* [by Mary Renault]. It was fantastically exciting for a young boy to think about other cultures – about sun-drenched bodies covered in oil, doing extraordinary things with animals. Yes, I was really struck by the culture of the Aegean, and then I suppose I got very, very interested when my dad took me to the British Museum, where I'm now a Trustee. I think that was a huge encounter, being exposed to the head of Amenhotep III and Ramesses II, and seeing those extraordinary lion-headed images of the gods – that was amazing. But then of course there was Roman Britain. I remember reading a lot of Rosemary Sutcliffe – *The Eagle of the Ninth* – and getting very interested in all that. And then around... I suppose I would have been around eight or nine, I did some excavations at Fishbourne, or rather, I helped – I say, 'did some excavations', but I was some little squirry boy!

**JH.** Did they have you cleaning the pottery with a toothbrush?

**AG.** Yes, they said 'come and help us down this trench', and that was exciting.

I started my own museum when I was about six. I say ‘museum’ – it was a cupboard with a glass front that I kept my finds in. My dad used to bring me things from North Africa. They used to go off to Tunisia quite a bit, so he’d bring me Roman oil lamps, or bits of pottery and coins. For whatever reason, I think that one’s imagination at that age is incredibly absorbent. And I suppose I’d moved quite quickly from this feeling about the Mediterranean, and then Egypt, and then back to the Dark Ages of Britain. I’d got very interested in the Celtic culture, and went back as well as forwards, and got very interested in all of that, from the Lindisfarne gospels, back to Sutton Hoo, and I suppose La Tène cultures generally. But I never wanted to be a Classicist. It always seemed to me that that was too much about living in a kind of Other World.

But then when I was at Cambridge I did Archaeology and Anthropology as the first part of my Tripos, and went to Rome for the first time. I was amazed at Trajan’s market, and just the power of the Pantheon, for example.

**JH.** So were you taken to Rome as part of the degree?

**AG.** Well, I was supposed to go. I went to Rome to study the Seicento, actually, at the beginning of my second year at Cambridge. I went to look at Bernini and Boromini and Brunelleschi, rather than classical Rome. But you can’t go to Rome and not end up gazing in wonder at...well, everything: the Forum, and the Colosseum. I think that Trajan’s market actually in terms of structure is something that really struck me – the clarity of the architecture, the squareness of the thresholds. There’s this one particular bit of Trajan’s market that is like proto-modernism. It’s this incredibly sensitively ‘consideredness’ of proportion, built out of blocks of absolute square geometry and well, you can see [*indicates clay blocks on table*], I’m a bit ‘block-minded’ at the moment, so I’m probably looking at it all from a biased point of view. I’m in my block-works phase.

**JH.** And then when you trained as a sculptor, was classical sculpture held up as a sort of paradigm by your teachers?

**AG.** Well, it was and it wasn’t. The fact is that nobody looked at Classical casts in the seventies. We were all Conceptualists. We wouldn’t look a Praxitelean body in the penis, or the face, for that matter. I mean, the curious thing... I think I’m still not quite sure what my relationship is with, as it were, *that* notion of ideal perfection. It’s extraordinary to me. I’ve just participated in a show that was in the Accademia, and I had two of my block works (these are the concrete blocks with void body spaces inside them, testing the edge of the block) between Michelangelo’s *Slaves*, and at the end of the room was Michelangelo’s *David*. And Michelangelo’s *David* you couldn’t conceive without, in a way, Classical, Periklean Greek sculpture as being its model.

And I suppose within me there is quite a tension between a wish to return sculpture to a kind of urgency that is to do with facing the twin poles of sexuality and death, that actually is carried most strongly by the absolute *antithesis* of Greek tradition, that is African and Oceanic art, that we all know was so important for the development of Modernism, and you could say a rather conventional suspicion about the idealised beauty and body consciousness of Periklean art that has been tainted by its appropriation by Arno Breker, National Socialism, and the ‘Body Cults’ of Totalitarianism generally. The *Triumph of the Will* is filled with references – conscious or unconscious – to Classical Greek sculpture. And I’m not saying that has wiped out every affection you know, when I look at Greek works like that Knidian Venus in the British Museum – it is

so touching, because it's about modesty and sexuality in equal proportion. It's not about dominance, actually. It's not about the sexualisation of the body. It's about the body as a vulnerable site, both of beauty and of transient balance. Or the Temple of the Winds there, you know, those sublimely great bodies with their uplifted breasts – their wonderfully sublime sexuality. As is maybe my favourite Greek work of all, which is the raising of Semele in the Ludovisi tomb, which to me is kind of breath it touches me in a way that I don't think any other work does. I mean, it's only a relief, but there's something about her uplifted look, and again her pert breasts, but this is the raising, in a way, of the Earth in Spring, and it seems so powerfully about an identification with the Earth, with the planet, with 'Gaia', or whatever. And it's so sweet, and so touching. That's on the cusp of Archaic Greek. And if I wanted to find, as it were, the source of my greatest inspiration in Greek art, it would be around the time that the kouros puts half a foot forward. The diskobolos I'm not interested in. The diskobolos is the beginning of The Big Mistake, so far as I'm concerned – the Big Mistake being that sculpture should deal with time by freezing a moment in marble. That's a mistake, because the sublimity of sculpture has to do with its static quality, its stillness, its silence, its ability to command our movement, to stop for a moment, to register its ability...its quiet stillness.

**JH.** How did you play with these ideas about classical sculpture in the Hermitage installation?

**AG.** Well it's interesting, I played a lot of bad games in the Hermitage exhibition. I was consciously saying that our received opinion about what classical sculpture is actually comes entirely through the Eighteenth Century. They've all been rinsed, and scraped, and bleached, and repaired. It's not just new noses, it's often two or three sculptures put together as a kind of collage, and the bits have been invented and limbs have been added, and then gestures, attitudes and even identifications of which god you are looking at have been placed later. What I'm saying is that there has been an enormous amount of projection on 'the Classic' – the 'Classic' being, as it were, this idealised model of *Charis*, the perfect mind/body balance, where I suppose the aspirations of being a fulfilled citizen are combined in the beauty of a body and the ability to speak, and move, and express yourself equally in the manners of the mind as those of the body. And it's a very high ideal, but it has been so projected upon, that I am still at this late stage of my life suspicious of it. I mean, I think that my bringing the gods down to the earth was in order to look at them as things in the world, sharing a common surface, a common support with us – no big plinths anymore – and to see them for what they were. So actually, the most touching work in my reassembling of the Dionysus room at The Hermitage, which previously had twenty-seven sculptures, most of them Roman copies, was really to liberate them from their original architectural setting. The guy who did the original setting [Oskar Waldhauer] presented them as a parade, pushed against the wall on plinths over a metre high, where they had no identity as three-dimensional objects. But I got rid of most of them (I mean, I only kept five sculptures from the original room and four from other parts of the Hermitage), put them on the floor, and then raised the floor up so that you were on a common level as these sculpted bodies that had lost their integrated, carved plinths. And the most beautiful and touching one, as far as I'm concerned, was the one from Pavlovsk Park – the one that had burnt and fallen from where it had been, which I think was on the roof of a Royal Palace. And this was relatively abandoned even in the Hermitage, and so... it was just beautiful, because it was blackened, still, by the smoke from the fire, and it has, a bit like the Temple of the Winds figures, this wonderful relationship between revelation and...this drapery

revealing more than it covers. And yet this object had sort of been lost and found and had a history.

The Dionysos that I kept there is an example of two ancient sculptures that were put together. So the lion came from another sculpture altogether, and he had new arms and a head, and was a fiction, in a way. He was made by the workshops of English dealers in Rome, to represent *their* idea of what classical sculptures looked like. And it's amazing how much our inherited understanding of what classical sculpture looked like comes from that very time.

So I wanted you to see all the cracks, and the restorations, and the fact that these were actually collages. And in some senses forgive them for all of that, these multiple histories. Because the only true Greek work was the 'Tauride Venus', which was the first Hellenic work ever to arrive [in Russia]. And when she first arrived, I mean, it is an amazing story. She was bought by Peter the Great from the Pope, she arrives in Russia, the first naked, sculpted woman. And she has to have an armed guard, she can't be brought into any imperial building, so she has to live in a cave, by the Neva, and people queued for days to see her. It's a fantastic story, it's like from *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, this strange thing coming from a culture in the south...

**JH.** That's incredible. I've never heard that before. It was like an awakening, almost.

**AG.** Yes, an awakening, exactly, of what, in a way, *art* can do to raise our instincts, or what an object can tell us about our drives. Anyway, I meant to say that sculpture was the next most interesting thing.

**JH.** So how did you go and pick the sculptures in the exhibition, and how did you decide what to get rid of?

**AG.** Oh, I was very demanding, and they were incredibly kind, because they didn't have to be. It was the first time that anybody, Russian or otherwise, had ever had a mess about with their collection. They are very proud, the Russians. It's extraordinary to me that you can have the most ideologically overturning revolution in the history of humankind right outside the front door of the Winter Palace, which is the Hermitage, against everything that the Hermitage stood for in terms of culture, and for not one hair of any sculpture's sculpted head or object to be stolen, removed or damaged. And that's a paradox to me. Extraordinary. You can say well, was it the power of culture? Or was it actually the ideology that these were, in some senses, objects that had passed from the ownership of a *feudal* hierarchy, to the hands of the people, and as such had to be preserved for the people. The history of the Hermitage is an extraordinary one, as is the history of Peterhof, and the fact that when people were starving, they still thought that the best thing was to re-gild the statues and get the fountains back working. You know, the Nazi bombardment, the 900-day siege of St Petersburg, was stationed in Catherine the Great's greatest palace, and they burnt it down before they left, and from very soon after the end of the war, to right in through the fifties, the amount of effort that went into restoring the palace. But maybe this isn't relevant?

**JH.** No, it is, very much so, because all of that history helps to construct the authority of the statues that the exhibition, in a way, was directed towards deconstructing. Does it

make your act of bringing the gods down to earth...I mean, you talk about it as a liberation, but was it in some sense also a subversive act, when you consider the history?

**AG.** Yes, I suppose so. It's just asking them to be seen as what they are; that these are man-made idealisations, and not so ideal – I mean, that they are made. But I would say that, yes, half of it is subversive, but the other half is celebratory. I suppose the bigger question maybe is: what *is* it that we project onto these things that we know will outlast the mortal life, that we want to preserve, or that we think are worth outlasting the mortal life, and therefore they become talismans. I'm interested in all of that – in a way bringing back in a Freudian sense the notion of the fetish, because I think that however 'evolved' our epistemology may be about our cultural objects, the fact is that that is what they remain – they remain talismans that in some way are about our association with an unknown future, and the degree to which we hold these things dear, or that, you know, the Victory of Samathrace or that Venus de Milo that is in the Louvre become absolutely embedded in our collective consciousness. What are they, and why does this armless woman... why can we summon her so easily from our visual memory? Why do we hold her in our minds at all? Is it to do with our understanding, actually, of the pathos of our vulnerability, that her limblessness, in spite of her beauty, allows us to understand something of our human jeopardy? Is it that the hope that is absolutely embedded in any act of making again a living body in something that outlives a biological life something that we need to hold in order to feel that life can have meaning beyond death, or something? I don't know. They are atavistic questions, in other words to do with the relationship of the unborn to the spirit of the ancestors, that modernity would like to tell us we have transcended, but psychology insists that we haven't. I would put a Rapa Nui Moai sculpture and a Classical Venus in the same space, that's what I'm desperate to do at the British Museum: I'm desperate to allow these iconic monumental masses that have been fashioned and made into images to talk to each other across time, but in the same space. So I want to bring the horse from the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, and the big foot and the head of the Empress Faustina, and the right arm of Amenhotep II and the lion from the palace of Sargon – I would like to bring them together to talk to each other.

**JH.** I'm interested in finding out whether your perceptions of the classical sculptures in the Hermitage changed at all during the time that you were working on the exhibition? Did getting 'up close and personal' with these objects make you reappraise them in any way?

**AG.** No, not really. It's what Michelangelo taught us, that the most powerful place to be in relation to a made thing, but particularly a made *body*, is the position of the maker. Because that is, in a way, the closest you can get. So it was *coming home* for these things, I think. So very far from them being dishonoured, I think they were put in a position where they could be seen, maybe for the first time, or for a very long time, for what they were – an expression of one body's ability to make another. And as such, I mean, it was an act of tribute and honouring to the original makers, and indeed all the fiddly restorers, and all their 'post-operational' games they played. Some of which are just very, very funny.

I mean, I played some rather cheap games. The two 'love stories' in my assembly were very cheeky, but I wanted to have them, because I think that once you get these down from their plinths, and you allow people to walk around them, you might as well have a bit of drama. So the moon-struck Eros who is looking longingly at Athena, who is not

interested at all, because she has got power on her mind. I wanted to play with their relative scales and how they work together.

And the same with the Tauride Venus and this composite Dionysus. I was very interested in a playful way in setting up another narrative other than maybe the symbolic ones that were inherent within the eighteenth-century language of interpretation. So Dionysus with his cup becomes a kind of junkie, a self-obsessed narcissist who is completely unaware of this vulnerable lady's appeal to him – a loving gaze that is saying, I'm here, I need you. He says, no, all I need are my drugs.

**JH.** No, he doesn't look particularly interested in her, does he? And what about when you introduced the viewers into that mix? I was wondering if you'd had chance to observe people visiting the exhibition, and their reactions to the statues.

**AG.** Oh, well have you seen the film? It is hilarious. Somebody did a 'Candid Camera' thing of people's reactions. So all the boys were feeling up the tits. It is amazing how people react, when there aren't rules of engagement, as it were – when you've released these works from labels.

**JH.** So were people allowed to touch them?

**AG.** Well ... they did! I think there was just a general sense of, well, they've come down to our level now, so.... It's interesting, because you were actually much more aware of their vulnerability, so the fingers on his hand, look down there [*indicates an installation shot in catalogue*]...they are very, very vulnerable. You are very aware of how easily they could be knocked off.

**JH.** In another way, it reminded me a little bit of some of those stories that you read in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, where there's an epiphany of a god, and they appear next to you, so they aren't up high on Olympus, but they come down to you in another, more human form. Maybe that's the opposite effect of what I was meant to feel, but it kind of *enhanced* their divinity for me.

**AG.** Well that's nice. It was very nice to see the look on people's faces when they came into the room, having been through the five previous rooms where everything was as it had been as it had been for a hundred and fifty years. The British Museum is interested in seeing what could be done somehow similarly, but I don't know if I'd want to do that again.

**JH.** Your own sculptures in the same exhibition, they were *so* different, so contemporary, but at the same time set within, I suppose, a classical setting.

**AG.** Yes, the columns, and the little narthex, that curved bit at the other side of the room.

**JH.** Could you talk about how your own sculptures interacted with their exhibition setting?

**AG.** I wanted to bring something, I suppose, very raw and industrial, to the sense of decorum. It's, very interesting, isn't it, how certainly *our* understanding of New Money is that it wants to express itself through the old. ... Certainly, the whole Victorian

obsession with the neoclassical –the money from industrialisation expressing itself in the language of fifth-century Athens. I'm not sure that this was exactly high in my mind, but I like the idea that you could express the material – you could say of modernity – but certainly the material of the industrial revolution, within these environments that in some way are appealing to something very much before and separated, consciously and stylistically, from the exploitation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and everything to do with the dirt of coal, the heat of the smelting furnace, or indeed with the idea of time, and how it acts on objects. The eighteenth-century obsession with the purification of white marble works, their ambition to make them *complete* again, putting them in perfect halls was countered by introducing works that had been exposed to the elements, that were rusting. And I think that it was very important to deal with the issue of time in an organic way.

**JH.** Yes, I'm fascinated about what you said earlier on in the interview about time, and about these classical sculptures being like snapshots, aiming to capture or freeze a moment in marble. Do you see this as a point of contrast with your own sculptures? I mean, I suppose that some of your figures *do* embody moments in time, like falling, toppling, or just 'Still Standing'...

**AG.** Yes, I think that unlike heroic Greek actions (they come from a series of works called *Ataxia*) they are more to do with the internalisation of energy, rather than the expression of a dramatic action, you know, like *David and Goliath*, the famous Bernini, where he's just about to jettison the slingstone. These are trying to make physical instability equate to a psychological or emotional instability to do with, I think, the human condition as a predicament rather than a cause for celebration. So they are about doubt and uncertainty much more than they are about 'the classical hero'. And that was important as well – the contrast between, you could say, the assured classicism, the idea of the continuity of society, the idea about the continuity of the values that the building represents, being a context in which breakdown is acknowledged in both the material condition of these works and in their emotional content.

**JH.** It sounds like they really did gain layers of meaning from their particular setting within the Hermitage.

**AG.** Well, I hope so. That's one of the things that we learnt at art school: the context is half of the work. So all of these works were made specifically for this show, knowing this particular room, knowing the relationship with the works next door. It took two years to evolve, negotiate; several trips there. It was a long job, but worth it. You can't make anything responsibly today with the presence of the past so absolutely accessible to us without it having a dialogue with everything that has already been made. In this context it was the contact between things that were made in the classical world that were questioned by my work in terms of what the body could carry through attribute and association.

What are the connecting principles? Well, these are more or less lifesize body surrogates that sit in the same space as the living body of the viewer, and pertain to a desire that human beings have had almost as long as there have been cultures – to make an equivalent to their own lives in substances that will outlive their own existence. And then the similarities cease. I reject the idealisation of beauty, the symbolic, the mythical,

the applying of attributes – the club, the cup and finally I deny gesture itself – all of the limbs in my work are clamped to the body, not extended from it.

So this is a stripping bare of that desire to make an objective correlative of a living body in something that is not living, and leaves it almost as an unfinished project, much as a child might pile wooden blocks one on top of another, in order to knock them down. So it's a very childish proposal, you might say. Why do we find it necessary to erect things to test ourselves, and then, having made them, to what extent to they remain true? Well, they can't. It's extraordinary – that's the *lie* of sculpture, isn't it? That it attempts to inscribe in 'sidereal' time (in other words, in minerals that come from the beginning of planets and the condensation of clouds of gas into mass), in *that* language, something of the fugitive thoughts and feelings of a human life. And yet that very attempt is doomed. But we've always had to do it.

**JH.** Well I think that would be a perfect place to finish. That has been incredibly enlightening – thank you ever so much.