

# Land of the giants

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Cast of hundreds: figures from Antony Gormley's Domain Field, based on plaster moulds taken from the bodies of 284 volunteers ( )

**Though it is the Young British Artists who make the headlines, Britain's most distinguished artists belong to the generation that preceded them. Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor, both in their fifties and both Turner Prize winners, have jointly assumed Henry Moore's mantle as the nation's artists-in-chief, lauded by the Arts Council and the Tate and turned to first when public and institutional works are to be commissioned.**

Accordingly, their work has been steadily inflating to a size appropriate to their status. Gormley constructed Britain's largest ever sculpture, the Angel of the North, which commands the entrance to Newcastle from the South, and his monumental Quantum Cloud hovers above the Thames by the ill-fated Dome; Kapoor has filled the cavernous interiors of both Tate Modern and Baltic with his oversized tubes. This week, in two exhibitions, these artists reveal their latest work.

Gormley and Kapoor came to prominence in the Eighties, but they are both very much children of the Seventies. With refined hippy sensibilities, they invoke the power of Zen Buddhism and their work explicitly aims to achieve the transcendental. In what, from today's perspective, looks grandly traditional in intent, their work has something edifying to impart to everyone.

Kapoor's work is the more visually intriguing of the two. At the Lisson Gallery, his new show includes a number of his familiar, wall-hung and freestanding geometric forms, but this time coated with high-tech iridescent paint, of the kind used on fast cars and motorbikes, and finished with thick, reflective varnish so that they bend light and trick the eyes.

Stand a little distance in front

of one of the wall-hung, smooth, round dishes that are about two-and-a-half metres in diameter and the concave surface will seem to be, say, metallic brown.

As you move closer, the colour sparkles and shifts through the spectrum, becoming, in turn, green, blue and then grey.

Move still closer and suddenly depth disappears, an almost holographic effect takes over and your vision is filled with shimmering, so that it feels as if you are stepping into a pool or a force-field.

The pieces are fully in keeping with Kapoor's tradition of attempting to be both aesthetically pleasing and spiritually resonant, and as sculptures appearing in an exhibition entitled *Painting*, they are also designed to subvert the three-dimensional/two-dimensional divide by creating a visual space that exists only in your perception.

However, like his previous

work, they stray into the dangerously ephemeral territory of the fairground trick and only by an absurd stretch can sensory befuddlement be equated with spiritual significance.

At the Baltic in Newcastle, where Gormley's work is on show, any expectations of visual poetry are immediately dashed by the large rusting scrotum that the artist has deposited at the entrance. As with almost all of his work to date, this piece, part of his *Enlargement* series, derives its form from a cast of his own body.

The other works here, however, exemplify his more recent interest in making sculpture with and, to an extent, about the people - an interest first expressed in his well-known *Field for Britain*, a carpet of thousands of disturbing humanoid clay figures roughly fashioned by people from the community of St Helen's, Merseyside. *Domain Field* generated much publicity earlier this year, when Gormley's assistants covered 284 volunteers in plaster to create casts of their bodies.

The final figures that make up the finished installation are, however, the lightest forms that Gormley has ever made. Similar in style to his Quantum Cloud, each figure is made from thin struts of steel welded together that rise up to create internal form, staying within the boundaries of the original, but now discarded, cast without crudely describing it.

The public can wander through the crowd that Gormley seems to regard as a representation of collective spiritual consciousness, achievable, he might say, through awareness of the true nature of things and an overthrow of the tyranny of the material.

Yet, though this work has none of the gloomy turgidity of Gormley's previous efforts, it has a similarly simple, bland aesthetic - the visual equivalent of a tune played on a onestringed guitar.

The lack of individuality of his figures can be just as easily identified with the inhuman callousness of a prison camp or free-market system as with a spiritual nirvana beyond the lie of the self.

Heroic though Gormley and Kapoor's attempts to stay true to the high, enlightening purpose of art may be, ultimately they are failures. That is not entirely their fault, for in a society that sets little store by either the collective, or the collective good, one is trapped by one's own perspective and, as Gormley's work shows, one man's heaven can be another's hell. ■

- *Anish Kapoor's Painting is at the Lisson Gallery, NW1 (020 7724 2739) until 28 June; Antony Gormley's New Work is at the Baltic, Gateshead (0191 478 1810) from tomorrow until 25 August.*