



Mark Lawson

The lure of UFO spookiness and sheer improbability

The surprising popularity of outdoor sculpture offers a lesson to galleries struggling to bring crowds through the doors

If alien invaders land in the north of England, they will report to headquarters that the planet observes a religion that worships giant figures. Two artworks by Antony Gormley – *Angel of the North*, the massive iron statue directing traffic above the A1, and his hundred cast-iron men wading in the waves at Crosby – will soon be joined by Sean Henry's *Couple*, figures five metres high of a man and woman that will stand deep in the North Sea off the Northumberland coast.

And, though a Martian reporter would be wrong to interpret these pieces as sacred, they are certainly part of something of a cult. Henry's offshore paddlers confirm the current power of public art. While modern art remains subject to tabloid sarcasm and public scepticism, and a run of stunning buildings has failed to save contemporary architecture from mockery, sculpture seems to be connecting with the public to a degree highly unusual for modernism.

The two outstanding art exhibitions of this year, judged by tread of feet and word of mouth, are Gormley's London show and Andy Goldsworthy's installations over several acres of the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield. Revisiting the latter on one of the worst weekends of this Noah summer, I found emergency car parking being added to cope with demand. What these exhibitions have in common is that their most striking works stand in places where art would not normally be found. Gormley scatters dark, life-size figures across the rooftops of the capital, sculptures so ominously realistic that Londoners dialled 999, fearing suicides. Goldsworthy imposes sudden structures on the landscape, installations made from wood, stone, mud. The Yorkshire Sculpture Park has always played with context in this way – standing Henry Moores and Barbara Hepworths among sheep dung and cowpats – but the Goldsworthys seem to have boiled up from the soil.

Gormley, in particular, has paid for the enthusiasm of the public with scepticism from critics, who see him as a populist show-off, producing the artistic equivalent of cinema special effects. In fact he's no more crowd-pleasing than the now revered Henry Moore – a footballer-level celebrity in the improbable days when a sculptor could go on Parkinson; but it has to be acknowledged that, in the rise of public sculpture, what might initially seem like a victory for modern art is in some ways a defeat.

Clearly some of the reason for the wide appeal of this kind of work is that it's the opposite of abstraction (although Goldsworthy's work is a kind of agricultural expressionism), often being literally figurative, a grown-up Tussauds run by Gulliver. (Another modern scul-

tor with major box-office impact, Ron Mueck, also plays dazzling games with the scale of faces and bodies.) They can also be mined for clear and intriguing meaning: Gormley's London roof-men make us think not just of suicides, but also snoopers and shooters. Also, because the pieces generally require impressive physical effort – a Gormley or Henry needs the phone number of a crane company – sculptors are immune to the recurrent objection that modern art is too easy, that the Turner prize can be won with a photocopier.

Yet, while the march of public art across land and sea is partly explained by a response to older artistic values, the most significant factor, as for estate agents, is location, location, location. This art is loved for where it is. A central attraction of these installations is their UFO spookiness, the sheer improbability of their being in the landscape. The sight of a man in a cloth cap and a woman in jeans apparently wading in the North Sea 350 metres from shore – as Henry's *Couple* will achieve – appeals to our instinctive enjoyment of incongruity, the amused double-take that has made surrealism the currency of sitcoms, movies and commercials.

When corn circles began to appear in Britain, one art critic became convinced they were not the work of students or aliens but of Andy Goldsworthy. And this erudite conspiracy theory, though false, touches – as did the commuters trying to save Gormley's mannequins from plunging to the pavement – on the way in which the best public art feels like an ambush by an overnight prankster.

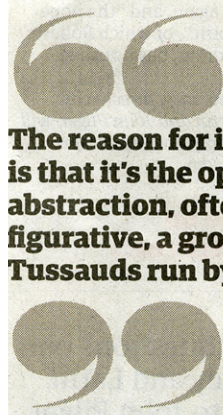
But the fact that these pieces appeal

partly because of being where they shouldn't sends a gloomy message to those places where art should be found galleries. The glittering visitor figures for Tate Modern distract from depressing research revealing that a significant percentage of the population would never consider visiting art galleries, finding the institutions hostile to their class, race, income or interests. Disturbed by such surveys, the outgoing director of the National Gallery, Charles Saumarez Smith, displayed reproductions of some of his swankiest pictures on exterior walls around London.

Strikingly, the region that has become the power base of outdoor art, with *Angel of the North* and the *Couple*, has struggled to attract the public to its new big-budget gallery: the Baltic Centre in Gateshead. Although the building has had some successes – notably when it made the logical move of staging a Gormley exhibition – the disparity in the reaction to outdoor and indoor art offers compelling evidence that many people who refuse to go to art are happy enough for art to come to them.

Gormley's London exhibition ends this weekend and his 27 omniscient statues will be moved. The artist's men in the sea at Crosby, originally temporary, were later made permanent and there is a strong case for the roof men to be given the same stay. They would stand both as a tribute to British sculpture's remarkable connection with the public and a warning to the art galleries at ground level of the urgent need to achieve the same effect indoors.

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