# Antony Gormley’s early lead sculptures reveal themes of vulnerability and survival



An exhibition at White Cube Gallery is currently showcasing the early works of Antony Gormley, offering a comprehensive view of the British sculptor’s initial artistic explorations. Known internationally for his striking human figures, many modelled on his own body’s dimensions, Gormley’s debut pieces, created between 1977 and 1993, are distinct in their use of lead and evoke themes of preservation, vulnerability, and existential anxiety.

Among the highlighted pieces is "Land Sea and Air" (1977-79), which presents three grey, weathered boulder forms thoughtfully wrapped in lead. These include a granite rock sourced from an Irish beach, accompanied by elements representing water and air also enclosed in lead, though their true identities are obscured unless physically handled. This protective lead sheathing not only preserves the elemental materials but symbolises shelter against destruction — a poignant reflection of the era’s Cold War tensions and the looming threat of nuclear catastrophe.

Central to the exhibition is an assortment of everyday objects, each progressively sized from a pea to a ball and encased in lead. Alongside these are lead bullets arranged in a pile and a machete similarly wrapped, underscoring the omnipresence of violence and mortality in Gormley’s vision. The gallery’s lower level features the sculpture series often referred to as "Gorminators" — life-sized lead statues abstractly shaped like human bodies. They adopt vulnerable postures: some lie face down with legs splayed, others curl into fetal positions, while a striking 5-metre-tall figure has its head replaced by a building, its welded surface bearing scars of its construction.

Gormley’s choice of lead is fraught with symbolism. Historically associated with bullets and protection, here it manifests as a heavy, scarring shell that transforms the figures into “human munitions,” simultaneously shield and target. The body thus becomes a conduit between the physical world and the “transcendent realms,” as Gormley himself explains, highlighting his philosophical intent behind these forms. He further elaborates that he has “always thought of the darkness of the body as being equivalent to the darkness of the universe,” reflecting a complex interplay of corporeal existence and cosmic vastness.

While some critiques suggest the artist’s lofty justifications risk obscuring the visceral immediacy of the sculptures, those who engage beyond these layers encounter profound expressions of fear and paranoia. These lead figures, forged amid a climate of geopolitical tension and uncertainty, embody a human condition marked by survival instinct and the shadow of annihilation. Although rooted firmly in its historical moment, the exhibition’s underlying themes carry an unsettling resonance for contemporary audiences.

The Guardian’s art commentary notes the exhibition encapsulates "the first footprints left by a giant of contemporary British art," providing insight into Gormley’s foundational concerns and his enduring preoccupation with the human form as both physical and symbolic entity. The show invites visitors to consider these lead-clad bodies not merely as sculptures but as charged artefacts — markers of a fragile humanity poised between preservation and destruction.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.whitecube.com/gallery-exhibitions/antony-gormley-masons-yard-2025> - This URL provides information about Antony Gormley's upcoming exhibition, which aligns with the context of showcasing his early works. Although specific details about the exhibition mentioned in the article are not provided here, it supports the broader topic of his artistic presence in leading galleries.
2. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Gormley> - This Wikipedia article gives an overview of Antony Gormley's career and artistic themes, including his focal use of the human body in sculptures. It corroborates his status as a prominent British sculptor known for his transcendent and symbolic pieces.
3. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/antony-gormley-10-works-to-know> - The article lists notable works by Antony Gormley and provides insights into his creative process and the thematic elements in his art. It highlights his ability to use various materials and creative methods, aligning with the symbolism found in his lead sculptures.
4. <https://www.phillipscollection.org/event/2012-06-01-antony-gormley> - This URL references a past exhibition featuring Antony Gormley's works that explore the relationship between the body and space. It supports the idea that Gormley's sculptures often focus on elemental human experiences and their interaction with the environment.
5. <https://www.antonygormley.com/resources/texts/seeds-of-the-future-the-art-of-antony-gormley> - This text provides insight into the thematic elements in Antony Gormley's art, such as reflections on human existence and the body's role in space. It supports the idea that his sculptures are imbued with deeper philosophical meanings related to vulnerability and preservation.
6. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/antony-gormley-1805> - Unfortunately, this link is not available in the search results. However, it would typically offer biographical information and insights into Antony Gormley's artistic trajectory, corroborating his use of diverse materials and techniques in exploring the human condition.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2025/apr/24/antony-gormley-review-early-works-white-cube-london> - Please view link - unable to able to access data