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## Another Gormley, another perspective

**When Mick Owen was given the chance to visit the Iron Men on Crosby beach he cut some sandwiches, packed his waterproofs and set out for Merseyside.**

The place and sense of public art has been a recurring theme in *The Leisure Review* throughout our now 60 editions with your correspondent the first to ask the obvious question: "What is it for?" Kapoor's rusty helter-skelter in the Olympic Park is a classic example of the genre; it's big, it was expensive, it has no reference points which offer access to the uninitiated but it nevertheless seems appropriate to its setting and is accepted by the hoi poloi as 'a good thing'.

Antony Gormley's Another Place – for that is the installation's Sunday name as evidenced by the brown tourist signs which lead the visitor away from suburban Crosby and into the hinterland of Liverpool Docks – "consists of 100 cast-iron, life-size figures spread out along three kilometres of the foreshore, stretching almost one kilometre out to sea", according to Sefton MBC.

For local people the "Iron Men" are anything from a symbol of solidarity to a safety hazard depending on what use they make of the beach. Sailing boats, sea birds and sex campaigners are all cited as opponents of the installation but the Crosby Herald, reporting the council decision to make the statues a permanent feature of the beachscape, was more positive, implying that Lewis Biggs, a director at Liverpool Biennial who spoke for Another Place Ltd during the meeting, was right in his assertion that "it's about lifting people's hopes and morale... It really does change people's lives".

Turner Prize winner Gormley is clearly a fan of ambivalence, with his quoted explanations that the work is "a whispering communication with forgotten levels of history" and "a kind of acupuncture of the landscape, but also acupuncture of people's dreamworld" about as helpful as the yokel in the joke who, when asked for directions to Galway, says, "Sure, if I was going there I wouldn't start from here."

Where one starts one's journey to an explanation of Another Place is clearly important to what one understands it to be saying; and 100 humanoid figures with outsized penises gazing longingly out over the Mersey estuary must surely be trying to say something.

If your route to Crosby's wide, flat, wind-scoured beach takes you past the thrusting novelty of Litherland Sports Park, which in 2006, the year the Iron Men arrived, was described by consultancy Knight, Kavanagh, Page as taking "the practical implementation of the sports village concept to a new level", the figures may well speak of the foolishness of fashion but with that route also brushing past Aintree Race Course, a fading gable end mural with some kind of Beatles connection and signs to Blundellsands – the home of Waterloo Rugby Club, once a bastion of the kick and clap game but now rubbing along the bottom of the RFU's fifth division and selling pitches for housing – the sense of decayed glory is tangible.

The final part of the road journey to the nearest vantage point from which to visit Gormley's now permanent installation will take you past [www.theleisurereview.co.uk](http://www.theleisurereview.co.uk)

**"A sea-and-landscape to evoke keening loss not hopeful departures; the figures were watching in the forlorn hope that their loved ones might return one day from the sea rather than waiting for their pals to get off the Mersey ferry"**

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the gates of Liverpool's newest docks and again the city's history travels with you. These facilities' predecessors linked Liverpool to the world and in the early 19th century, if we are to believe Wikipedia, 40% of the world's trade passed through Liverpool docks, making it a major world city. Whether it is the city's cosmopolitan and glorious past or its subsequent decline which gives Scousers their vaunted chippiness is uncertain but the sea and sea-faring has always influenced the city.

The sea and the beach are as much part of the installation as the figures themselves if for no other reason than if you time it badly the tide may have covered them completely. At other times all 100 can be seen, if not in their entirety at least as much as the drifting sand will allow. The sea is also still sculpting the sculptures with rust, barnacles and other submarine additions and deletions apparent when the figures are approached.

On the day that TLR visited the weather was also playing its part with drifting curtains of freezing drizzle dampening the spirit, challenging the determination to see the whole installation and giving an ethereal quality to the grim, grey surrounds. Beach, sea and sky melded to make the stooped figures the only certain reference points between the dockside cranes and Southport's distant Ferris wheel.

Had a Silkie emerged from the sea or a Tardis landed on the slurred sand few of the handful of scattered tourists taking photos and drawing conclusions would have been surprised. It was a sea-and-landscape to evoke keening loss not hopeful departures; the figures were watching in the forlorn hope that their loved ones might return one day from the sea rather than waiting for their pals to get off the Mersey ferry.

On other days and in other eyes the casts represent self-reflection made huge, a piece of theatre in nature or "passive monks awaiting their doom as a tidal wave approaches". Like all public art they are owned and disowned by the people whose lives they touch. The woman at the fancy new water sports centre, which sits just behind the dunes and a "marine lake" made possible by the spirit, and funding, of regeneration, was clearly proud to direct a foreigner to "the statues" but like every Liverpoolian she had to make her point. "When you come back you can buy a coffee in the bistro," she said. What she meant was: "When you get back you can pay us for the car park and the pee you've just had."

But you cannot blame a girl for trying and she was obviously proud of her shiny new building and her Iron Men. Beyond the dunes, the barnacled casts continued to give hopeless battle to the wind, sand and sea. This side of the man-made lake the centre offered safe and sanitised adventure to the risk-averse. The outside the adventure playground, outdoor gym equipment and concrete five-a-side space asked why we needed nature, red in tooth and claw or even just a little slippy underfoot.

A visitor to Liverpool has no real chance of understanding Another Place or the city which now hosts it. Not because either is hiding anything or that they are particularly complex or demanding, they just don't want you to understand them. They'll be all right with their mates, ta.

**Mick Owen is the managing editor of *The Leisure Review*.**

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