

'I am mediating nature with my body'



English artist Richard Long speaks about his physical interventions within landscapes

Richard Long has an exhibition *Mendoza Walking* at the Faena Arts Centre, running from June 28 for one month. Long (Bristol, 1945) is a British artist who has gained fame within the world of art for his revolutionary ideas, changing concepts of art. He is renowned for his "landscape art," where he leaves traces in nature during one of his many walks. Walking — or using his body as his artistic tool — and employing other natural materials in his work, make him stand out as an artist. Long has had shows at the MOMA in New York, the Tate in London and the Guggenheim in Bilbao, to name a few places. His current exhibit in Buenos Aires is also his first in South America.

In an interview with the Herald, Long talked about his focus on walks and his fascination with the Andean landscape.

Congratulations on your exhibition — it's the first one in South America, isn't it?

Yes, it is. I mean, I was at the Sao Paulo Biennale in 1994, but well, yes, this is the first solo show. When I came here in 2012 to do the walk in the Andes, I came by here and saw the place. It is a beautiful place. And if you give me a beautiful place, I can make a beautiful exhibition.

Was Mendoza Walking commissioned?

No. I always make my work on my own initiative.

So how did you find Mendoza?

I love the Andes.

Had you been there before 2012?

Yes, I made my first trip to South America in 1972. I went walking in Bolivia and Peru. I love the Altiplano, its nature is so particular. In 1994, I was here again (for the Sao Paulo Biennale). I hitchhiked all the way down to Patagonia. Amazing landscape.

Landscape and nature form an important part of Long's work. While passing through nature on his walks, he intervenes and leaves "sculptures" behind.

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Why do you feel a need to change or add to nature?

Part of human nature is to leave a mark. A mark on the planet — on some level. It's not the only reason to be here, of course, but we want to communicate. Even change something. The best sculptures I make are a celebration of me being in that place, at that time at that moment. The places usually chose themselves. I feel the need to leave a mark there and then, even if it's temporary. If I make a beautiful circle, for instance (as in his Mendoza Walking exhibit), then I want to show it to someone afterwards. That's when the camera comes in.

Why this urge to show it?

That's the whole point of being an artist: to communicate. If I were the last person in the world, there would be no reason to make art.

Would it not be enough if other people were crossing the Andes, in this case, and were to encounter your works, by chance?

Occasionally that happens, but they won't know that it's a work done by Richard Long. Other people make circles. Aborigines make circles. I leave marks, like other climbers or people and animals living in the mountains create paths while walking. Sometimes I walk in lines (back and forth, to create a line in the earth, based upon his renowned 1968 piece) along the foothpaths created by generations of people. There are different layers on the surface of the world and I am adding to that.

How do you feel about nature changing your works?

I take that for granted.

Do you ever go back to where you walked and left your sculptural traces?

Occasionally, but it is not my intention to go back and check out a site. In fact, I feel the opposite. Sometimes it is not even there anymore. I make a work. Take the photograph and put everything back.

You actually do that?

Yes, sometimes I do. It kind of depends on the place. The mark is like a stopping place on my walk. I make the work. Take the photograph. Put the camera back and walk on never to go back to the place again. And that's actually quite a nice aspect of it. Knowing that the work will disappear in time.

Is your art about nature?

I turn walking into art. Or I turn nature into art, don't I? The mud — he points at the mud painting in the gallery — is nature. And I turn it into art. And into words, as you can see from the text works. This exhibition in fact shows all the different statures I choose to have at my disposal.

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Why work with mud here though?

Well, when I was here in 2012, I went up to the Delta, to the Parana River and was drawn to it. I found this mud. I had to look for the right sludge to work with. I have been working two days on this painting, putting the mud in fast pace on the wall. You see the movement, the gesture of my arm, of my hand. I am mediating nature with my body.

The framework you painted it in is particular.

It's a ziggurat. It is a very South American form, isn't it? The first time I used this symbolic shape was in Bolivia, when I was there in 1972. I love the symmetry of it. A lot of my work is about symmetry.

The symmetry gets "broken" by the splashes outside its border.

It is mud, and very liquid. Therefore parts drip down, due to gravity. The splashes are a result of the fast movements of my hand. The splashes are very much part of the work. I do the top part of the work, and nature does the rest.

Did you choose this symbol on purpose, do you look into the culture of places you walk and make art?

I am not an anthropologist. I am not a political thinker. I am not a writer. There is a lot I am not. What I am is an artist.

The text work made following the Mendoza walk is also constructed in a ziggurat shape.

This is a more complex text work. In another place in the gallery you can see a simpler text. It mentions the concept of the walk I did in Spain in 2009: a walk following the full moon, until the new moon, following its waning moonlight. That is what the text says. Here within this symmetrical shape (where words of the same amount of letters are juxtaposed) I made a much more complex piece of language. Some words describe the physicality of the place, others are part of the discourse of walking, stemming from introspective ideas about for reaching the top, about luck and chance on the way.

Are you religious? The "here and now" of the places you chose for your traces in nature, this perfect circle made of wood snippets — the other site specific work in the gallery — may suggest so.

No, I am not religious. I am drawn to Zen Buddhism, yes, but a lot of artists from my generation are. You could say I made the circle in a sort of Zen way: being concentrated, relaxed, not worrying about where to finish.

You mean you didn't measure this perfect circle?

No. I made it by eye. I just started in the middle and went to the end. I don't think about it while doing it.

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What's going to happen with these two works when the exhibition ends?

Well, in an ideal world, it would be nice if they could keep it.

Do you have your next walk planned yet?

No. As soon as I am back in England, I have to go to Rome, Italy, for another exhibition. A lot of time is now spent on time making exhibits and catalogues. It's not just walking.

Do you like that?

Well, I least like the openings and talking to journalists (laughs). But it's part of being an artist.

Your international career started in Italy, didn't it, with the Arte Povera Show in 1968?

Yes, by chance actually. I was in Dusseldorf, had a show there, and then I had nothing to do. So the gallerist said, "why don't you head south to Italy, there is a crazy group of artists there. Just show up." And that's what I did. And now, 45 years later, I see I was part of a movement... On a serious note: my "line made by walking" is in fact a classic Arte Povera work, making something with nothing. And they could see that I was a contingent spirit, so they took me in. I am fortunate to always have received the encouragement and support of the artists of my generation.

What about the rest of your entourage?

From them as well. From my family, my school. In elementary school, I was already the school's artist. The head mistress recognized this and would let me paint for half an hour every morning, while the others had religious service. Later in secondary school, I made the stages for the school plays and a mural in the summer.

You still paint sometimes?

No. Well, yes, I make fingerprint drawings.

Your body being your instrument.

Yes, it's about the different scales I use, from the small finger, to the walk of a 1000 miles.

But the walk is just with the foot, right?

Yes, it's just more.