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Richard Long's walks in the wild

With new exhibitions celebrating 40 years of his work, the sculptor and landscape artist talks about solitude, mud and a sense of the sublime



One of the fallacies of the Young British Artist (YBA) era is that before that time, British artists were never young. There were plenty of artists whom we recognised before their 25th birthdays, sold to museums and collectors abroad, and were supported by gallery owners with their long-term interests at heart.

David Hockney and Peter Blake are the obvious examples from the early 1960s but, by the end of the decade, the scene had shifted to St Martin's School of Art in London, where the "A" class in the sculpture department had been selected for their radical ideas: they wanted to move art out of the studio into wider social and political exchange with the world. They included Gilbert & George, Barry Flanagan, Bruce Maclean, Hamish Fulton and Richard Long.

Before St Martin's, Long had been a student at West of England College of Art in Bristol, where he had grown up. In 1964, at 18, he was self-confessedly precocious. That winter he went out and rolled a snowball across the grass. As it picked up snow, it grew larger and heavier, leaving behind a meandering track. Long took a photograph of it and went home. It was his first intervention in the landscape and it set the path, literally, for what he has been doing ever since.

Fifty years later, Long is about to open an exhibition at the New Art Gallery, Walsall. It covers 40 years of his work as a printmaker, with additional stone floor-pieces and a huge new mud work — a massive drawing in liquid mud, which he applies by hand — across one of the gallery's 26-metre walls. (These mud works are made in situ; if a collector wants to buy one, Long makes a new one.)

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“Waterfall Line”, which he made for the opening of Tate Modern in 2000, is still there but concealed behind a false wall. Later this month, an exhibition of Long’s latest work will open at the Lisson Gallery in London. He first joined the Lisson in 1971 and now, after two decades with the d’Offay Gallery, which closed in 2001, and a decade at the Haunch of Venison gallery, he has returned.

At 68, Long is a physical metaphor for his work: tall, lean, rangy and tightly sprung. On this chaotic pre-opening afternoon, he is full of nervous impatience at the public requirements — the interview, the photograph, the public talk, the private view.

He has been an international artist from the beginning. His first solo show, in 1968, was at the Konrad Fischer gallery in Dusseldorf, which was Gerhard Richter’s gallery and where American artists such as Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt and Bruce Nauman had their first European solo shows.

Long and Andre became friends. When I ask what will be in his Lisson show, he says, “I have a plan for a new walk but I don’t want to talk about it until I’ve done it. As Carl Andre once said, you climb a mountain because it’s there, but you make a work of art because it’s not there. So no work of art exists until it’s made. Including a walk.”

Yet there is a paradox here: Long’s walks depend on the existence of the natural landscape — are indeed a celebration of it — and his own interventions are minimal. The walk is as much part of the work as his single-handed alterations: moving stones into a line or a circle or a spiral; transplanting stones from one location to another; creating a path where one didn’t exist before; piling stones into a cairn or upending them like Neolithic figures to face the horizon. He considers himself a sculptor, and a radical one, but he also sees himself and his art as part of a long tradition.

“People have left circles of stones for thousands of years in different cultures all over the world. My work takes its place among many other man-made marks and cairns and footpaths and stone markings. Most artists, like the YBAs, are city artists. Being a landscape artist is still a minority art but it doesn’t bother me at all.”

Nor does it bother him that the actual works are rarely witnessed. “All artists — what you see in their work is their choice. My interest is walking in the wilderness and making sculptures in lonely solitary places that most people would probably never see. I’m not that interested in people even seeing the sculptures. Which is appropriate to the whole spirit of the way I work.”

What he offers the viewer is an imaginative experience: the means to share that sensation of being alone in the landscape, to be transported into a different mental space, to consider the

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world from a different perspective. He makes a single visual record from each walk. It might be a photograph or a sequence of words, or both.

The photographs, usually in black and white — but also in colour — are straightforward shots of the landscape and the work. The texts can just be the location, date and sometimes the length of the walk, or they can be more complex assemblies of words: lists and phrases that describe the route, or the experience — sights, weather, sounds, terrain.

This is where the tension of the work is held: all the energy of the undertaking contained in a single frame. Unlike haikus, to which the text pieces are sometimes compared, there is no overt attempt at emotion. Yet in their economy, they can offer the viewer more than a photograph.

Long has made works in many distant locations: the Himalayas, the Andes, Mongolia, Japan, Mexico, Scandinavia, Nepal, as well as much closer to home. “All those sculptures are works of passage,” he says. “They are stopping places along a journey. I am never consciously trying to choose somewhere new, because I always return to places that are very well-loved and familiar to me. So all my work is a balance between making walks in places that I don’t have any clue of what I’ll find, to going back to Dartmoor many times in the past 30 years.”

Each walk is based on an idea. He sets off with a plan but chance plays a big role. “Even though I’m not a conceptual artist, ideas are very important in my work. But they’re always ideas as they’re realised by me doing the walks or carrying the stones or throwing them over a cliff or whatever.”

His work has nothing to do with Romanticism, he says — but I wonder if he admits the idea of the sublime.

“Yes. Absolutely. There is something sublime about a fingerprint.”

Should the viewer get a sense of the sublime from your work?

“Oh yes, I think so.”

Does religion have any part to play?

“Ah.” He sits back. “The big questions. No, I’m not by nature a religious person, any more than I’m a political person. I’m first and foremost an artist.”

But they’re not mutually exclusive.

“Exactly.” Long’s speech picks up speed. “I think art can be spiritual and emotional and enlightening and uplifting and sublime,” he says. “When I am in such a place, with my energy, in a beautiful place that has beautiful stones and I can make a circle and it’s beautiful and I can

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take the photograph home to show other people. I have celebrated me being in that wonderful place. So it's a coming together of many different things, all very positive. But I have to put myself in these places. With all the artistic baggage from my whole life of being an artist, in my head, in that place."

He looks at my tape recorder. "I like the idea of making something of nothing — which a lot of my work is, almost. Don't you think that's a good way to end?"

It's not from nothing, though, is it?

"No, of course not. Nothing is from nothing. It's a Zen idea."

—Financial Times

Richard Long's "Prints 1970-2013" is on until June 22, and "Spring Circle" until July 9, both at New Art Gallery, Walsall, England. His latest works will be on show at the Lisson Gallery, London, from May 23-July 12.