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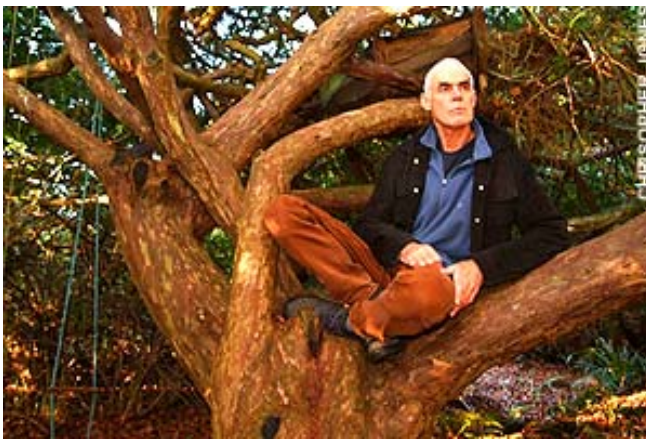
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In the studio: Richard Long

By Martin Gayford

Richard Long's studio is nature - his works record the extraordinary walks he takes across some of the world's most dramatic landscapes. Martin Gayford joins him for a gentle stroll through the English countryside in which he grew up



"Are you OK for boots?" Richard Long asks me. It's not a question one is normally expected to answer in an artist's studio, where sitting down on tacky paint is a more common hazard. But Richard Long is not a standard artist, and his studio is not easily located.

There is a limited amount that Long, as an artist, can do in a studio. He works in his house - a pleasantly converted Victorian school building in the country outside Bristol. That, however, is more of an office-cum-headquarters. It's where he can plan his exhibitions, and his expeditions. But a lot of his thinking is done on the spot, out in the world. Because Long, of course, is an artist who walks.

At home outdoors: Richard Long surveys woodland near his home in the West Country

That is the amazing and radical notion at the centre of Long's work: that walking could be the basis of a work of art. One of the first pieces that made his name was *A Line Made by Walking* from 1967, when he was only 22. It consisted of exactly what the title says: a mark created by Long's feet passing to and fro in the grass. At that stage he was at St Martin's School of Art in London and part of a celebrated generation that also included Gilbert & George.

A photograph of G&G looking extremely youthful is propped up in Long's kitchen where we have our lunch. "In my first week at St Martin's," Long recalls, "George was the chap on the next desk to me. He was already a pure, eccentric, fully-formed artist."

"It must have been like going to college with Oscar Wilde. You knew his life would be made into his work. When Gilbert arrived in London, he was like a shepherd boy from the Dolomites and George took him under his wing."

Long himself took the above-mentioned photograph on the roof of St Martin's. He, like G&G and a number of young artists of that time, was busily rethinking what art - and sculpture - might be. G&G came up with their *Singing Sculpture* - themselves, painted bronze, miming to *Underneath the Arches*. Long produced, among other pieces at that time, his *line in the grass*.

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That indicates a difference between him and G&G. Their personalities are at the centre of their work; his revolves around where he goes and what he experiences. Consequently, his appearance is scarcely known.

In person, Long is tall, and as you might expect, fit and wiry; in conversation, he is articulate but quiet and precise. He is not, he points out, a recluse, but he is solitary when it comes to art.

"I enjoy meeting people," he says, "but I find it difficult to work with people around. A lot of my best creative thinking time is when I'm on my walks, which are usually alone."

Long's work has taken him around the world. But though he has been almost everywhere - Mongolia, the Sahara, Ecuador, Australia, Scandinavia, America, the list of his destinations goes on and on - in some ways he is rooted to the Bristol landscape in which he grew up.

For one thing, he says firmly, mud from the Avon - visible from his house - is the best in the world. "It's classic tidal mud, which is different from mud that you might dig up in a field or muddy earth you get on your boots. It's very, very fine; it's silt, not soil. The molecular structure is completely different. It's very robust. It lasts well. A mud work on a wall could last for hundreds of years."

Long's mud works on walls are spectacular. They resemble giant abstractions, in which the forces of nature seem to have been harnessed to produce whorls and sprays of pure energy. They are planned out for a certain place and executed by Long, often with his bare hands.

When not walking at the ends of the earth, he also makes walks beginning and ending at his house, or at the little wood he owns just down the lane. As soon as I have checked my footwear, we are out inspecting this, an old arboretum on a steep slope. This place is also a sort of studio, with a little pavilion in which Long used to work during daylight hours (there is no electricity there).

After we have inspected the wood - which has a palm tree, a Californian redwood and a red Japanese maple that gave Long the idea for Red Walk, a journey through the West country in quest of that colour - Long suggests we step over the fence and carry on with our stroll. "If you are up for it?"

Of course, I say I am, and soon I am following Long as he strides out up hill and down hill, talking contentedly and evidently in his true studio.