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Richard Long

by Richard Cork

Richard Long has crossed deserts and braved earthquakes in pursuit of his art. His next challenge? The Royal Academy's Central Hall



Richard Long, *Untitled*, 2003, River Avon mud with acrylic medium and paint on wood, 48 3/8 x 48 3/8 inches

Back in the late 1960s, the young and precocious Richard Long began revolutionising the whole notion of British art and the landscape. Refusing to be confined by orthodox ideas, he regarded the entire world as a potential arena for his activities.

Usually on his own, Long roamed across even the most remote and deserted expanses of countryside. He made primal marks with the sand, water, earth, sticks, mud and stones found there, recreating his epic experiences in vastly impressive gallery shows where photographs, words and floor-based sculpture invited visitors to share a potent sense of wonder. Long was the first artist of my own generation to enthral me on a profound level, and he never attracted anything except vehement scorn from the arch-traditionalists at the Royal Academy.

But now, 35 years later, the tables have been spectacularly turned. David Hockney and Allen Jones, who are curating the academy's summer exhibition, invited Long to mount a special solo show in the most prominent space: the Central Hall. His presence here is a measure of how far the Royal Academicians have developed — away from insular, mind-numbing intolerance and towards a more enlightened, open understanding of modern art at its most adventurous.

Long himself, ready for a demanding day of installation in this lofty, skylit chamber, still seems surprised to find himself welcomed by his old enemies. But there is no time to linger on the past. Clad for action in a pale blue, short-sleeved T-shirt, he is already darting round the space with a long-limbed agility that belies his age. Next year Long will celebrate his 60th birthday. But he shows no sign of slowing up, or opting for shorter, safer walks in locations nearer home. The most recent work on display here arises from journeys to the Sahara Desert, a Japanese mountain, the Three Sisters Wilderness in Oregon, and Warli Tribal Land in Maharashtra, India.

Apart from his close-cropped white hair, this indefatigable wanderer appears as slim and energetic as he was when I first met him in 1971. He talks quickly, gesturing animatedly and then stops suddenly, as if overcome by shyness. For Long is an intensely private man, a natural loner who has always been based in his native Bristol and pursued a singleminded vision of the world. "The truth is," he says, pausing between hands-on bouts of picture-shifting, "I'm a classical artist concentrating on lines, circles and fundamental geometry. But I use lots of different media, and every stone or splash of mud is different. So I think it articulates the cosmic variety of nature."



Unlike many successful artists who rely on a battalion of assistants to produce their work, Long still insists on doing it himself. "It's all made by me, like a kind of self-portrait," he says. "The mud-works are done with my hands, and I roll the stones down the hill. It has always been like that. I'd get no pleasure from being an artist if I couldn't make the work myself. I'm one of the few artists who still lives where they were born. It's handy for all that mud on the river, so I'm still near my great natural resource."



Artist Richard Long

The only help he relies on to install his show here in the Central Hall comes from two young men, Kevin and Stuart. They suddenly arrive with a red metal ladder. As they climb up, Long starts directing them, measuring an immense white wall with tapes. Directly above, a bust of Michelangelo glares down disapprovingly from a gilded niche. But Long ignores this, pacing restlessly forward and back, assessing the space.

"You don't just plonk things up," he says. "Sometimes the creative way to work is to look at all the permutations. Opportunism is important, being able to use the particulars of a place which I normally don't know at all."

On two of the walls, he plans to hang large photo-pieces and text-works printed on thick paper. But on the other two, the words will be applied straight to the walls' surfaces. "The first piece deals with a six-day kayak ride down the Columbia River," he says, "and the second is a 15-day walk in South Africa — that'll be like a big circle of words, showing how I walked in a different direction each day and camped for 14 nights at a borehole on Guarrie Berg in the Karoo."

By this time, Kevin and Stuart have been given the go-ahead to place some sentences on the wall devoted to the Columbia River trip in the western US. I notice that two of them are musical quotes: Johnny Cash's *I Hear That Lonesome Whistle Blow* and Bob Dylan's *Watching The River Flow*.

So does he listen to songs while making the journeys? Long's bushy black eyebrows close in a frown, and he shakes his head. "I don't take audiotapes — that's too technical," he says. "They're not for me: I'm not on email or computer. But music is important to me at home, and sometimes an idea comes from having a piece of music going over and over in my head, like a mantra. I like very emotional music: I think art is very emotional. What else is there to live for? The happiest time of my life is when I'm walking. It's a great therapy, and a great time to sort things out. One function of art is to simplify the complications of life."

So how can he bear being in a metropolis as big as London? "I couldn't live in it, but I accept it," he says. "Most art is made by artists based in cities, so my work is not typical. I have a hit-and-run attitude to urban life. I do love the energy of New York, but all my work is made in completely isolated places, where there's amazing freedom."

Out there, in the desert or wilderness, silence must be cherished. Long does not even take a mobile phone with him. "It spoils the walk," he says. "I don't want to interrupt the concentration: I'm in a private zone. Many years ago I took a radio along, to follow a cricket match. But I couldn't focus on either the game or the world around me."



For the same reason, he avoids taking books. "They're too heavy to carry, anyway, and not as important as food. I don't like novels taking me over. If you're in Oregon, where the land is covered in volcanic dust, you don't need Jane Austen. I've never felt lonely, ever. Urban loneliness, yes, but never in a landscape."

Why? "Because solitude is rare, and something to be savoured."

Only by concentrating very hard in the primordial emptiness can he become fully alert, and respond to the kind of uncanny experiences behind a text-work called *Transference*. Taking me over to look at it, Long explains that "there's a phenomenon in particle physics where behaviour can be duplicated, from one part of nature over to another. It's one of the great mysteries."

Transference started with a three-day walk on Dartmoor, where Long notes, among other things, white butterflies, animal droppings, slipper boulders and a peat bog. Then, "half a lunar month later", some of them were uncannily repeated during a seven-day walk on Chokai Mountain in Japan.

They made him respond "in completely new ways", and a related urge has now led him to use an equally fresh approach for his large new sculpture on the floor of the Central Hall. "I'm calling it *White Light White Mud Crescent*," he says, moving over to a lamp resting in a corner. "I guess I wanted a work which people can walk through. There'll be heavy human traffic in the summer exhibition, and visitors will cut that crescent with their feet and shadows."

Where did the idea for this unprecedented piece come from? "It sounds corny, I was camping and looking at the Moon out in the desert. I thought: 'What am I going to do in this space at the Royal Academy, with its problematic trap-door in the floor?' So I just decided it would be nice to have this image of white light, with people walking through it."

Although Long insists that he is not "a literary person", the choosing of words becomes a central activity on his walks. So how does he record them? "Most of my text-works start out in the margins of maps, written in pencil," he says. "But I do have a notebook and, in fact, I can show it to you."

Striding over to a rucksack deposited at the edge of the room, he produces a battered notebook with the number 4 on the cover. "It's small because everything has to be light on a walk: that's crucial," he says, showing me a densely written diary, lists of things he has encountered and words in capital letters, the try-outs for wall-works. Turning the pages, I find myself reading a dramatic entry from his Japanese expedition: "Ants in dry grass. Tremor, in evening! Bigger quake around 7.13 in the morning!" During his last night on Chokai Mountain, this major earthquake killed several people in the region. I ask Long if he was frightened. "No, no, not at all," he replies dismissively, as if the question were absurd. "I wasn't scared: I was in the middle of a forest. It's the safest place to be. Nothing can ever happen to you."

Long continues to regard the natural world with a fundamental sense of awe. Hence, perhaps, the luminous serenity of his *White Light White Mud Crescent*. Later that day, high up in the ceiling, the lamp is attached to a circular track with the aid of a lift. The projected beam creates two large curves far below. Their glow is enhanced by a layer of white mud meeting another layer of china clay, with a glistening rainbow effect all along the edges. Watching how they scythe through space, and meet at a point of intense brightness, I see the work as a symbol of Long's need to keep on the move.

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"The whole world is my territory," he says, "and the big tension in my life is finding the balance between walking and showing my work. I wish I had more time for walking."