

## JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Sheena, Hastings. "Elemental art that speaks for itself," *Yorkshire Post*, June 25, 2012,  
<http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/lifestyle/the-arts/art/elemental-art-that-speaks-for-itself-1-4671989>

**YORKSHIRE POST**

### Elemental art that speaks for itself



Richard Long is one of the most influential artists of his generation and generally prefers the work to speak for itself. In a rare interview he talks to Sheena Hastings.

IT'S two days before Richard Long's Artist Rooms show at The Hepworth Wakefield opens to the public. The spaces where his 13 pieces will be seen are closed for now, and their creator is working with technicians so that every component is perfectly placed.

Being allowed a preview is a treat, and slipping through the door to see work inspired very much by earth and water and executed using materials from nature, the immediate sensation is one of stepping into a universe very different to that inhabited by Dame Barbara Hepworth, whose classic sculptural works stand only yards away.

Including two site-specific pieces as well as work dating back to 1967 across Long's astounding career, the show sums up what it is that has put him at the forefront of British art for over 40 years,

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pioneering new ideas and directions through an exploration of landscape as both medium and subject.

Long started making sculptures in the landscape in the mid-1960s. He used photography to record the ephemeral traces of interactions with nature. Subsequent early map works recorded very simple but precise walks on Exmoor and Dartmoor with the intention "to make new ways of walking: walking as art". The walks are described in three ways – in maps, as photos or as text works.



Each walk expresses a particular idea, such as walking in a straight line for a pre-determined distance, walking between the sources of rivers, measuring a walk by tides or dropping a stone into each river crossed along a coast to coast walk. While many of Long's walks connect his art to the River Avon (he lives and works in Bristol, where he grew up) with its tides and mud, others have taken him as far and wide as Canada, Nepal, Africa, Mexico, Mongolia and Bolivia.

Tall and rangy, built almost in the mould of an Ethiopian distance runner, Long is slightly reticent in person. He says others may talk in a complicated way about his work, but really it is very simple. His *Water Falls*, created specifically for this show, took one hour to make, and as an opener it is breathtaking. He was given a 9 metre by 7 metre wall space and used a scissor-lift to plaster china clay on top of black paint with his hands. At the top edge in swirls, the falling trickles make skinny finger marks in the middle; more whorls are below – like foaming water below a waterfall. Using first his own energy to create momentum, he then left gravity to do its work in taking the clay in a delta towards the floor. The result seethes with power, almost bursting off the wall.

As with many of his works, there is an element of what Long calls "cosmic variety" in *Water Falls*. The materials find a path in their random way – a pattern never to be repeated, made using natural forces.

Over 30 years Long has become well known at certain favourite slate quarries. *Blaenau Ffestiniog Circle* (2011) is a forest of slate off-cuts that, when placed together, in the distance create their own weird and dark landscape. Inspected more closely, there's an intense depth at the centre, one that you could fancifully imagine erupting into life.

In the same room is *Cornish Slate Ellipse*, another conglomeration of pieces, this time of uniform depth so that they lie in a flat, elongated oval, a maze of natural, recognisable material transformed into something both familiar and regular yet also unpredictable and unsettlingly alien.

Long says he'd been visiting favourite quarries for decades to gather materials for his work before anyone working there knew what he did with the stone. "I think they're sort of proud of me," he adds, with a slightly tentative laugh.

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Long began experimenting with making pieces from lumps of turf in a neighbour's garden when he was a teenager. His parents were "loving, encouraging, supportive... liberal", he says. After art college locally and then at St Martin's in London, his work began to make waves. The 1967 Line Made By Walking – a line made across a field of cross literally by walking back and forth along it, was an early expression of his trademark walks. It was hailed as a turning point in modern art, initially finding an audience among his peers in Germany and the Netherlands.

His walks don't always leave a manifest mark on the landscape, although a mysterious and beautiful sign of his transient presence (like Circle in Africa, made in Malawi in 1978) has suddenly appeared in many a wilderness, made using whatever he can find, be it stones or cactus branches left blackened by fire.

"I'm an opportunist. I often don't plan what I will do, what materials I will use and how I will place them. I used whatever's there, and when I've finished, the piece might be gone before anyone comes along.

"I photograph it, but it's not about people coming along to that spot and reacting to it. The function of the photos is to bring the work out into the world."

Long's basic premise as an artist is, as he says, a simple one: art can be anything and anywhere. That's it. Concentric Days 1996 is a map of Exmoor and Dartmoor with five concentric circles drawn on it. The art Long created was the endeavour of walking within each of the circles consecutively. His work created in text is exemplified at The Hepworth Wakefield with the line: 'A day's walk across Dartmoor following the drift of the clouds'. It may be one line, disappearing upwards off a wall, but it perfectly describes the free spirit that created it.

He enjoys walking thousands of miles, and also revels in making work in a studio or gallery with mud, or a Zen 'path' of twigs (Willow Sticks, 1980). The myriad forms his work takes seem to feed off each other.

Seeing them in the same room, a complementary energy is created. Some of his work is a mark made out there somewhere that will disappear, leaving only a photograph. Others like his slate pieces here, come with certification and instructions on how every small component must be placed, so that others can reconfigure them with exactitude in future.

"All of it is as much about other people as me. I don't talk too much about what I do. I just make it, and leave other people to think what they think, feel what they feel. It's great if people get it."

*Artist Rooms: Richard Long is part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad Festival, and is at The Hepworth Wakefield from tomorrow until October 14. Information: 01924 247360  
[www.hepworthwakefield.org](http://www.hepworthwakefield.org)*

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## *Artist of earth, land and air*

*BORN in Bristol in 1945, Richard Long studied at the University of the West of England's College of Art 1962-5, then St Martin's School of Art and Design in London. Shortly afterwards he became closely associated with the emergence of Land Art. He also participated in the first international manifestations of both Arte Povera, in Italy in 1968, and Earth Art in New York in 1969. The Hepworth show is his 240th one-man exhibition, including a major retrospective at Tate Britain in 2009. Long is the only artist to be shortlisted for the Turner Prize four times, winning in 1989 with White Water Line.*