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The Richard Long retrospective Heaven and Earth, at Tate Britain , exudes personality and mystery

Two years ago the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art staged a retrospective of the work of British sculptor Richard Long that left me reeling. Selected and installed by the artist himself, the show struck a perfect balance between wall texts, photographs, three-dimensional sculptures, works on paper, and found objects.

But what really made the experience different from any show of Long's art I'd any seen before was the prominence given to his mud pieces, the spectacularly tactile works in which he throws, sloshes, smears and slaps liquefied mud or china clay straight onto the gallery walls. What struck me so forcibly at Edinburgh was the visceral, adrenalin-pumping excitement of encountering so many of the mud pieces in one place.

A new retrospective of Long's work opening today at Tate Britain is utterly different. The curator has shifted the focus away from works of art Long creates or assembles in the gallery to emphasise the long walks he has been making both this country and abroad since the Sixties. Because the viewer can only experience these journeys at second hand through words, maps and photographs, this aspect of Long's practice tends to appeal more to the mind than to the eye.

Despite the presence in this show of a number of three-dimensional sculptures and mud pieces, the large number of photo and text pieces makes exceptional demands on the audience. Though the show takes so much concentration that it will require more than one visit to see properly, it serves to remind us that the ephemeral journeys on foot have always been at the heart of this remarkable artist's work.

The history of art advances not when an artist creates something wholly original, but when the public accepts what he has done as a finished work of art. When JMW Turner exhibited a canvas consisting of two great arcs of black and white paint and nobody laughed when he called it Hannibal Crossing the Alps, landscape painting changed for ever. The same thing happened in 1967 when the 22-year-old Richard Long walked in a straight line through a field in the English countryside, photographed the newly trodden path, and then exhibited the photo as a finished work of art. He was asking his audience to make a trade-off: accept that to experience this work you have to use your imagination, and in return I will show you that sculpture can be made anywhere, out of any material, and using any physical action.

What convinced those who first saw this work of its importance, I think, was Long's ability to imbue his actions with gravity. Other artists in the late Sixties were working directly with the land, but none did so with Long's humility, his respect for nature, or his lightness of touch. In *A Line Made by Walking* we can see exactly how the path was made, approximate the time it took to make it, and guess how long it will remain visible before it is obliterated by the elements. And yet it is also mysterious. It looks as though it appeared out of nowhere, with no footprints leading up to it or away from it, at once a sign of the artist's presence and of his absence.

Long's earliest works are filled with silence and emptiness. In them, you find an unflinching compulsion to describe reality unmitigated by the artist's subjective responses to nature. Gradually, however, he added texts, and these in turn made his art more intimate, emotional and personal.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

In a piece made in 1970, for example, he took stones from the shallows of a river bank in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee to make an X-shaped sculpture under the clear running waters. In the lower right hand corner of the photograph documenting the action, he prints the words to Johnny Cash's I Walk the Line. Here he pays his respects to the culture of the American South, and also lets us know that the tune was running through his head as he worked. You can almost see him smiling as he did so, for that song could serve as the personal anthem for an artist who spends so much of his time walking lines.

It is hard to convey the effect of Long's wall texts without reproducing their topography, scale, spacing and use of colour. Many consist of place names, nouns, and verbs sometimes connected by prepositions or conjunctions, sometimes not. Basically these are lists of things Long saw, heard, thought, ate, or encountered on each walk, but when he strings them together they have the rhythmic concision of Japanese haikus.

One, from a 15 day walk he made in Oregon in 2001, begins "Moving by day/ Resting by night" and ends "The walk as A True Path/ Some False Moves". Reading it the first time, I saw it as another list of sights and events encountered on the walk. Now I'm not so sure. Long doesn't usually go in for metaphor but here he seems to equate the act of walking – and sleeping, dreaming, counting and thinking – with life itself.

But the text and photo works are so demanding that they are best seen one at a time, not in a large show like this. So it was a relief to come to the breathtaking display of six three-dimensional stone sculptures laid out in one large gallery. Each is different. In one long rectangular piece, fragments of light grey slate are placed in such a way that each diagonal is matched by an opposing diagonal. The thrusts and counter- thrusts create a sense of contained energy which is ratcheted even higher by the interstices between each stone, so that none actually touches another. By contrast, a monumental circle of closely spaced iron-rich basalt exudes an atmosphere so dark and heavy it feels as though it might sink through the gallery floor. An elegant circle of upended shards of dark red slate points to the sky, lifting the spirits.

And that brings me to the mud pieces, and the title of the show, Heaven and Earth. The theme of the union of earth and sky, body and soul, heart and mind runs throughout the exhibition, culminating in a mud piece made in two parts. There is a band near the ceiling in which Long has flung and rubbed china clay from Cornwall with his hands, fingers and arms in compact tightly worked sworls. And below this water line, he allows the force of gravity to let the overspill run in rivulets to the floor, so that the whole piece wonderfully evokes clouds, rain – heavenly turbulence pouring down to the earth below.

Long himself – I mean a photo of the artist – never appears in his work and yet walking through this show there isn't a moment when you aren't aware of his mind and his body at work – just as it is difficult to look at Jackson Pollock's work and not picture the artist in the act of making one his drip paintings. Long is present everywhere, inside the landscape and outside it.

By the time you'd reached the exit you've experienced his hardship and joy, you know his taste in music, what he has for dinner at the campsite, what he reads, and what he thinks about as he walks. There was that film a couple of year's ago called A Beautiful Mind. That's what we encounter here.

From June 3 until Sept 6 at Tate Britain

Telegraph Rating: * * * *