



# Rich rewards of a natural curiosity

Andy Goldsworthy's work is shown at its evocative best in Yorkshire Sculpture Park, says William Packer

Land artist? Earth artist? Eco-artist? Conceptual artist? Whether Andy Goldsworthy is all or none of these things is hard to say, but he is an artist for all that. Yet for all his undoubted popular success, his resistance to pigeonholing does perhaps explain why he remains something of an outsider to such institutions as the Tate or the Arts Council, whose support so many of his peers have been able to take almost for granted. Curators these days require categories, critical programmes and an intellectual rationale. And Goldsworthy is a true one-off, and full of surprises.

Born in 1956, he was still a student by the time, in the late 1970s, that Richard Long and Hamish Fulton were already internationally celebrated. For a time it seemed he was just a late-comer to the same creative territory – intervening in the landscape, leaving a trace, performing an act, taking a photograph and moving on. But through the early 1980s his distinctiveness became apparent, owing as much to his natural curiosity and invention as to any formal quality. He may have set out his field of interest within clear limits – natural materials, natural processes, natural structures, the rhythms and uses of the land – but within it he always found an endless variety of engagement. Quite as much as of the natural philosopher, his was and remains the curiosity and excitement of the schoolboy, scuffing paths through dead leaves, rolling snowballs, watching the tide wash away ridges in the sand.

His exhibition now at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park is not quite the full retrospective that we might have expected of a show on such an ample scale. But it is

better than that. The small Bothy and Garden Galleries at the top of the Park are, it is true, given to archive and documentary displays going back even to Goldsworthy's student days at Bradford and Lancaster, but they are representative rather than exhaustive. A context is always helpful. The rest is, at the very least, recent work, the bulk specific to the show. New as it is, it shows us, sometimes on a heroic scale, the essential sculptor he has always been.

He is never more himself than when out in the worked but still natural landscape. Along the ridge at the very top of the park runs an ancient boundary ditch, bisected along its length by a more recent dry-stone wall. This wall, characteristically, Goldsworthy has interrupted at intervals, extending it into three rectangular dry-stone enclosures, within each of which he has dug down to the bedrock and then slung a stripped oak trunk across its space, wall to wall. At first approach, nothing is visible except the top of the old wall, then these new structures, and finally, as we peer over, the suspended tree-trunks, inexplicable in their meaning yet no less imaginatively resonant for that.

Nearby, in the Round Wood that may well mark another ancient site, is "Outclosure", circular like the wood itself, but quite impenetrable, built too high to look into, or even scramble up, though no doubt some will try. And down in the open parkland, on the footprint of what was a working timber sheepfold, he has built a no-less-practical dry-stone structure, except that in its centre is another enclosure all but filled by a large flat slab.

Old ways, traditional practice, natural structures, the used land:

so things continue indoors. In the Longside Gallery, high at the far side of the estate, the predominant theme is sheep. The gallery's long glass wall has been plastered entirely with fresh sheep dung, with only a wide serpentine band masked out along its length to allow a glimpse of the view across the valley – and make, of course, the obvious connection between the verdant grass outside and its fertilisation. In recent months, Goldsworthy has also laid out canvases in muddy fields, each with a slab of mineral sheep-lick in the middle, to see what happens – which proves in the event to be a flurry of hoof-prints round a now-blank centre, and the occasional mark of a quad-bike tyre. Rather intriguing, and surprisingly decorative, things they are.

But the more spectacular surprises rest in the vast Underground Gallery at the heart of the Sculpture Park. The first, crammed into the entrance lobby, is an apparently precarious stack of oak logs, all cut on the estate, the largest at the bottom, the smallest towards the top. But it is as solid as his dry-stone walls – nothing pegged, nothing stuck, but knitted together and held simply by weight.

Next is the "Stone Room", full of 11 low, hive-like structures of local warm-grey sandstone slabs laid one upon the next and capped with a single final slab holed in the middle – tombs, caves, hives: the possibilities are

and made of nothing but horse-chestnut leaf-stems pinned with blackthorns.

But best for me comes last but one. To enter the "Wood Room" is to enter a darker, older world. Like a Mycenaean beehive tomb, it is a high cavern, but not so high as not to be slightly oppressive. It is made of freshly coppiced chestnut poles, thick and heavy at the bottom but barely more than twigs above at the final closure of the structure. Woven together, as if it were an upturned basket, held simply by weight, and still reeking of the fresh-cut wood, it affords as extraordinary an experience of space and place as any I can remember.

This is altogether a remarkable exhibition, and could hardly mark the Yorkshire Sculpture Park's 30th anniversary year to better, or more appropriate, effect.

*'Andy Goldsworthy' is at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, until January 6, tel 01924 832 631. Sponsored by Roger Evans, with support from the Henry Moore Foundation*

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what you will. Then comes the "Clay Room", its walls plastered with a daub of local clay mixed with human hair, and left to dry and crack. The last, the "Leaf Stalk Room", is divided by as light a structure as the rest are heavy – a lace-like curtain hung floor-to-ceiling across its width,