

He's got the whole world in his hands

Alastair Sooke meets Andy Goldsworthy, the sculptor who makes art out of down-to-earth materials such as wood, clay and manure

When I meet Andy Goldsworthy ahead of his new show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park near Wakefield, the artist refuses to shake my hand. This is not because he's precious. Far from it: he seems down-to-earth, speaking with a soft accent that betrays the fact that he has lived in a Dumfriesshire village for the past two decades. Nor is he piqued because I drew attention to the tattoo of Elvis Presley on his forearm ("I got it done when I was very young," he says sheepishly). Rather it's because his hands are covered in what he cheerfully calls "cow shit". I put my hand back in my pocket.

The famous "land artist" is finishing a piece for the Longside Gallery, situated on a ridge overlooking the park's 500 wind-battered acres. Buckets of manure are dotted around. The smell of slurry thickens the air. Using a stubby paintbrush as well as his hands, Goldsworthy is smearing gloopy dung along the glass that extends down one wall of the gallery. Snaking through this encrusted window is a clear band through which you can glimpse the honeyed, 18th-century sandstone of Bretton Hall nestling in the distance. As sunlight seeps through the sludge, the effect is strangely beautiful, like stained glass.

"There may be shit on the end of my brush," Goldsworthy says, "but I feel like I'm painting. That view out the window is so lush and green because of the amount of manure that's put on the land every year. I'm not making this to shock. I'm just being truthful to what I see outside. I see this work in the British landscape tradition. It reminds me of

Constable's painting of a manure heap."

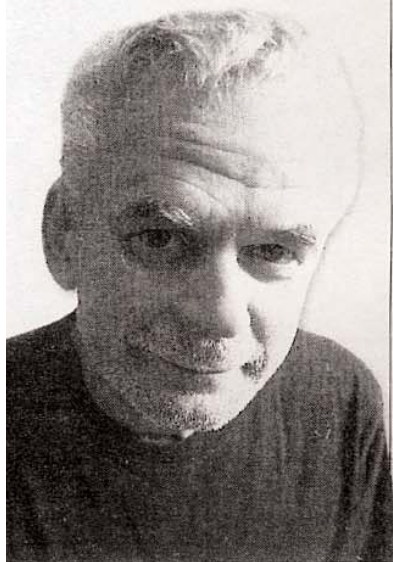
This is classic Goldsworthy. Now 51, the eco-friendly artist, who was awarded an OBE in 2001, has been working directly with the land ever since, as a fine-art student at Preston Polytechnic, he fled the studio to make art on the vast sandy stretch of Morecambe Bay in Lancashire in the mid-'70s. "When I began working outside," he later recalled, "I splashed in water, covered myself in mud, went barefoot and woke with the dawn."

His raw material is the natural world. He balances slivers of sandstone, slate and oak into improbable cairns; painstakingly fuses sycamore leaves and horse-chestnut stalks into filigree shapes; moulds humpback sculptures out of sand; and fashions giant snowballs that gently melt to reveal pebbles, pine needles and twigs. "I think it's incredibly brave to be working with flowers and leaves and petals," he tells me. "But I have to: I can't edit the materials I work with. My remit is to work with nature as a whole."

Many of his works are ephemeral, recorded only in beautiful photographs subsequently published to great success by Thames & Hudson. Like Richard Long before him, Goldsworthy has invigorated the landscape tradition by literally using the landscape to create his work.

For this latest show – a return to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where he spent a year during an artist's residency in 1987 – he has again drawn on some of his favourite motifs. An obelisk made from gnarled, moss-soaked branches of oak, and balanced together without any struts or supports, towers over the entrance to the Underground Gallery, the sleek £3.5 million exhibition space that opened at YSP two years ago. Squeezed into the foyer, this precarious menhir has a menacing aspect, like a glowering monument from a Druidic age. It looks as though the slightest nudge would send the logs tumbling down.

"I purposefully put the oak stack in a confined space so it would become threatening," Goldsworthy says. Why? "Because of the number of times I've been in woods, working in a strong wind, and have felt threatened. Big trees have fallen right on two places where I've worked a lot recently. This has happened throughout my life. When I was a student, I worked on one particular rock at Morecambe that I called my workbench rock. When I returned a couple of years later, a big boulder from the cliff had smashed the stone. In geological time, that was a near-miss."





Goldsworthy's heightened sense of his own mortality provides a clue to how we should "read" his work. Don't be fooled by his delicate, decorative agglomerations of colourful leaves and sticks: his conception of nature is much darker than it first appears.

"I find some of my new works disturbing," he says, "just as I find nature as a whole disturbing. The landscape is often perceived as pastoral, pretty, beautiful – something to be enjoyed as a backdrop to your weekend before going back to the nitty-gritty of urban life. But anybody who works the land knows it's not like that. Nature can be harsh – difficult and brutal, as well as beautiful. You couldn't walk five minutes from here without coming across something that is dead or decaying."

His showpiece work in the Underground Gallery – "A single work made up of four rooms," he explains – is a good example. The Clay Room is a chamber slathered with 20 tonnes of clay dug from the grounds of the park and mixed with human hair. The clay has cracked like an arid river bed so that the criss-crossing hairs are visible in the fissures. Human matter mired in mud: it's a

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terrifying reminder of where we all end up.

Next door is the Wood Room, an intricate dome of coppiced chestnut branches that looks like an upturned nest. Inside, it's claustrophobic, oppressive. "I hope the room feels like entering the stomach of a tree," Goldsworthy says. "It's very intestinal."

The piece was inspired by his memory of a visit to the park in 1983. A much skinnier Goldsworthy tried to wriggle through a small opening at the base of a sycamore into a rotting cavity (the manoeuvre is recorded in a series of photographs also on display in the show). "I was under threat when I went inside that dead tree," he recalls. "I really didn't know if I'd get stuck halfway."

He pauses, pensive. "One of the beauties of art is that it reflects an artist's entire life. What I've learned over the past 30 years is really beginning to inform what I make. I hope that process continues until I die."

And with that, he wanders back to his buckets of manure and loads his paintbrush with a large dollop of muck.

❖ 'Andy Goldsworthy' is at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield (01924 832631), from next Sat until Jan 6, 2008.