

Richard Long: turning walking into art



A circle of stones in the Aconcagua made by Richard Long.

One of the most celebrated English land artists shows his works in Buenos Aires until July 28

Two years after the famous English land artist Richard Long walked 16 days through Mendoza's Andes, he opens with a show at the Faena Arts Centre today.

This is the first one man exhibition he has in South America. Long spoke with the Herald about his 2012 walk and how is to work in this art space. "If someone

gives me a beautiful space, I make a beautiful exhibition," Long explained. And beautiful it is!

The works in the exhibition consist of three older works, two photographs and one textwork, another more elaborated textwork and two photos based on his Mendoza Walking, and two site specific sculptures, following his 2012 visit, made for this show.

Richard Long is known for turning walking into art. He has done so as early as 1968 when he made a line by walking back and forth, again and again, until a line was defined on the landscape he had walked. "I had turned something out of nothing," he said.

Long developed as an artist within the conceptual art framework of the 1960s and 1970s, partaking in the revolution of art. Why need a brush? We can leave traces in different ways, using our body as a tool. When walking we create lines and circles and leave our traces on earth. Not only does Long want to leave marks in nature — for a next passerby to accidentally notice and wonder about them — but he also wants to leave a mark in the planet, mediating it.

"When I get to a particular place on my walk, I have to stop. I make a sculpture, like a beautiful circle of stones. I take out my camera. Take a photo. Turn off the camera, and continue walking. The best sculptures are my celebration of being at that place, at that time, at that moment." The photographs, as well as the words he writes in his notebooks, are what he shares of what he made and experienced during the walks. "I need to show it thereafter. It's the whole point of being an artist: to communicate it. If I were the last person on the world, there would be no reason to make art."

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So, instead of following his footsteps through the Andes, we can see his art at the Faena Arts Centre and imagine ourselves being in those mountains, looking at the perfect circle of stones he made, aligned with the summit of the Aconcagua. “Yes, use your imagination,” Long highlighted.

But we can also watch his sculptures first-hand, such as the enormous mud painting on the wall or the perfect circle of wood snippets he has created in the gallery. He always uses natural materials — mediating the planet. Both works were created during the week he was in Buenos Aires, preparing for the show. To make the mud wall painting took two days. “The mud comes from the Paraná River. When I was here in 2012, I went up the Delta, and found this mud, which I have now shipped to the gallery. I painted it with my hands, as you can tell from the gestures. You can see the movement of my arms. The splashes and drippings are very much part of the work. Movement and gravity are definitive for the work.” The mud painting is a dynamic chaos with a ziggurat bordered frame, making reference to the Latin culture.

“I am not an anthropologist though. I don’t investigate cultures. When I came to this continent for the first time in 1972 and went to Bolivia and Peru, I came across this shape and used it. I am not a writer either, even though some of my works consist of words. I am an artist.”

Cultural references are made when he sees fit. The circle though has a long symbolic connotation in different cultures. Long has made them in every part of the world: from the Sahara, to Ireland and the Himalaya. He does everything by himself, with no one there, except for him and his camera as witnesses.

At the Faena Centre, the process of the circle-making was documented. Long explains that he just started in the middle of the circle and without any worry of where and when to finish. “No measurements involved?” “No, I did it just by eyeballing it.” It almost seems like a Zen ritual, and the artist confirms this: “You could say that there is a Zen way to it. You need to focus while I remain relaxed, and should not worry about the end. Just do what you feel right.”

What feels right for Richard Long has been regarded as innovative in the history of art. He emphasized that leaving a trace also means to make a mark in the line of art-making. “Van Gogh was innovative. The Abstract Expressionists were new. And then you have me.” He refers to what many art historians, called “the end of art,” after Pollock’s drip painting. Where was art to go? Land art and performance art arose in the sixties and Long was there, in that “here and now” that he wants to keep on showing. His “here and nows” are to become our “here and knows,” even if it’s only for the duration of the show. If not, you could always try to trace his walks around the Aconcagua.