

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Artist Andy Goldsworthy Tries to Capture a Sense of Time

One of his boldest projects yet, 'Walking Wall,' has been meandering across 5 acres in Kansas City

November 1, 2019
by Emily Bobrow



When it rains, Andy Goldsworthy likes to lie on the pavement and then rise to see a fleetingly dry echo of his body. Making art is his way of understanding the subtle shifts and changes taking place around him. At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo., where the British artist has been working on a big site-specific installation, he has spent several mornings standing still for around 90 minutes at sunrise to watch his shadow move across a chimney, which he noticed glows at dawn.

"What I'm experiencing is the sense of time," Mr. Goldsworthy says, adding that words never quite capture the effect. He tries to create something every day, mostly outside and with whatever is close at hand—twigs, leaves, ice, bone. Some works are built to last, but many exist long enough only to be photographed before the forces of time wash or blow or melt them away.

'What I'm experiencing is the sense of time.'

Mr. Goldsworthy, 63, has become an unexpected darling of the art world. He has starred in two acclaimed documentaries, more than 15 years apart, both directed by the German filmmaker Thomas Riedelsheimer. His odd and often ephemeral sculptures defy easy commodification, but his vivid photographs of these works—glowing icicles twisted around trees, radiant leaves in painterly

circles—grace major collections around the world. Every year brings new commissions for pieces that exceed the scale of what came before. “This is undoubtedly an extraordinary time for me,” Mr. Goldsworthy says. “Some of my most ambitious and challenging ideas are being realized.”

One of his boldest projects yet is now entering its final stages at the Nelson-Atkins. Since March, Mr. Goldsworthy has led a small team of laborers, including two regular collaborators from the U.K., in building what he calls “Walking Wall”: A 100-yard, 150-ton stone wall has been meandering across 5 acres of land, even crossing a multilane road, as it travels to what will be its final and permanent stop, partly inside and partly outside the museum. To make his wall “walk,” Mr. Goldsworthy and his crew have been moving the stones by hand, from the back to the front, around 10 yards a day, in two-week bursts over the course of the year. On Nov. 8, he will begin the final installment of what he fondly calls his “journey into the unknown.”

For Mr. Goldsworthy, the work is never merely the final sculpture but everything that goes into its creation. He enjoys the fact that the job of building, unbuilding and rebuilding this subversive wall has changed according to the demands of different seasons, from a winter cold that made his hands ache to a merciless summer heat that forced him to start work before 4:30 a.m. He also revels in the work’s unpredictable effect on those around it. “People are not spectators, they’re participants,” he says.



Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUmtDHBfyXE>

Because the wall is made of stone and spans as far as the eye can see, it looks permanent even as it wanders, which can be disorienting. When the wall blocked a major road for weeks in the spring, some drivers were noisily displeased, but others delighted in the novelty. Visitors were less cheerful over the summer, when the wall blocked the museum’s main entrance for days. “I think I learned more about human nature during those weeks than I have for a long time,” Mr. Goldsworthy says.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/artist-andy-goldsworthy-tries-to-capture-a-sense-of-time-11572629661>

One man huffed that people should be taking down walls, not building them; the artist replied, puckishly, that he was doing both.

Mr. Goldsworthy has always preferred to work outside and figure things out with his hands. Even as a teenager, on a farm near Leeds, he sensed that much of what he was doing—from stacking bales to drawing lines with a plow—was sculptural. The landscape, he saw, could be majestic but also brutal: Dogs attacked sheep, spring lambs became meat, a foul storm could wreck a week's worth of labor. The strenuous work of farming had a rawness and physicality that he found gratifying. "It was a very broad kind of education," he says.

'It's just the only thing I've ever done.'

He knew he would be an artist: "It's just the only thing I've ever done," Mr. Goldsworthy says. Yet he was rejected from several art schools, which proved edifying in its own right. Although he eventually got a fine-art degree in 1978 from what is now the University of Central Lancashire, those early snubs made him skeptical of any arts establishment. While many of his fellow graduates swanned off to London in hopes of getting noticed, he moved to Dumfriesshire, in southern Scotland, where the landscape can be majestic, the people are tolerant, and the living was cheap enough to work as an artist.

Because Mr. Goldsworthy's preferred materials are nature, uncertainty and time, some see in his pieces a larger message about the human toll on the environment. But he is quick to say that he isn't a political artist. "I'm not trying to preach," he says. Instead, he sees everything—from a leaf to a building to himself—as part of a larger, mostly ineffable process of change, growth and decay. His art honors the natural world by being humbled by it. He isn't a religious man, he says, but his work often feels spiritual to him.

Mr. Goldsworthy still lives in Dumfriesshire, with his second wife, the art historian Tina Fiske, and their young son, his fifth child. Yet his projects often pull him away from home, to Australia, France, London, St. Louis, San Francisco and elsewhere in the past decade alone.

The themes at the heart of his work—time, transience, uncertainty—feel especially profound at this stage of his life. He is still fit enough to practice his uniquely physical brand of art, yet seasoned enough to be getting the kinds of opportunities he always dreamed of. "I'm taking risks that I've never taken before," he says.

Chance plays a role in everything Mr. Goldsworthy makes, but the stakes are much higher for something like "Walking Wall." His smaller pieces are meant to melt or collapse soon after he finishes, but his permanent works should live on well beyond the moment he steps away. Some of his big projects have gone on to be beloved by generations. Others have been destroyed, by apathy or nature.