Andy Goldsworthy

Works made in and around Morecambe Bay

An exhibition in two galleries:

THE STOREY INSTITUTE ART GALLERY
and
THE PETER SCOTT GALLERY

Lancaster

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A Conversation

Andy Goldsworthy was a student at the Storey Institute in the 1970's, when the building housed the Fine Art Department of Preston Polytechnic. Goldsworthy now has an international reputation, exhibiting in France, Holland , Germany, Japan, and the USA.

This is an exhibition in two galleries, being organised as a collaborative venture between the Friends of the Storey Institute and the Peter Scott Gallery at Lancaster University. The Friends is a group of local artists who are revitalising the splendid Victorian gallery in the Storey which was unused for many years.

As a student, much of Goldsworthy's time was spent outdoors, working on temporary sculptures around Morecambe Bay.

This exhibition is of works made around the Bay, including some new pieces made at Heysham Head. Goldsworthy has also created an installation in each gallery using sand, bracken, chestnut leaf stalks, and thorns.

John Angus, Chair of the Friends of the Storey Institute, asked Andy Goldsworthy about his memories of the building and Morecambe Bay, and about the works in this exhibition. The following is an edited transcript of that conversation.

John Angus. How does it feel to be back in the Storey Institute?

Andy Goldsworthy. It just feels like going into college again. In some ways I never really attended it in a sense that a normal student does, I was working outside a lot. It feels like going back to a place again where I have worked. There are certain places outside like Morecambe Bay and certain woods that I have worked in, the Storey Institute feels like that too. It feels right.

J.A. You're working now in the building, did you do much work in the building when you were a student or was it all outside?

A.G Well I worked here for the first three months, doing projects that the tutor set for us, nothing particularly significant.

J.A. After that first three months you spent quite a lot of time around Morecambe Bay itself didn't you?

A.G. Yes that's when I began. I also worked in the sculpture department which was in separate premises.

J.A. It must have been a bit unusual to do that kind of work at that time, what did the tutors think about it?

A.G. I think that they were a little bit anxious that I wasn't coming in regularly. Visiting artists like David Nash were very helpful. Eventually they accepted it and were very supportive.

J.A. I heard something about them insisting that you came into the life classes.

A.G. I was asked. I was told I should come to do life studies which I was quite happy to do as a break from what I was really doing. I was working a lot with clay and sand at that time, out on the beach. Going into the life room and doing clay models, my hands were so drained of oils they began to swell up a lot under the electric fires, it was just chilblains really, so I wasn't physically able to do it, I remember it being quite painful.

J.A. Whereas most people find it quite difficult to work outside?

A.G. Yes I guess so.

J.A. Do you remember was this gallery used when you were here?

A.G. It was used for the degree shows, and for occasional exhibitions. The staff had their shows here and I think Basil Beattie had a show. Considering what a good space it is for showing it's a pity it wasn't used more.

J.A. We are doing this as an exhibition in two galleries, both here at the Storey Institute and at the Scott Gallery. When you first came up I remember you making the comment that you were pleased to find two places that were prepared to co-operate. Does that mean you find that it doesn't normally happen?

A.G. Well I do I work in many places where people will not work together or find it very difficult and are competitive. Art is a co-operative thing. I would have hoped at times it would have brought out the co-operative spirit in people, and not the opposite. I enjoy collaborations with different organisations, and between different organisations, it can be very creative.

J.A. Presumably different locations must have an effect on the kind of work you do. Are there things that are special to you about the Bay, how you work there?

A.G. The Bay is a very rigorous teacher and that's where I first began working. I was drawn to the Bay against a backdrop of the studio where everybody had their little cubicles in this very small space and the beaches were this vast space and that was much more interesting, so I was drawn to the beach. The beach obviously has a very strong sense of rhythm and the tides, the daily rhythms, dictated my day, where I was going to work, and how long I could work. That sense of time, and things being of the moment, and the tide then taking away was really a very important lesson. That's where a lot of my feelings towards the land began.

J.A. You've used some ferns and bracken in this installation, I was interested to hear that you have had problems with using the same materials in Japan. Can you say a bit about that?

A.G. I work with, and I am drawn to commonplace and ordinary materials: bracken, dandelions, hawthorns, the blackthorn, vigorous materials that you can use without killing the tree. That is an important part of the way that I work. Bracken is a much despised plant by farmers in Britain. It is a very vigorous plant. So in Japan when I heard that there was bracken; I am having an exhibition there this year; and I asked whether I could work with bracken, they said well, we do have bracken but it's very difficult to find because people hide it. Which I thought was wonderful, the thought of people hiding bracken. I could perceive the plant in a different way when people value it; and that's what my work does to some extent, I value things that are not valued. They value it because they eat it. I showed them slides of work I made with orange bracken and they were astonished by the colour, they have never seen it reach that stage.

J.A. Because they eat it when it is still green?

A.G. Yes. For this installation in the Storey I've used sand and bracken. It's difficult to actually articulate the relationship but I think it visually says other things that I feel about the beach. There is the workable sand in which to dig, and to look into, and a feeling of internal space which could be the sea; the sand does become liquid when the tide comes in and moves around, so the hole is like looking at that. But at the same time there is a strong sense of the view over the Bay, and of the Lake District, of 'up north'. So I wanted the installation to be both inward looking and outward looking. The sand is looking to the bracken on the wall which comes from Scotland, which is only a bit further north, so it's like a view looking northward from the Bay. It could be five views (as in Mount Fuji), 'Five views of Cumbria'?

The bracken, the form too, I wanted it to have the feel of journeys. I've been on so many journeys from this place, from Morecambe. So the work on the wall should feel like a route, a journey of some kind, a description of a journey, they have qualities of the river, of a line, a meandering line. From here I've worked up the Lune Valley to Bentham, and I went up to Brough in Cumbria, and now I live in Dumfriesshire, so I've worked around the Bay area all my life and I keep coming back here.

J.A. And you will keep coming back?

A.G. Yes, I love Heysham Head and each time I go there it changes so much. It's astonishing to see the changes. When I first began working outside there was one rock at Heysham Head in particular upon which I worked. I began working very early in the morning, when it was calm, it's often calmer first thing at dawn, and this encouraged me to make balanced work, balanced rocks. There is one rock in particular on which I did a lot of balancing. I got to know that rock so well, I knew every little nook and cranny of that rock on which to get a grip for the stones that I was to balance, it was very intimate.

J.A. What size of rock?

A.G. It was big, I called it my workbench rock. The top was like a landscape in itself. Although the works are very small there was a feeling of monumentality.

J.A. You can't always tell the scale from the photographs.
I remember in your degree show being intrigued whether these were massive things or tiny little things.

A.G. A lot of the works in my degree show were actually on a table for people to construct again. There were stones broken and they could build them back, so they could see how big they were. Although those works were dealing with precariousness in nature, and the fragility of nature, it never ever occurred to me that the stone upon which I was working was vulnerable. It was stable. So it was an enormous shock when I came back a year or two later to find that a stone had dropped from a cliff and smashed this rock. Added to that the possibility that I could have been there when it happened was a very unnerving thing, which was a great lesson. I like that. In my recent work, I am no longer interested in making things on top of the rock, I am interested in the rock itself and looking into the stone. I'm not interested in objects, I'm interested in existing rocks.

J.A. So you are making less of an intrusion?

A.G. Yes I'm touching less but touching deeper, it's very very difficult to do, and the more I work outside the more the I learn to be able do that. When you first begin you tend to overwork things. My relationship with form has always been an easy one. Geometry appears in nature so it should appear in my work, but I feel at the same time it is sometimes imposed upon it. My very first works were very geometric, and I felt very uncomfortable about that. Then I did a lot of work where I was just rolling about in stuff and I was covered

in muck or sand, working to get away from the geometric; not making any thing, just being there. I still look for that and every so often something more hard edged, more geometric, comes out which it should do, but I only see one end of a wide spectrum of forms in nature, and there are many sides to it.

J.A. One of the big appeals of your work is the way it makes one think about nature in a different way to normal. It feels very much at the moment that people are out of touch with nature. Your story about the stone is a good example, most people wouldn't have the opportunity to observe that kind of change because they are not close enough in the first place.

A.G. They wouldn't have worked - working - being able to touch -we have got so frightened of touching now. I can understand that, because we have done so many things that are wrong. I remember when I was working very early on as a student, a biology tutor from the University saw me working when I was lifting stones and he said, do you know every time you lift a stone you destroy an ecosystem. I knew that and yet at the same time I knew I had to work there, and that's a dilemma. But I also knew that he was driving home in his car, living in his house and doing all sorts of destruction through that. I am careful about what I do, I try to be as careful as possible, minimise the effect of what I do.

J.A. Are you consciously trying to communicate something?

A.G. No, all I'm doing in the work is learning, that's all it is. I think if I started to try to consciously commu nicate something through the work it would lose its ability to do that. Now I find myself in a very strange position because even though I don't intend to communicate, I am actually communicating, and that's a peculiar sort of thing. So you have to be careful with that, and not to abuse that by trying to manipulate it, both in terms of it manipulating me and me manipulating it. You have to keep borders to some extent. There are other times like an installation where there is a social aspect, where the social nature of the building, the way it is approached, the way people will see things, that is different. But when I'm out on the beach that's myself and the place, and although I do bring some of that back in the photographs as a way of expressing that, it remains essentially at heart a very personal exploration of the place, and the photograph is part of that. There is a personal need to take the photograph, to understand what I've made, because at the end of the day you are often too tired to know what you have made. Sometimes it's only a few years later when you look back at the image and see things that you weren't aware of at the time.

J.A. But the photograph is also about communication.

A.G. Oh yes, I am aware that it is communicating the work. Brancusi said "Why talk about sculpture when I can photograph it". It has that kind of role. Photography itself is really time. That separates photography from painting and sculpture in a conventional sense because, if I'd painted the work it would become separate from the time. A photograph always relies on, and remains rooted in the moment it was taken. It needs that moment to make sense.

J.A. It feels as if there is a slight problem to do with exhibiting your work as photographs, in that it distances the observer from nature and the natural materials from which you have made the work. Perhaps people have to make that leap themselves?

A.G. Yes, I think I would feel uncomfortable if it completely represented what I do outside indoors. There should be an element of loss or incompletion, you need that, that's important. It's like the difference between a sketch done with energy, half done, there is so much missing but that gives it its power. Incompleteness isn't necessarily a bad thing, and I think that is why the photograph is quite good. I think when technology becomes so good that it actually does give you the thing, I give up.

J.A. You don't fancy recording something in three dimensions?

A.G. Not in the least. It's almost necessary for the work to be of a duality, the work outside and the image, it somehow needs the dialogue between those two. I don't entirely understand it, it started off for such modest reasons; imagine this student going off working on the beach and he has to explain to his tutors what he is doing. So how does he do it? With photographs. They are still a bit like that. Although I say the social side of things is not the reason I do it, the social side of an artist or any human being is enormously important. So it is the link between myself and people. The photographs become like words.

J.A. Do people have a problem with the value because it's only a photograph? Although you call yourself a sculptor, what you exhibit in general is photographs which must confuse people at times.

A.G. No I don't think so. There are many paintings I consider sculptural, and many sculptures I consider painting. Sculpture isn't defined by bronze, it's an idea, it's a quality, a way of seeing. The same with drawing, I make drawings in my sketch book after I make a work, but they are not my best drawings. My best drawings are done on the beach with a stick, that's getting closer to the essence of drawing which is much more interesting. I think that sometimes it is necessary to redefine what sculpture is.

J.A. Do you just produce one copy of a photograph?

A.G. Yes, I used to do editions but I always look for the simple solution, and always end up with one.

J.A. But presumably that's passed out to someone else, though you take the photograph yourself, you don't print it?

A.G. No, I'm much more demanding as a customer than as a producer of them. I work with the same people and they know what I want. I also don't want to get involved too much with the manipulation of it, I like to keep it as simple as possible.

J.A. You provide sort of 'diary' explanations to the work quite frequently which I find helpful.

A.G. They are like directions, I have them jotted down, how to get somewhere - that's what they are intended as.

J.A. You are exhibiting some photographs here of red pools. Will you explain what you did?

A.G. Well, as I've said my work is a way of learning things, a discovery of things. One of the really great discoveries on Morecambe Bay is a soft red stone that is like nuggets inside other stones, it stains the stone. I love that colour, you can draw with it, and you get it all over your hands and everything, then you wash your hands in a pool of water and the pool turns red, that's amazing. I did one when I was a student, a red pool like that, which just shows the difference between now and then, for though I made the pool turn red, I didn't choose the right pool or the right light, or the right place, to make it a brilliantly red pool. I went back to make that work this year and I found that if I made it where the rocks were white, which is where I made it originally, though it's a very deep red, the red was too red and went too dark. So I was choosing darker pools, especially ones with green seaweed around them which obviously makes the red even more vibrant. I have to choose a pool where a shadow is cast onto the pool, so there isn't any sky reflected into the pool which would lose the red. The pools are very carefully considered, carefully chosen, and then I

grind the stone into the pool until it turns red. That can take half an hour to an hour just grinding stone against stone until it goes this deep red.

There is an element of shock to come across a deep red pool in Morecambe Bay, they are blood red and I'm sure a lot of people will think I've painted the pool and will be shocked by that. If my aim was to shock, then to use paint wouldn't matter. Though there is an element of shock which I quite like, it's important to me that behind that shock lies the truth, that this is the colour of the beach, it's the colour that is there. You don't see it, you are not aware of it. That is for me the purpose of my art, to show me what I can't see, what I'm not aware of, to make those things visible. The way that they are made, grinding stone against stone to colour a rock pool, which itself has been ground down by stone. It's such an appropriate and right thing to make, and yet on the surface these could be the most inappropriate things for a beach, and that's interesting because I'm continuously being questioned by nature; about what I think is appropriate to a place. The idea of a place can restrict you so much. If you say there's no red here then you don't see red, and that's what those people are doing when they see these photographs. Whereas it would be better if they were saying, 'Is there red there?' Now I never start off by saying there is no red here. 'No' is a difficult word to use, you just say, 'Well let's see what's here'. It's great to have a work, an art, that shows you things. I've been shown so much.

J.A. People who are familiar with your work have said to me that they have been disturbed by the image used for the poster and private view card. They felt that it looked like pollution, and I wondered if the diary description that you give is particularly necessary for this one.

A.G. Well it probably was, to have that written on the bottom. I think I have just said 'red stone sea', I haven't actually said this is a stone which is red. Maybe I was just holding back a bit there, letting people walk off on a plank!

J.A. Of course there is a problem with pollution in Morecambe Bay.

A.G. Well my work doesn't make direct statements. It's obvious where I stand on the Power Station through what I do. I made these pools 3 or 4 months ago and now they are testing for leaking radioactivity using red dye.

Red Sea

MORECAMBE Bay was turned into the Red Sea last Thursday, albeit only partially and temporarily.

Small quantities of the chemical tracer rhodamine B were poured into the bay through Heysham nuclear power stations' outfall systems. This was done as part of a National Rivers Authority experiment to see how water from the stations is dispersed in the sea.

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There have been a lot of times in my life when the work has been like a divining rod. It's like the Lampton Earth Work in Newcastle, I put that proposal in not knowing anything about the Lampton Worm myth. Then nearby I made a maze which echoes a maze 100 yards below ground done by coal miners. Then I made a steel cone in Newcastle which is an urban work, about the steel history, in a park. Then I found out that the park used to be an iron foundry. These things are interesting.

J.A. The Red Pools and the recent testing using red dye in the Bay, another example of coincidence?

A.G. Yes this is more coincidence, it's more amusing than anything. For me it was the joy of that colour in the pool, and that light, and the discovery of the colour. It is a difficult work not just because of the colour; they are works that are, as I was saying, closer to how I make my work now where I'm not putting the form in, I use the form of the place. The pool is the form, all I'm doing is changing the atmosphere. I'm not as in control of the form or the place as I used to want to be. I think there has been too much emphasis on the more formal things that I make because they are the things which are most recognisable.
I think people don't see the other parts of my work as well as they do my formal pieces.

J.A. Presumably because it's harder to see them?

A.G. Yes, harder to see, harder to understand. So they are difficult for that reason too. That seems a good reason to show them doesn't it?

J.A. It certainly does.
In the period since you were a student there has a big increase in the green movement, which didn't really exist in the '70s, and that must have affected the reception and the sensitivity to your kind of work. Did you feel yourself to be contributing to that?

A.G. Well I am contributing to it yes, but I am very cautious of being used by it. As I've already mentioned I do make a contribution to that debate through what I make. It would be wrong and unnecessary for me to start trying to do what Greenpeace do already. I made a piece of work for Greenpeace Headquarters in London which says my contribution, and thats how I feel it should be. I can do things that Greenpeace can't, and they do things that I can't, but we work together. I could use that green connection. I don't want to use ecology. It's not something I just want to inject into the work for a while, or a kind of fashion, it's something I feel deep sympathies for and I think that shows in what I make. What else can I do?

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