

Campbell-Johnston, Rachel. "Sculpture with the X factor." *The Times*, 28 April 2017, p. 12.

visual art

Sculpture with the X factor

The land artist Richard Long's exhibition has Rachel Campbell-Johnston falling under its spell

If we excavate the memories of childhood," wrote the traveller Bruce Chatwin, "we remember the paths first, things and people second — the paths down the garden, the way to school, the way round the house, corridors through the bracken or long grass." Paths forge, he suggested, our first lines of connection to the world.

I contemplated this as I followed the path of one of the Richard Long pieces that form part of his forthcoming exhibition at Houghton Hall in Norfolk. Behind me, Britain's finest Palladian building heaved its huge stone façade upwards against cloudy expanses. Ahead, the narrowish line of ochre stones cut its precise way across a formal lawn. It led outwards towards open views, their veering perspectives made to feel more dramatic by the long, flanking rows of a pleached beech hedge.

Long's stony "path" leads you into a world of freshly heightened awareness. I felt newly alert to the bluster of a sleet-bearing wind as I walked; to the feel of the damp grass that clung claggily to my feet; to the cries of the oystercatchers and the bleat of the sheep; to the smell of the air. It was as sharp and clean as a newly struck flint. Long encourages a return to childhood's vivid senses.

More than 50 years have passed since 1964 when he, then a student of 18, went for a winter walk and began rolling a snowball across pristine white expanses. When it had grown so big he could no longer push it, he took a photograph of the meandering track it had left. This ephemeral mark in the melting snow, *Snowball Track*, became the starting line of a fresh way of thinking.

Sculpture, he realised, did not have to be only about form and material. It could also capture a sense of time and place. His art would be created through the process of walking — walking, less as a way of travelling than of simply being in this world.

Earth Sky: Richard Long at Houghton opens on Sunday. Outside, among the six major sculptural pieces on display, visitors will find *White Deer Circle*: a circular "henge" of great upturned tree stumps set in a gentle declivity of a park roamed by a herd of ghostly pale deer. The roots writhe, gurn and flicker like uptorn mandrakes. They play Tolkienish tricks with the imagination, summoning primeval dragons and sprites out of twists of dead wood — not that the deer, who use them as scratching posts, seem to mind.

In the walled garden, a jagged slate cross forms a striking centrepiece. A



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spiral of stones has been set at the heart of a "wilderness area" — it is only wild in contrast to the structured formality of the rest of the garden whose immaculately trimmed hedges and neatly clipped parterres create a vegetative equivalent of the white cube of the modern gallery. Along the arches of a colonnade run a series of Long's "waterfalls". Their splashes and dribbles and feathery patterns are made by the free-running rivulets of sloshed white paint.

Inside, in the echoing expanses of the great stone hall, lies *North South East West*: a circle of knobbed flint stones, criss-crossed by compass-like calibrations of rugged slate. Meanwhile two galleries display a small sample of Long's trademark mud works and a selection of his photographs and text pieces, as well as documentations of his wanderings across the face of this Earth.

Long's work has a lovely, elemental lucidity. He "liberates materials" as the artist Michael Craig-Martin once put



it, not carving or shaping his medium but allowing it its own life. Often his pieces arise literally from the land on which they lie. *A Line in Norfolk* uses carstone from a local quarry. Chalky lumps of flintstone come from the nearby coast. And the primeval stumps of wood in the henge were taken from uprooted trees that had fallen in the park.

Connections are not always so literal. Reaching the end of the rocky path, I reached open lawn and criss-crossed *Full Moon Circle*, a 2003 piece that forms part of Houghton's permanent sculpture collection. A big circle is created from slabs of overlapping slate. It was mined in Cornwall. Catching the thundery light, it shone a louring purple before

Houghton Cross, top, and, above, *A Line in Norfolk* by Richard Long, left

breaking out, suddenly, into a watery shimmer as a gleam of sunlight burst abruptly through the clouds. If the line felt like a narrative, then this seems to be the full stop. As you circle it, your thoughts slow to a contemplative pace.

Ideas begin to move outwards and not simply onwards: a bit like ripples on the water, repeating and expanding and broadening before merging back into the whole. His text pieces, sparse records of facts and fragments of thought, can be equally evocative. Overtly, they feel more conceptual. Yet at the same time they can be the most viscerally evocative. They work like those words that drop into your mind as you walk, churning and rolling around in your head, as your thoughts drift farther and farther into the world that they conjure up: a realm of blizzards and rainbows, of ptarmigan and hailstorms. Single words become mantras that evoke atmospheres and moods.

This is Long's magic. Houghton, that lofty monument to the social ambition of Robert Walpole, our first prime minister, cannot speak as truthfully of our place in the world as the most austere simple, the most purely natural, the most lightly ephemeral construction of Long.

So if you want to find out where you stand, go to Houghton. However, don't just tour the grand rooms, comparing their decor to that of your humble semi. Follow the paths on which Long's pieces can lead you and find your connections to far wider universal forces. *Earth Sky*: Richard Long at Houghton is at Houghton Hall, King's Lynn, Norfolk, Monday to October 26. houghtonhall.com



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