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By Ann Landi

Catching Nature's Vanishing Acts


The artist during the installation process. Wesley Law

St. Louis

From some angles, "Stone Sea," Andy Goldsworthy's new installation at the Saint Louis Art Museum, does indeed look like a series of roiling waves made from arching chunks of limestone. If one walks through the narrow courtyard that contains the piece, it can also resemble a hallucinatory Romanesque cathedral, spliced with narrow openings that lead in and around 10-foot-high arches, some of which spring out from the walls while others curve upward from the pebbled ground. They call to mind both classical architecture and Druid monuments, loopy Piranesi drawings and Romantic sketches of abandoned ruins. Such is the magic of Mr. Goldsworthy's sculpture that it conjures up any number of associations—and provokes a strange longing to see the work by moonlight.

But the brute facts are these: "Stone Sea," made up of 25 arches, sits in an awkward sunken space, roughly 73 feet by 20 feet, that connects the original museum building with a sleek new wing for modern and contemporary art designed by British architect David Chipperfield (both the building and installation open Saturday). Each arch weighs approximately 13 tons, and the limestone was sourced from the nearby Earthworks Quarry in Perryville, Mo.

To get more technical about it, Mr. Goldsworthy explains by phone from his home in Penpont, Scotland, "all the stones were numbered and cut in the quarry. Where one stone comes into contact with another is a very clean cut, so you get maximum surface contact, but I was never quite sure whether they'd all fit in the space until we started putting them there." As with many ancient Roman arches, no mortar was used to join the massive slabs of rock. The artist "worked with several models to define the composition, and it was put together in three two-week visits," says Simon Kelly, the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art. "It's his most ambitious and complex museum project to date."

An overview of 'Stone Sea' Scott Smith

A sculptor of international renown who is sometimes lumped into the Land Art movement, Mr. Goldsworthy has worked in St. Louis before, making site-specific ephemeral projects in the mid-1980s and 1990s, and was invited by the museum in 2008 to discuss a commission. "We gave him a floor plan for the new wing, and he fell in love with this particular site, which was an unresolved space, a bridge between the new and the old," says Tricia Y. Paik, assistant curator of modern and contemporary art. "It was not an open space, which most artists prefer, but a challenging site that is extremely compressed."

"What attracted me to it were those spaces that become like windows through the building, to what lies below," says Mr. Goldsworthy. The curators "showed me a picture of this courtyard and what it would look like, and in the middle was a Henry Moore, which is great, but it's a very well-behaved sculpture sitting in the middle of an empty space."

From the beginning, Mr. Goldsworthy's art has been anything but well-behaved. He has been described by one critic as "a dramaturge of nature's temper," whose earliest projects consisted of things like giant snowballs, packed with dirt and twigs, trucked into a gallery and allowed to melt on a sheet of paper; or ephemeral, enchanting constructions made of leaves, ice crystals, twigs or clouds of sand, photographed in dazzling color and preserved in a series of large-format books by Abrams. One of his better-known projects is called "Rain Shadows": For these, Mr. Goldsworthy positioned himself on the ground before a rainstorm, remaining there throughout the drenching, and then took a photograph of the after-image, a ghostly outline of a human body almost like a crime-scene photo.

Born in 1956, the artist grew up in Yorkshire, England, and worked as a farmhand as a teenager. He describes that sort of "practical education, of putting things together and moving them around" as integral to his aesthetic, perhaps more so than his schooling at Preston Polytechnic, where he first met the English Land artist Richard Long, who inspired him to work in the open with found materials. Though he has been making permanent installations since 1984—including projects at Storm King Art Center in upstate New York and Yorkshire Sculpture Park in England—he still likes to fool with nature's vanishing acts, almost in a kind of diaristic fashion. "They're about that day, for that day, with whatever presents itself," he says. "They're done in a spirit of exploration and discovery, opening my eyes to what's in the landscape."

Wherever he has a large-scale commission—he spends about half the year traveling, and half at home in Scotland—Mr. Goldsworthy will explore the history and geography of the site. St. Louis was especially appealing for both its limestone and its prehistory. "Something that fascinates me about the whole Midwest is that it's a very flat landscape with all this underlying geological rhythm and movement. The limestone originated in the sea—a material that is now so permanent was once part of something fluid." Stone arches have engaged him over the years, inspired by a quote from D.H. Lawrence's "The Rainbow," in which the writer describes Lincoln Cathedral: "Here the stone leapt up from the plain of earth. . ."

"This idea of stone leaping, of being not dead but alive and moving, that's how I wanted to see stone," the artist says. "By placing these arches in a space midway between bedrock and building, they become a literal bridge between the architecture and its origins. If people came away with that sense of movement and connection between stone, building and nature, that would please me. Those are the kinds of connections that I'm trying to make when I construct a piece like this."

"Stone Sea" will be allowed to weather with age. Its surfaces will acquire a patina from the elements; lichen, moss and other vegetal intrusions may take hold. It will be as subject to the whims of nature as any of Mr. Goldsworthy's will-o'-the-wisp forays into the ever-changing landscape around us, but far more durable than a melting snowball or an assemblage of twigs.