

SPERONE WESTWATER
257 Bowery New York 10002
T + 1 212 999 7337 F + 1 212 999 7338
www.speronewestwater.com

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Lord Cholmondeley with
Richard Long's sculpture
A Line In Norfolk, 2016





The Long view

Lord Cholmondeley is filling the grounds of Houghton Hall in Norfolk with the work of leading contemporary sculptors, including a major new exhibition by Richard Long. By Jonathan Bastable. Photographs by Kate Peters



On the approach to Houghton Hall, where pale fallow deer wander among the trees, sits a strange and beautiful artwork by Richard Long. It is one of his circular pieces, a low henge of 16 blackened tree stumps. Each one has been turned on its head so that the twisted roots look like dark antlers, and the ring in its entirety forms a kind of giant gnarled coronet. Long has called it *White Deer Circle*.

This work arose from a conversation between Long and the Marquess of Cholmondeley, who is the owner of the house. 'I was talking to Richard about "stumperies",' says Lord Cholmondeley. 'In the 18th century, tree trunks were sometimes placed in gardens to create a Gothic feel. He said, "Oh, let's try that." I think this is the only stump ring that Richard has made. All the trees that he used are from our park.'

White Deer Circle is one of several Long pieces at Houghton Hall. Some of them have just recently been installed for an exhibition that opens in April; others are permanent fixtures. Behind the house is a piece called *Full Moon Circle* that has been here since 2003. It takes the form of a perfect disc made from overlapping shards of grey slate, and it is almost invisible until you are upon it - like an old penny dropped on the lawn. 'I think it has the feeling of an ornamental pond,' says Lord Cholmondeley. 'There's a wonderful undulating texture. And it changes in different lights and weathers.'

As with the work Long does in wilder settings, these pieces respond like taut strings to their environment. The arc of the slate moon, for example, is retraced by the curve of a ha-ha behind it - the grassed ditch acting like a kind of lunar halo in the turf. Within sight of the slate moon is a newer work, a line about the length of a cricket pitch that is filled with gingerbread chunks of Norfolk carrstone. Two hundred years ago, this same red stone was used as the building material of the nearby stable block. The horizontal oblong of the Long piece »



[ON SHOW: NORFOLK]



Above, *Houghton Cross*, 2016. Opposite, detail of *Full Moon Circle*, 2003

seems to echo the narrow rectangle of the stables' façade. And the pile of rough stones is, in its way, no less considered and constructed than the old building with its rhythmical arches and octagonal turrets.

One of the privileges of staging a Long exhibition is watching the artist at work. 'He comes to each piece with a very definite idea,' says Lord Cholmondeley. 'The large stone works are physically taxing pieces to construct, but they are a mental exercise, too. He lays a section, then moves to a different place and carries on from there. If he speaks to an assistant it is all very practical: I need that stone, or that one. There is little chit-chat. You feel that he is in his own world, and you wouldn't want to disturb him.' Long is planning to do some mud paintings on the wall of a loggia close to the house, as if the stately arcade were an Aurignacian cave. 'I think he wants to use china clay, which is almost white, against a black background. He is an artist without tools: he never uses anything but his hands. He'll often use driftwood and paint it with his index finger - and we will have some of those smaller works inside the house.'

Other artists' work is present in the grounds - half-concealed in woods or behind walls. 'In the 18th century, the woods might have been dotted with follies,' says Lord Cholmondeley. 'We are filling them with contemporary art instead.' There is a Skyspace by the American artist James Turrell,

used in an exhibition he staged at the hall two years ago. A second Turrell piece, one of his lambent and mesmerising panels of purple light, is housed inside a carriage shed close to the house. ('Did you know that he was an adviser on *2001: A Space Odyssey*?' asks Lord Cholmondeley. 'Makes sense.') Elsewhere, out in the open, there is a formless stainless-steel 'scholar's rock' by the Chinese sculptor Zhan Wang. It looks like a monumental goblet of mercury falling from an alchemist's bench. At the heart of a walled garden, Danish artist Jeppe Hein has installed an extraordinary sculpture in which a live flame sits on top of a jet of water. Rachel Whiteread has created a concrete negative image of a gamekeeper's hut. It stands among the trees like a kind of mausoleum, a solid monument to some long-dead huntsman.

The plan is to continue to acquire new works, and to turn the grounds into a major art venue. Visitors to Houghton Hall always want to tour the house, with its many ancestral treasures, but when they step outside they will have a different kind of artistic encounter. 'I hope people will come and look,' says Lord Cholmondeley. 'Richard Long is such a respected artist, and I don't think he has ever done a show in a landscape like this.' *'Land and Sky: Richard Long at Houghton'* runs from 30 April to 26 October. www.houghtonhall.com