

Sarah Coulson - Andy Goldsworthy, Hanging Trees

SARAH COULSON: My name's Sarah Coulson. I'm curator at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and today I'm going to be talking about Hanging Trees by Andy Goldsworthy.

Andy Goldsworthy first visited the Sculpture Park in the 1980s and he visited across the seasons, making ephemeral works in the natural landscape. He used ice, berries, fallen leaves to make temporary work. He got to know the Bretton Estate within which Yorkshire Sculpture Park sits incredibly well at that point. He spent hours, days, weeks walking across the estate, getting to know it intimately and all of the intricacies of the nature and the trees, and the environment across the estate, and that knowledge really fed into the work that he came back and made when he returned to the Sculpture Park.

Andy Goldsworthy lived in Leeds as a child, and his home was on the boundary of the city and the countryside, and this is something which has gone on to influence his work. He was very interested in the idea of living on a boundary, something that represented a barrier between one realm and another. He saw this as an interface, that's the way he describes it and still describes it today, and this is something that has gone on to feed into his work, and that's something that influenced the idea behind Hanging Trees.

Andy Goldsworthy also used to work on a farm and was very much acquainted with an agricultural lifestyle. So he's very interested in physicality, he's very interested in the way that farmers work the land and he says that he always sides with the farmer, with the people that are working the land, rather than with the landowner.

And he's interested in the layers of history and how farmers' activity and the activity of animals on the land has actually shaped the landscape of this country.

Andy Goldsworthy's very interested in the idea of north, and particularly of living in the north. And as soon as he'd finished art school, he moved further north, from Yorkshire to Cumbria, and he was living in a place called Brough and was making a lot of work out in the natural environment, in farmers' fields, in the land around his house.

And he found that he was often getting into trouble for trespassing, for making work on farmers' land, and he got into many altercations because of being on other people's land. And this was something that started an idea within him of how to approach those issues of conflict and of land access.

Yorkshire Sculpture Park sits within the Bretton Estate, which is an estate that has a very long and rich history. It was first mentioned in the Domesday Book, and since then has been settled and lived on by various aristocratic families over the years.

A lot of the landscape changes that occurred here were in the style of Capability Brown through the 18th century. And the history of the landscape is very much told through those changes and from the perspective of the landowners who made those changes.

But Andy was interested instead to look at how the activity of farmers had fed into this estate and had helped to shape it, as well. One of the features of the estate that Andy was most interested in was the ha-has, and these are very particular to 18th-century estates, like this one. And they're used to keep livestock out of the areas of the estate that the families, the aristocratic families that lived in the house would access.

And basically, the families didn't want to see agricultural activity taking place, they didn't want to see cows and sheep in the areas that they had the view of from their house. It was very much about controlling the view that they had.

But Andy was interested in the fact that this was actually a very arrogant view. That actually, the farmers were the ones who were directly contributing to the life and the activity of the estate, but that their activity wasn't classed as being worthwhile and it wasn't something that should be mixed with the activity of the landowners.

And so he wanted to make a work which was much more about the actual, the worked land of the estate, rather than landscape as a backdrop. Andy sees very much these days that we see landscape as something which we look at when we go for a walk in the countryside, but we're never actually very physically involved with. That it's something that separate from us, rather than something that we actually have a really physical connection with.

And because Andy himself has that physical connection, he's very interested to look at the influence of people who also work the land. And so he wanted to make a piece that was about that historic relationship between farmers and landowners, and that dealt with these ha-has.

So although the ha-has run across the estate, Andy was very keen to work with one that was on the furthest reaches of the estate. This was something that's very important to him, that his work wasn't easily accessible, that it was something that people would have to work to find.

And so he sited his work right across the valley from the main part of Yorkshire Sculpture Park, from the area where the galleries are, and made this work right on the edge of a farmer's land. The ha-ha he selected here is an unusual ha-ha, in that it's within a ditch, as all ha-has are, but it's actually two sided.

So in effect, it's a wall that runs the length of this landscape here. And so Andy decided he wanted to work actually in this ha-ha, because not only was it an interesting feature to him, but also it represented a no man's land. It was a boundary between the land that belong to Yorkshire Sculpture Park and the adjacent land, which belongs to a farmer.

And the process of negotiation to enable a work to happen is something that Andy's also really keen to explore. So in order to make the work that he wanted to make, he had to go and see the farmer. He had to ask him if we could take a little part of his land in order to make this work. So this process of negotiation is actually physically part of the work to Andy.

So Andy decided that he wanted to take an element of the natural landscape, so tree trunks from oak trees, and actually embed it somehow in the dry stone wall of the ha-ha. And in order to do

this, he chose three sites along the ha-ha where he made these incredible deep chambers, which are rectangular chambers made in the same way as the ha-ha, so from drystone wall, from Yorkshire stone.

And he made these wonderful chambers into which he horizontally embedded these fallen oak tree trunks. And these very much feel like they're in a state of suspension, they're sort of held between life and death. They're not upright, they're not alive, but nor are they fallen, nor are they on the floor. They're suspended, they're held in this state of tension. This state of tension that Andy also talks about, which arises when you have the boundary between one thing and another.

In working in this way, Andy is also extracting the tree from its natural life cycle and taking it out of that cycle and using it in a very different way. So he's playing with the cycles of nature. And very much related to this idea of life cycles, is the fact that these rectangular spaces, they're so deep, and when you look down into them, they have the feeling of being like tombs almost, or of looking into an archaeological dig. Of something that's been excavated from the land.

And this is an idea that Andy was very keen to explore because he's interested in peeling away the layers of the landscape to reveal its true history, to reveal its heritage, and to make a comment about the fact that this land doesn't just have one history, it's a multilayered history. And it's a history of various different types of activity, of many different generations of people who have come together to make the estate what it is today.

And although this work is built and doesn't feel as ephemeral as a lot of Andy Goldsworthy's work, it actually has embedded into it its own natural life cycle. Because these works Andy makes out in the landscape, even when they're built works, will ultimately decay. The tree, because it's held and still subject to the forces of nature, to wind, to rain, to fungus growing on it, the trees will ultimately themselves still decay in the way they would have done if they were still part of that natural life cycle.

So the processes of death and decay are actually inherent within the work itself, and contribute to its evolving life cycle. So every time you see the piece, it will be in a different state and you will see it differently.