

Complexity & the edge of land art

From wood-weaver to eco sci-art fusionist, **Chris Drury** has carved out a singular path from the land art thicket. Over the last decade Drury's work has turned to exploring the overlay between the natural world, our bodies and the sciences of chaos and complexity, revealed in imaging techniques such as MRI scanning and echograms. From this a remarkable chapter of work has unfolded, from Drury's primarily British based 'Body as landscape' series, to his journey's into Antarctica's ice encrusted and Nevada's deathly post-atomic deserts.



Heart of Reeds from above and (opposite) in winter

All photos Chris Drury

I The body and the land

Where to for land art? Nine years into the new century and the established wave of British representatives are heading towards the golden sunset years. They are not there yet, but most; David Nash, Richard Long, Peter Randall-Page, Hamish Fulton and Chris Drury are close to theoretical pension drawing ages, with sixtieth birthday celebrations already done and dusted or looming ever closer on the horizon. Such seniority won't stop them working, for sure, but the making of big new steps, after three or four decades plying their art trade, feels, with every turn of another year, less and less likely.

And at the same time the world changes. Indeed the pace of change accelerates. Only eighteen months ago global warming was at last on everyone's lips, today we watch with passive incredulity at economic meltdown. The heat is on. An art form which once appeared radical and refreshingly, rather than shockingly new can in these post-BritArt days, with the likes of Damian Hurst and Tracey Emin settling into middle-age, appear too pastoral and bucolic to the raging, accelerated velocities of the planet spinning out of control. All across the planet news comes in through the instantaneous media and undermines the capacity for pastoral celebration to adequately contend with; the Middle East catastrophe; dark-age Amerika; waking giant China; ice melting across the poles; and changing climate. And finally, so far, the Global economy in irreversible tailspin.

It is difficult to make the link between these headline grabbing, planet-wide themes of our times and the relatively local acts of artists, who highlight the natural world. And yet, artists working close to the natural world do make significant contributions which feel timely, still in these changed times.

Chris Drury, sixty last year, has emerged from a particularly fruitful ten year period, which, through a set of closely related pieces, almost incidentally update and draw land art into a range of contemporary discussions and debates. In each, Drury has uncovered ways to connect to some part of the contemporary world which otherwise would not see itself as necessarily related to the language of land art, nor for that matter the land. Thus, across much of this work, science, in the guise of complexity and chaos theory, informs Drury's exploration of flow and change, overlaying how complexity's patterns are found inside and on the surface of our bodies, in plant life, through habitat and landscape itself to the planetary systems found in the weather and oceans. With complexity science Drury has found scientifically credible means to relay his long-term concerns between a short set of binary pairings, the outer and inner, nature and culture, and the micro and macrocosmic. Through the lens of science he has been able to bind together the inner workings of the body with the outer, external world.

One consequence has been bringing the site specific work in from the beguilingly remote, natural silent spaces to the cold, sterile and alien spaces of hospitals, whilst applying the highest tech machinery of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) as the instrument to uncovering flow and pattern deep inside our bodies. At the same time he remains an artist involved in the world outside, but his relation to nature has changed. No longer is his work necessarily about exploring the other or is-ness of nature to culture, framed as it was in the orthodoxies of the passive art object viewed by the observer, albeit, outside in the wild, 'more than human', natural world. In place Drury is feeling his way into a more informed ecological art, which inferentially challenges his art peers to a renewed assessment of what this land art work is about, celebrating human experience of its is-ness or dynamically assisting in the work of nature's is-ness. Taken together as an ensemble of closely related pieces, the different elements weave in and out, related and relating to each other. Together,



they comprise a new departure for the land art lounge, and one that adds up to significantly more than the sum of its parts.

In Britain the most ambitious and most challenging piece – in terms of managing to get it into the world – is Drury's most fully formed ecological statement thus far. *Heart of Reeds* is a large-scale earthwork sitting in the midst of a nature reserve in Drury's hometown, the southern Sussex British county town, Lewes. *Heart of Reeds* has been something of a personal odyssey for Drury, who conceived of it in 2000 and finally completed and participated in its opening in 2005. A few years on, Drury realises that the work is only beginning; the reed beds are only starting to become visible and it will be three or four years before they have grown fully. The earthworks were dug to make way for a series of connected channels, which from a God's eye view are