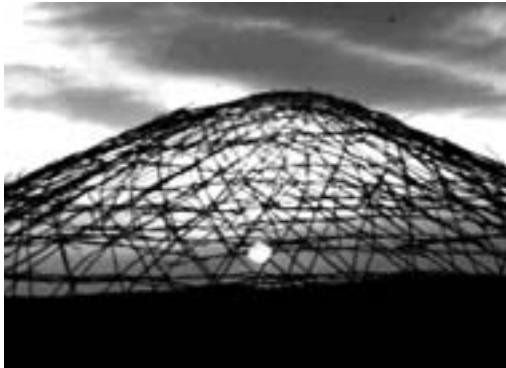


## ARCHITEXTS 1



**Chris Drury, land and nature drover, creates art in the living landscape, at times from stone, at times wood.**

**Here Drury discusses his work, 'nature' and their relation to craft. He also describes the creation of three recent works, out of willow and hazel.**

# Cooltide for empty vessels

Chris Drury's complexion is suitably ruddy for a man well-practised in the outdoor world of long-distance walks in far-off places, wild coastlines, high mountains and inaccessible valleys. It's from these inhospitable, unruly wilderness regions that Drury has found the materials to make an individual artworld.

If those are commonplaces in the practice and a journey recognisable elsewhere in the land and earth art movements of the last thirty or so years, it's a sign of the increasing visibility of such art practice, which only a generation or so ago would have been noticeably esoteric. Their skills, in making forms of art from the skin of nature, indissolubly weaving the two into one, is presently very well attested for. There's a host



Covered tumulus (photo Chris Drury)

of nature-artist practitioners established in the foreground of the art minds' consciousness. Of these, Andy Goldsworthy is perhaps the most popularly visible, his thematic books and the greeting card-genic photo-documentations of his work having become a form of cultural industry in themselves. If Goldsworthy is a popular British representative there are many others working in nature who have built bodies of work over the years which meet Goldsworthy in subtlety, understated sophistication, and sense of presence. These points are also a common ground for others who work with and in the naked material of nature. Richard Long and David Nash are only a couple of the visible who spring to mind. Also, generally their time has come, in that the public in its sensibility has

turned thoroughly to 'nature', at least as a leisure time-out activity. Across the country Goldsworthy and this loose affiliation of compatriots have helped people to see the natural world with new eyes, making any number of connections which maybe weren't hitherto imagined. It seems of small consequence that some would say there is a merely decorative element to a part of this work. The public mind has chosen with its feet (and its pocket) in enjoying this rendition of nature and art, galvanising in turn the emergence of myriad sculpture trails and the appearance of representative public art across the country.

Chris Drury's work is a part of this firmament. Like many of the practitioners though, there are elements which are different and individual to Drury and his

journey; for instance he sees himself as a sculptor, and is written about in these terms. As with others the primary emphasis is on making, and the craft and skills of making. Although he has worked and continues to work with stone, the slant this short Gallery set of photos and thumbnail interview takes is around weaving in wood. The photos are all of woven pieces, either hazel and willow or both. These are worlds of intricacy, skill and delicacy. The first picture 'Air Vessel' formed the guiding 'Vessel' theme of Drury's 1995 Eastbourne and Edinburgh exhibition. Here, he voyages out on several versions of vessels; the basket and kayak as vessel; the shelter as upturned basket and vessel of still, interior space; and the cairn as marker to journeying in nature, a nature always in flux, these cairns are therefore vessels of this state of movement.

As Drury also says, they are about there being beautiful things in the world, though beautiful things which are still meaningful. Thoreau wrote 'Give me a wildness no civilisation can endure'. Turned around, the Californian Buddhist Poet, Gary Snyder has written of a civilisation wherein 'wildness can endure'. Surely the practice of craft is and would be a crucial element of this.

Chris Drury and his partner Kay Syrad kindly provided descriptive texts for the three gallery pieces, one of which formed part of a Resurgence piece last year. Interspersed with these is an interview with Chris picking up some of the themes.

### Air vessel – 1995

When I was a child my father made a kayak from a kit. It was carefully constructed from a skeleton of wood struts on to which canvas was stretched and painted. This beautiful craft accompanied us on all our holidays and provided hours of fun. A few years ago, I saw a genuine Inuit kayak at the Museum of Mankind which literally took my breath away. The shape was utterly precise, very long, beautiful and delicate. The only other objects I know which have the same resonance are the polished ceremonial stone axe heads from the neolithic peoples. This kayak, I realised, must have taken hours of painstaking work during the storms of the winter – the struts piece together from small strips of driftwood, and tied with raw hide. Something of the intense concentration of attention in the making of an object for use and survival imbues this object with great spirit. It is a hunting tool of precision, amazing that something so light and fragile was designed to negotiate some of the most hostile seas. Its lightness, shape and fragility seem to me to be as much about flying as floating.

With this in mind I wanted to make a similar vessel which appeared to fly, whose sheer lightness mirrored many moments of exhilaration in extraordinary landscapes and mountains I have visited. I wanted to use

my continuing tradition of woven baskets and vessels, so the air vessel was to be a 3-dimensional drawing in willow.

I drew out in actual size the length and shape of the vessel in chalk on the floor. I exaggerated the length (18 feet), and marked in where the transverse struts were to come. The shape of those struts I then cut out in plywood and notched around the edge where the willow struts were to lie. Starting at one end with a bundle of tightly bound long willow, I inserted the first small ply strut, fitting the parallel willows at right angles, following the line of the strut. When the twining has circled the cross-section, the ply strut is removed and the next one placed, and so on. So the vessel is made over several days of concentrated attention using the same body and hand movements, starting from one end and working through to the other. The final work is suspended by thin nylon thread so it floats in the space of a room.

In some strange way the concentrated attention required to make something, especially something woven, requiring the same repeated body, arm and hand movements, is very close to the act of walking over long distances for several days. In both activities, the body is repeatedly in movement while the mind is concentrated (on rain, weather, staying found or in making the correct shape) but at the same time alert to what is happening on the outside and to the thoughts passing through on the inside.

#### Interview I

(Nature is a word in language, and language is culture.)

*Would you say you have a working definition of nature? How does nature send its saplings into culture? Where is the bridge, where are the differences?*

First of all nature is not just something out there. It's not trees and animals, because we're nature as well. We have to fit in with that. So if you ask the question, what is nature and what is natural you are supposing that something that is natural is something untouched by human hands. So you'd have to go on and ask is an apple nature, is wheat nature, is a rose nature? And as soon as you ask those questions, you separate yourself from nature. And if you're separating yourself from nature then you're not nature. So the problem here is not 'nature' but the separation when we ask that question. As soon as we ask that question we're into language. Nature is a word in language, and language is culture. So really when we say nature, we mean culture. In actual fact nature just is, full stop. As soon as you start to define it, or go on from that statement you're into culture. So we can either say nature is culture. Or we can say nature is.

So if we look at this division, and break it down, what we get is separation between man and nature and in this case art and life.



Air vessel – 1995 (photo Chris Drury)



*Would you say your work attempts to restore a connection in this separation between art and life?*

I can do that within myself. I can't restore a connection for anybody else, because at the basis of this whole existence is this business of you and me, like I'm different to you. But, in fact, that isn't the case because I have the same conditioning as you: I have the same culture, and in our bigger consciousness, the content of our consciousness is our culture. You can say, I am the contents of the total human consciousness, all of our culture, world culture, because we all know about other cultures now. All that is in us. So we're not separate. It's just this business of the 'I' and the 'you', it doesn't exist, it's something that we've made up. So we exploit these minor differences in order to say I'm me and you are you. Which is fine, although it does breakdown and causes immense problems. It causes wars, and it causes our separation from the environment as well. If I'm separate from you, I'm also separate from the land I live on. I can exploit it.

I can only point people at nature, point people to the fact that there is a connection. And I can say, if we do separate ourselves from nature, through culture, which we do, you then have the choice. You can decide to be close to it and help it or you can decide to destroy it, which is what we seem to be doing. When it's a question of survival, we destroy it, and we don't realise we're destroying ourselves at the same time, as we are nature. Not everybody knows that. That's a philosophical question, but do we understand that, totally? I don't think we do.

*You've talked of there being different representations, different versions of nature, such as at the Danish nature park of TICKON (Tranaeker International Centre for Art and Nature) and of other historical examples, being only man-made versions of nature.*

A lot of my work deals emotionally with landscape, about when you're actually in it, and you see something and then do something; you act. That's not thinking about it, that's a straight action with regard to nature. Out on a walk or something, you pick up a stone without thinking about it, you just do it. When I'm invited to...urban spaces, for instance, in TICKON, where the landscape is particularly manicured to appear in a certain way, you don't have that. What you have at TICKON is this international centre for Art and Nature, situated by the oldest castle in Denmark, within a park that was made by a follower of an English Landscape Architect. The architect followed that nineteenth century romantic notion of landscape, and built the park to reflect that. So the park is a representation of what that culture thought nature was. And then in the twentieth century, added to this, is the Art and Nature centre – which is a twentieth century cultural view of what

nature is. So there are two layers, or views, of what nature is. You could say they are two veils obscuring what nature actually is. It's manicured, and the park is like a sculpture itself. It's manipulated so that it appears a certain way.

I'd been making cairns in, so-called, 'wild' landscapes which simply mark a place and a time. They mark that rather than being sculptures. At TICKON I couldn't do that because there was nothing to mark. So in order to do something that worked, I made a covering for a big cairn, which people could go inside. So there was this cairn covered by an open woven dome. The covering was an open weave over, so it would allow the outside to come through as well and you'd get this inside-outside fluidity between the two, with the cairn marking the inner in the middle. The shell was made like a basket, with a basket weave. It was a rigid geometrical dome – made with green sticks which is a human order put onto nature. I used hazel and willow: the willow going in one direction, and the hazel in the other. If you put willow into the ground at the end of the winter, come spring, if the ground's wet, it will take root and grow. So the hazel was going to die and the willow grow, so I predicted that within ten years, you'd get some boulders within a willow thicket – the imposition of human order before returning to the chaos of nature, which is in fact true order.

But what happened is that it went back quicker than I thought because deer ate the willow in the spring, and knocked holes in it in the rut. So there were only a few willow trees left. So that's it. But that in turn, the fact that there were deer there, and there's nothing much to eat, means they eat what you make. And that again, is human intervention, so we're part of that whole equation of what's going on in nature.

*TICKON was an example of this new representation of arts and nature which is blossoming and appearing in parts of the West?*

Yes, it's happening all over the West. It's a very Western concept.

*How do you feel about these places?*

I think they haven't worked out what they're doing. On a day to day basis, it enables people to see art outside galleries. That's a good thing: Art in the landscape. So it breaks down the separation between art and people, which is separated by galleries. It's a good thing. But apart from that I don't think anyone has actually worked out what it is that they're doing.

*Can you imagine how you would attempt to take it further? Or whether you would?*

I don't know. You can't really take it further. Because you're still caught in this business of the separation. It's still a twentieth century Western view of

nature. Show it to an aborigine and they would think you're totally daft, because it wouldn't be their view of what nature was. Maybe you should ask those people of what or how to... or maybe there isn't a how to. Maybe they'd think it was crazy, because nobody's living in it. A farm is more real, you have to feed people. That's not to knock it, but it's limited.

## Covered tumulus

I have always been fascinated by the tumuli and burial mounds of Southern England. On the broad, shortly-cropped back of the Downs, they stand out against the sky as a faint echo from our ancestors in the remote past. These convex forms are mirrored by the concave dew ponds, some of which date from Neolithic times. In the mind's eye they form a sphere, a whole, which neatly mirrors a continuing preoccupation of mine – shelters and baskets.

In the January of 1997, I started to make interventions in silted up and dried out dew ponds. In one, using a spade, I cut a spiral into the accumulated turf, like a huge coiled basket; in another I took a whirling basket weave design from a previous work and cut that into the turfed concrete of the pond; and in two further ponds on the Kingston Down – which still held water – I trod a basket design into the mud with my feet and walked a spiral into the waste-deep pond weed.

At the same time, in the studio, I started to cut up maps of the area into strips and weave them together into concave and convex baskets, one map pigmented with sheep droppings, thus giving a brown and white criss-cross and spiral design. These works were mounted into card and framed – *Tumulus* and *Dew Pond*.

It only remained therefore to make a work with a tumulus. I had made open woven domes with hazel, both on the Cuckoo Trail in Sussex and at TICKON in Denmark. I felt that if I covered a tumulus with a stick dome then I would be drawing the actual original shape and size of the burial mound.

I eventually selected a mound on the Firle Downs which was reasonably close to the road so I could get the sticks up to it. I planned the whole thing meticulously. I wove the top, the most time-consuming and intricate part first; this was done with very light willow and could go on a roof rack. The tumulus itself is 34ft in diameter, which is far bigger than anything I had ever done before, with a circumference of 107 ft. So if doubled sticks are placed every 2.5 ft apart that means 43 points, which is 86 sticks at the base. Each stick would have to be extended by another stick to reach the centre – 172 sticks – plus about another 86 sticks for the weft. In all, 258 sticks. These took two days to cut and bundle. The previous day I carefully measured out the circumference of the dome and made 86 holes at equal distances. I hid half the sticks in some nettles. The

following day I got up at dawn and took up the rest of the sticks and started weaving. By 3.30 pm that day I had finished. I stayed on until sunset taking photographs, then came back the following dawn to take photographs through until afternoon. The siting of the original mound was so accurate – on the highest ridge of the Downs – that my structure could be seen from miles around. I felt that covering this tumulus highlighted a forgotten feature of our cultural landscape. I dismantled the work after six weeks, leaving the tumulus bare and unobtrusive again.

## Interview 2

(the meaning is not in the work – the work is in the meaning)

*Would you say something about the connection of meaning to your work?*

When I actually make work, I tend to work from the pit of my stomach, the gut feeling. I just make things; and it comes from a sense of excitement or exhilaration, and this is easy in places that are resonant. It's not so easy, as I pointed out, in places like TICKON, when I have to draw on knowledge and memory. But mostly, making is an act from the stomach without too much thinking. In a sense when you're in mountains and such places, there is a close connection, a physical thing, staying found and staying dry and getting wet and cold.

Especially if you walk alone, it makes you very close to the outside. That in turn gives you a kind of insight, and from that you can just make. But also that insight can make you think about things, which can lead to making more formal inside work. First though, you need the insight. So that's what I mean by working from the stomach. Over the years I have built up this way of working – this connection to inside and outside.

It's as if the meaning is not in the work, for if I'm working straight from here (the stomach), there's no meaning in the work, but the work is within a wider meaning. So the meaning is not in the work – the work is in the meaning. There's this South American tribe whose life revolves around basket making. They do the same thing, in that there's no particular meaning in the baskets they make, but the whole way the baskets are made and woven, the collecting of materials, fits into a wider meaning of their culture, within their cosmology. They couldn't point to a basket, with, let's say, geometrical designs on it and a frog in the middle, and say it means this. It is the relation of designs in a series of baskets that builds meaning within their cosmology. But they couldn't actually say this basket means this – the basket is just the beginning.

And that whole aspect, within those baskets and strictures, is something that inhabits every single area of their culture. Alan Guss, the anthropologist who

wrote the book (*To Weave and Sing* – University of California) said that you could have gone into that – he wanted to find out how these people lived, and their cosmology and all that, and they wouldn't tell him, because they couldn't. And then he said, "can you tell me how you weave a basket", and they said, "oh we can do that". And then what he realised was in weaving baskets he was able to take a step into their culture.

He could have asked them how do you make a house and it would have come to the same thing in the end – because the same thing applied.

*You talked about your work facilitating experiences. Do you feel there are quite a few artists doing this sort of facilitating of experiences, in different ways? Do you feel connected to or several removes from other artists?*

Well I don't know. Because a lot of artists talk about nature. They're people working in the same field as me. What they're doing seems equally valid. It adds up to something greater than the sum of its parts.

*Are there other artists who are exploring this territory of weaving?*

I know some quite interesting artists who weave things in strange ways. There's Patrick Dougherty in America – he used to be a Marine – who weaves huge and bizarre things that swirl around people's chimneys and in windows and out doors. They are witty and exhilarating.

There are one or two traditional weavers who I'm quite impressed with. I was very impressed with David Drew because he was very rigorous and was definitely a basket-maker. He suddenly got into sculpture which I found less interesting. He was more interesting when he was very rigorous and made very beautiful baskets, with a strict adherence to tradition and a form, and a precise way of doing things. He made the most incredibly beautiful things. He's around. He works a lot with the French. He's actually an itinerant basket-maker now. He's all set up in a van and he goes from one basket-making area in Europe to another and works with different people in different traditions. He'll stop in a place for a bit and find out how they work there. But he's also making some more sculptural growing things with willow, which I've seen. They come out of fences – which interest him. But they have to be manicured. He does them woven like that and then they grow, and they grow together. But in order to make them do that, you have to prune them every year meticulously. So it's like gardening, like bonsai really.

*How important is the element of craft to your work?*

There are many times when I purposefully use random craftless means to make something, giving an energy which draws attention to the material and therefore the place from which it was gathered. Or there may be a situation where there are many helpers, where the

use of particular skills would be exclusive. Rather I'll say I want something roughly this shape with random energy in it and find a way of doing it, this is an inclusive process. Craft is only relevant when it's connected to use.

Some craft objects these days are simply an application of craft, and they're often incredibly beautiful, but they're actually totally soulless. They just seem to be a very beautiful way of making something, but nothing beyond that. To make something beautiful is good, but it's somehow adrift and unconnected, not within the meaning as it were.

There's no requirement for the craft. One of the things that interested me in the Pomo basket-makers of the South Western American tribes was that to learn to make a basket you had to be an apprentice to someone, and you had to learn where to pick the material, and at what time of the year. To learn about the materials. Also you had to learn to weave the psyche of the tribe into the basket.

I thought that was really quite an interesting thing to say. And there must have been elements of that in our past somewhere – where your life is connected to the things you make. But somehow that's all got separated. There's a division come through, and the division makes the craft look very twee and irrelevant. Although to have things of beauty around you is a good idea. But beauty needs meaning to be truly beautiful. *OL*

## Vortex

I was approached in early 1994 to make a temporary sculpture in the castle grounds for the first of the Lewes Art Wave Festivals. I know the castle well, but I had to look at it with fresh eyes, because a site-specific work would have to relate to it both visually and conceptually. As I descended the steps from the keep I realised at that moment anything I built would have to be the same scale as the barbican in order to compete and not just be another object placed on the grass. I was both exhilarated by that idea and intimidated, because the barbican is 20 metres high.

The barbican is solid, permanent and rooted in the history of Lewes. To contrast with that, my work would have to be light, airy, dynamic and impermanent. The only way to do this within the (minimal) budget was to make a light structure of woven sticks. I had made an open woven dome from hazel and willow the previous year, and I knew from experience that this criss-cross weave was very strong and practical. Hazel costs nothing, but it takes time to cut and transport it. I still had to overcome the problem of building a structure 70 feet high. Since the feeling of the work had to be of something being poured or shot from a single point on the battlements, then the shape would have to be a cone – spreading to about 20 ft diameter on the ground.

What I had to do was weave the bottom third up to about 20 ft, then weave the top third, which would be small and light, on the ground, then erect scaffolding to 30 ft, haul the top up until the tip reached the battlements and tie it in place to the scaffolding. Then I would have to weave the middle bit to join the top and bottom. To make sure the work would be stable and not sag or be blown by the wind, I wove a strong thin steel wire into the top so this would run down the backbone of the cone pegged into the ground.

It took five days to cut and transport enough hazel sticks, then twelve days' weaving. It was incredibly strenuous work, and because there is only one leading edge in the weave, then only one person (myself) could do the job. Each stick is under tension, woven under,

over, inside, outside, and the weft runs as a continuous spiral from top to bottom – which was why the structure was very strong and rigid.

I would say that, in making this piece, I was right up against my physical limits – which is good. I enjoy that, and it was gratifying to remove the ropes and scaffolding and have the work remain rigidly in place – and then to stand inside it and experience the beauty of that whirling material structure with the solid castle as the backdrop.

*Chris Drury has been working on a Camera Obscura Cloud Chamber in Kingswood, Challock, near Ashford, Kent this spring. A book of his work will be published by Thames and Hudson (Abrams in the US) in the autumn.*



Vortex (photo Chris Drury)