

Lords of the Landscape

Lismore and London

Two shows celebrate nature's special place in British art

British artists have a peculiar ability to immerse themselves in the landscape, to see its dirt as well as its Divine glory. John Constable famously took his canvases into his native Suffolk fields to create what he called a 'natural painture' based on direct observation of nature. Two centuries later, Richard Long has taken this a step further, literally, by turning walking into an art form from which to fashion sculptures, photographs and text pieces.

Mr Long has been making art out of walking since 1967, when he carved a line in the grass by walking across a wet field repeatedly and photographing it. Both minimal and magical, it fused the urban art-school ideas of his generation with a romantic yearning to be at one with nature. Ever since, Mr Long's work has been modern and primal, conceptual and material – as much about the time spent in the landscape as the finished product. 'Places give me ideas', he says. 'I get my energy from being out on the road or walking in the mountains.'

How can a sculpture be an action rather than a physical object? 'Walking has enabled me to extend the boundaries of sculpture', Mr Long says. He regards movement as the essence of nature and incorporates it into his art. By 'taking a stone on a walk', as he has done around the Ring of Kerry, he is alluding to the constant migrations of matter caused by the earth's movement, be it slow-motion geological time or the flux of seasons, storms and tides. He wants to feel part of this motion and call attention to it in his work.

At Lismore, a picturesque castle near Cork that was once owned by Sir Walter Raleigh, his ideas come together in perfect synchronicity. As he did along the River Avon of his youth, Mr Long has walked along the Blackwater river from its source to its mouth, passing by the castle under which it flows. Using tidal mud, he has created a massive tondo out of concentric circles of his hand prints, and elsewhere has daubed roof slates with his mud-dipped finger. In these simple yet cryptic gestures, Mr Long is leaving his mark, yet also bringing the flow of the river into the gallery.

Constable too, never forgot his boyhood landscape. The 1817 painting of his father's mill at Flatford in Suffolk's Dedham Vale (which he would have inherited had he not rebelled to become a painter) looks tame today, but for the artist it was a manifesto in which he signed his name in the dirt. Constable painted the world as he saw it – not an idealised, classical landscape painted from on high, but a working rural scene, with a canal, a field and a mill, as seen by the viewer about to walk along the towpath.

Constable was not the first artist to paint a landscape from the ground up (Jacob Ruisdael pioneered this approach in the 1600s), but he was the first artist in England to bring landscape down to earth; and at first he hit the ground with a thud. The prevailing taste held that landscape was inferior to history painting. While J.M.W. Turner invented historical landscapes that were acceptable to the Royal Academy of Arts (RA), then Britain's arbiter of taste and primary exhibition space, Constable's earthy landscapes, based both on his experience and his deeply religious beliefs in nature as the site of Revelation, were a harder sell.

* 40 To gain critical and commercial success and support his family of seven children, Constable devised his 'six-footers': landscape paintings big enough to command wall power at the RA's annual exhibition. He did this by painting a life-sized oil sketch, then laboriously copying it over to an adjacent six-foot canvas and working it up in a more finished form. These rural scenes, painted in the middle-aged Constable's London studio, are idealised memories from his Suffolk boyhood, with motifs made up from his youthful sketches.

45 Now, for the first time, all of Constable's 'six-footers' – the oil sketches alongside the finished works – have been brought together from around the world. (...)

Constable wanted to create a 'kingdom of my own' in his landscapes. Mr Long has done the same in his. Their intense engagement with nature makes their work both personal and universal.

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The Road Not Taken

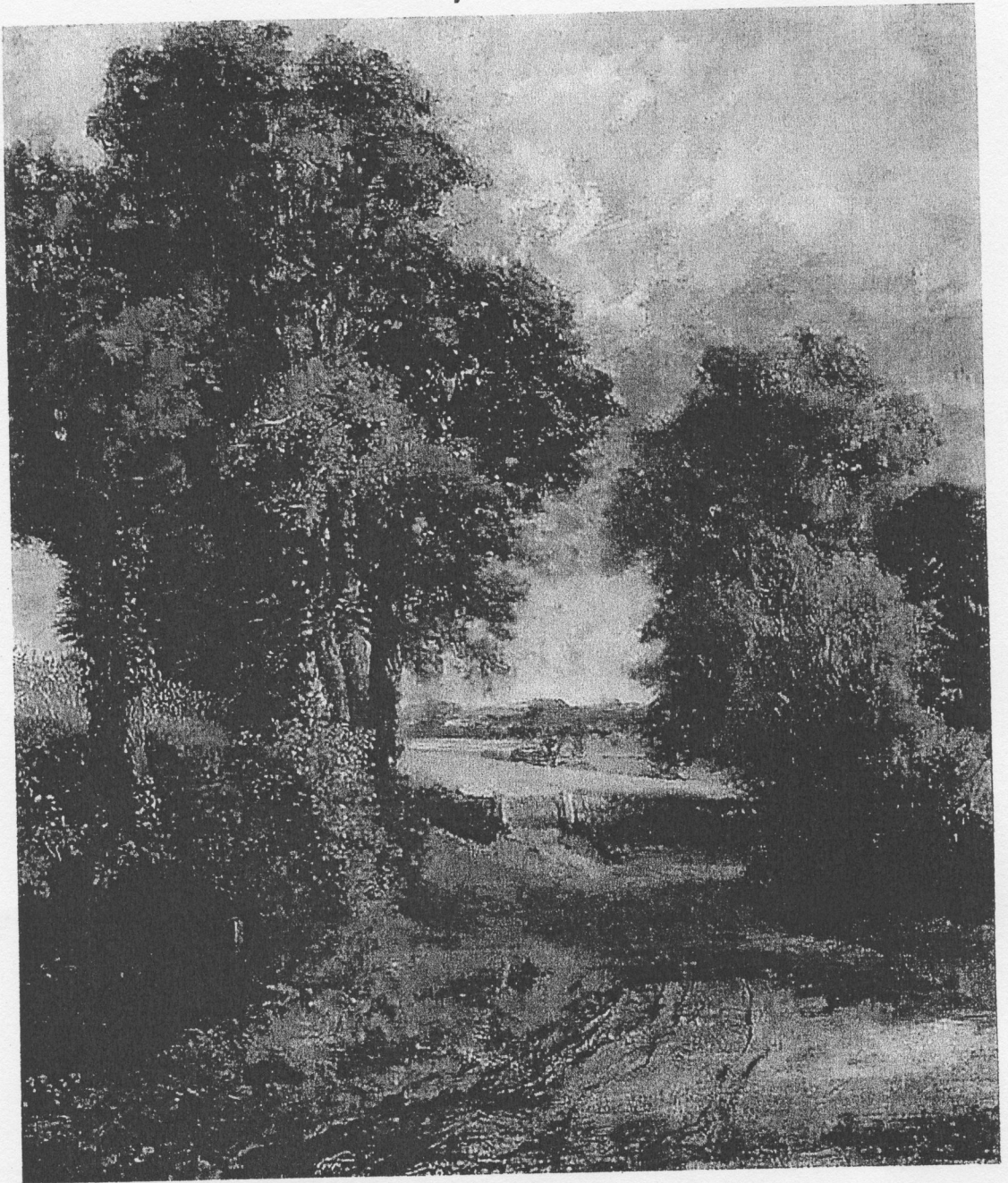
TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
5 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
10 Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
15 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
20 And that has made all the difference.

From Robert Frost, *Mountain Interval* (1916)



John Constable, *A Cornfield* (1817).

Oil on canvas. 613 x 510 mm

Tate Gallery. London.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=26101>