

## Medicine Wheel (1982–3) by Chris Drury

### A talk by Natascha Clissold, Visitor Assistant

My talk today concerns the artist Chris Drury and his large circular piece 'Medicine Wheel' which can be found in our current show 'Natural Encounters', with its natural palette of creams, browns, greys, deep reds and off whites, this distinctive piece asks you to consider the world around us. He best describes his practice as 'a human being in nature - with a relationship to that nature' his work has been labelled as land or environmental art.

Indeed, his ephemeral, site specific pieces from 'Covered Cairn' (1993), hazel and willow sticks, enclosing glacial boulders, where the hazel will rot and the willow will grow,

'Echoes of the Heart' (2007) a slate echogram of the heart in a Middlesex hospital courtyard or, the Spiral 'Winnemucca Whirlwind' (2008) etched into the Paiute Indian peoples dry lake in Nevada to Wyoming's 'Carbon Sink' (2011) pine logs and coal brought together in a vortex, highlighting the destruction of forests by climate change or also 'The Wandering Path' (2016) a winding hedge and drystone wall following the Whadjuk peoples dreamtime story in Perth, all these and more suggest a tenderness and an affinity to the surroundings.

From shows and site specific pieces in Britain, Europe, Scandinavia, Asia, America, Australia, The Antarctic and his birth place Sri Lanka, Drury has developed an international presence.

Tuning into the land around him; its materials available and the underlying energy of a place and its connection to its peoples, Drury's work manifests itself with its dwellings and patterns, such as cairns, protective baskets, chambers, whirlpools, vortices, spirals, waves, echograms, mazes, spheres, domes, shelters, cameras, capsules, clouds and igloos, seeking to readdress the balance between nature and culture.

Concerned with various themes such as: the inner and outer, most notably in his cloud chamber pieces where a domed building, partially built underground projects the outside inside by pinhole cameras or apertures at unusual levels that allow the clouds to be viewed differently. Microcosms such as bodily patterns including fingerprints, flows of the blood, heart chambers and macrocosms of weather systems including oceans and planetary systems all feature in Drury's patterned flowing works.

Often site-specific commissioned works from galleries, festivals, communities and art councils take him to undeveloped sites where he can start a work anew with local crafts people and knowledge, creating installations inside or outside that have an ecological or spiritual depth that seek to address political or cultural healing.

However, Drury states that in his work 'he doesn't impose himself but lets an articulation of a place come through' and 'Allow a place to suggest a form and material, driven by

care for the environment'. He cites that 'a work of art need not set out to communicate anything, rather it has a language of its own.

This has been his ethos for nearly forty years, informed by other disciplines such as; scientists, farmers, ecologists, meteorologists, clinicians, master craftsmen, film makers, printmakers, digital technicians and most recently thatchers amongst others.

However, one aspect has continued to fascinate Drury, that of mushrooms.

'Medicine Wheel' collated and made between August 1982 to August 1983 has at its very core twelve segments of paper, one to represent each month, made of mushroom spores created as a print from their pulp. 'Mushrooms are he says 'plants that can feed you, kill you, cure you, or even make you see visions and as such they are also a human metaphor for life and death and regeneration'.

Drury's first main work 'Medicine Wheel' into environmental art took a year to make, 365 items collected, one a day, by him or friends collated and threaded like a fine spool, became a tangible record of the changing seasons in the English countryside and emotionally difficult times within Drury's year. As his wife and children separated from him - but did return and his father died.

Spanning 230 centimetres in a circular diameter and 8 centimetres deep, divided into twenty-four segments, with approximately fifteen pieces contained in each section, this mindful piece deserves a meditative view; driftwood, feather, bones, willows, skulls, seeds, pebbles, fur, flowers, wool and berries amongst many other natural ethereal items 'The threads of life' are collected and strung together, with a repetitive movement, 'the hand and the body' as Drury states 'clears the mind and focuses' it'.

Walking certainly seems to help open Drury's mind, as it was this that cemented his foray into art outside the confines of a gallery, with its particulars of storage or exhibition space and representation.

Hamish Fulton, a 'Walking Artist' was introduced to Drury by his Uncle who was Drury's dentist, they cemented a friendship and for Drury a new outlook, whilst walking for three weeks in the Canadian Rockies in 1975. It was here that Drury felt his time creating bronze heads of company managers had come to an end. Classically trained in Sculpture and Drawing at Camberwell School of Arts and graduating in 1970, but by 1982 he changed his art practice and had a new way of seeing.

So, at the age of thirty-four Drury set off to work within the natural surroundings of earth itself. Connecting time and place and reconnecting people to the landscapes, with elements of the handmade became Drury's practice and its beginnings can be viewed back to 'Medicine Wheel', with its cycle of life, round never-ending structure, the craft of making and its ability to encompass the viewer.

Traditionally, medicine seeks to right an imbalance and for the indigenous people of Dakota, medicine wheels symbolise the four dimensions of a person, namely; The mind,

body, heart and soul or mental, physical, emotional and spiritual - they believe that if one aspect of this circle is broken or off balance then so too is the person.

Is this what is being expressed within Drury's piece? Do we find repetitive collection or the power of nature albeit a walk in the woods or park calms our minds, centres ourselves and reconnects us to the big wheel that keeps on turning?

The lapwing feathers found two together were the first items to be collected in the 'stubble fields' as Drury writes in his book 'Silent Spaces' continually collecting, Drury would lay them on a tray to be tied onto the structure between the spokes of bamboo at the weekends. Drury speaks about it being a daunting process, but he learnt to 'let go and allow objects to come to him' the swans egg being an example of that, he says 'it appeared in a field near his house probably dragged there by rats', his children and friends found organic items too, there's also a special object for his dad.

Drury was represented by Coracle, showing 'Medicine Wheel' with other environmental artists, such as Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy and later with Bill Culbar and Anthony Gormley, receiving a glowing review in New York 'Not only is it an arresting object but it charts the cycles of the year in a way that is exact as it is discreet' before arriving at Leeds Art Gallery where we have been fortunate to house it since 1987.

Much of the artist's work takes its form with installations, photographs, electrograms, maps, digital video and site specific nature based sculpture and this 'Medicine Wheel' encapsulated his vision.

This object calendar was as Drury puts it 'a slow meditative mindful connection to nature' one which clearly resonated for all his future work.