

1. Entering

In the Onjuva region of North-West Namibia, in an open quarry where the sun refracting from cream-white marble is so dazzling at midday that you can hardly see, there stands a dry-stone wall with a vertical gap in it. Or two walls beside each other, almost but not quite touching. White against white, they are crafted with a jeweller's precision from spoil-heap shards. The angles are right-angles, the edges are sharp, the gap is a firm black line of shadow. Around this intricately made structure rise the sheer, shining cliffs of the sliced marble mountain. *Divided Block 3* is made from the materials of its place: marble, heat, light, knife-edged shade. At midday, everything blazes, except for the rhomboid of shadow behind the walls, cut across by the shaft of sun that comes through the gap. In this place of fierce light, light everywhere, Julie Brook, has created a cool sheet of shadow on which a single moving line of sun is drawn.

On rough moorland above a Hebridean beach, stands a dry-stone wall running round in a perfect ring to form a circular room. *Winter Wall* is made from the materials of North Harris: boulders of gneiss, sudden wind-blown intervals of cool low light. The two ends of the ring do not quite meet. The slim gap between them makes an entryway just large enough for a human body, should anybody come, and large enough for a shaft of low sun to strike through into the space within. The opening is angled towards the westerly point of the midwinter sunset: a shaft, or wand, or paintbrush, or clock-hand of light will enter here, through this human-sized gap, stay a while in the bothy that has been made for it, and slowly leave again.

A powerful ray of thought stretches between these works in sites eight thousand miles apart where the light of a shared sun falls differently. Julie Brook has watched and waited in the Onjuva quarry and on the Hebridean shore, observing how the colour and intensity of light changes moment by moment. She has learnt to work the different stones and live in the contrasting environments of desert heat and northerly cold. The discoveries she made while 'channelling the light' in Namibia suggested new ways of looking at her native Scotland: *Winter Wall*, though it is made from purple-brown gneiss on the mossy shore above a particular cove washed by the Atlantic, has the desert in its genesis. Brook gives each place she works the extreme fullness of her attention, feeling for its unfamiliar rhythms and forms of knowledge. She is an intensely local artist, willing to let a part of the earth teach her its ways. And she is a world artist, inhabiting remote landscapes continents apart and coming to understand their relation to the whole.

2. Firing

For thirty years, Brook has been steadily and devotedly making art with and about the materials of the land and the relation of the elements. In the early 1990s she set up home under an arch of rock on Jura, and stayed there not just for an experimental week or two but for months at a time over four years. It was among the happiest periods of her life, and she dips back into the

memory of it when steadying herself for new projects. The daily rhythms she established on Jura run under all her work. It took skill and energy to sustain the fundamentals of life there: to collect fuel and water, to keep dry, to keep on making fires. But the necessary labour was, for Brook, conducive to experiment and contemplative play. She drew, she painted, she started to use the essential processes of her life – stoking fires, keeping logs dry, knowing the tides – in ways that exceeded practicality. She built a beacon in the sea, and watched the waves wash over the flames. It was a ritual observation of something human-made meeting its fate in the wild, effortfully sustained for a short while, and then lost.

Two decades later, she built a stone firebowl at low tide off Aird Bheag. It was the first of the *Firestacks* she has made and filmed in the same bay season after season since then, every ‘firing’ distinct, telling a new story of setting sun and encroaching water, smoke rising through still air or flames beaten and revived by wind. All the quiet manual effort of collecting and building serves a theatrical purpose that goes joyously beyond camp-fire survival skills to start up a conversation with the sky and the sun.

There is an austere simplicity to the *Firestacks* series, but also grandeur, showmanship, a sense of spectacle that is almost baroque. The elements are brought to a point of focus, like light in a prism. A fire is made to float on the face of the deep! The *Firestacks* make us children again, horrified and elated by the forces that flatten a day’s careful construction work on the beach. And they make us older, more patient, more able to steady and utilise our attention. ‘It’s difficult to watch a tide come in’, Brook says. Casual seaside strollers might think it’s one of life’s less taxing occupations, but few of us regularly watch a tide from high to low and register its qualities in a mental and bodily storehouse of remembered tides.

3. Receiving

Each of Brook’s works teaches something new in the art of attending. Building her stone ring for *Winter Wall*, Brook was making a receptacle for light and also an instrument in which she could study it. When she slips in through the narrow gap, she is entering a cinema in which her eyes will grow used to the dark and images appear. On a mid-February afternoon there is a span of three hours, she finds, from the entry of the light to its departure. That’s long for a movie, but the plot and pace are set by the turning earth and any edit is a loss.

If the structure is a cinema, it’s also a monkish cell, simply and plainly holding the body, closing off all distraction, teaching concentration. ‘The wall receives the light’, says Brook with her usual clarity and without any affectation at all. Receives: it’s the word Christians use of communion. It’s also, connectedly, a word linked with visitors and hospitality. We receive a guest. The stone clock sits ready to receive human guests as well as sun. Its very existence suggests that someone – a watchwoman, keeper of the flame – might leave everything else

behind at certain seasons, carry supplies over the trackless hills on foot, and then by boat round into Tòb a' Ghèarraidh, and devote attention to a strand of light.

Brook made the journey to visit *Winter Wall* in February 2021. She set out from Skye as an emissary, going to check on the sun and bring back news. Most of Europe was overcast, and its people claustrophobically muffled by lockdown. But the seas around North Harris were glinting under the deep blue of a freezing, cloudless sky. Brook found that her wall had survived unscathed since last summer's building. She slipped through the gap and waited in the shadowed interior for the sinking afternoon sun to enter. Her photographs communicate some of what she saw. First this:

Dot dash dash dash

Dash dot dot dot

From near-darkness, there appear across the turf floor something like stitches in a luminous thread. The light has flowed in between the courses of stone, finding the cracks. Flecks of grass are lit to day-glo yellow. The dashes of colour have the liveliness of creatures: fish glinting in a dark pond, glow-worms in night air. They have taken the watching artist by surprise.

Gradually the dashes lengthen and join to become the 'slender dagger' Brook had anticipated from the first. The light-line creeps up the far wall, bending over the stones but keeping its vertical path. In the photographs you can see the fieriness of this light as it comes burnishing the grey stone with an ochre that looks warm and cold at once. If Brook's ring of wall is a kind of sundial, this is the gnomon. The line moves over the gneiss, telling the time. The sun-key fits into the round stone lock, and turns. The wall receives the light.

It's not surprising to find Brook using language evocative of religious practices. She is sometimes reminiscent of the early Christian holy-men who made stone hermitages at the rocky edges of Britain. Or is she more like the desert fathers making contemplative lives from the different materials of sand and heat? Perhaps neither analogy is relevant; Brook is not a metaphysical thinker. Her eyes are on this earth and the people who dig, quarry, carve it, build with its clay, paint with its pigments. Still, she has the discipline of a Columba or Cuthbert. She is at her most exuberant when living very simply; you might call it asceticism if she weren't so lavishly delighted. Like the adherents of many religious orders, she devotes much of her time to physical work. Manual tasks are not distractions to be dealt with before some more elevated form of creativity can begin; they are at the core of all she does. Brook needs to be physically on her mettle in order to reach the kinds of thinking and rhythmic making she desires.

4. Making

Each of Brook's landscape interventions is made by hand and mostly by her own hand. Before any stone is laid or earth dug, there is the work of getting to the site with adequate supplies of food and fuel. Then there is the gathering of materials, hauling boulders over the moor or slates

across the quarry. There can be no grudging of effort in the experimentation that follows: the playfulness of the sandcastle-builder is required. In the dry river valley of the Marienfluss Brook began to work the red earth with a mattock. She was cutting into the river bank to give it a new shape, a re-drawn edge. The mattock swung into the bank, breaking through compacted layers of baked top clay, sands, softer clays beneath. In Kanagaso quarry in Japan, she imagined steps soaring up towards the cliff-face. How do you build a staircase by hand from the stones on a spoil-heap? One step at a time, Brook invented the method. The stones being too heavy to lift, she learned to budge, shunt, roll them. She 'walked' them, rocking the weight from side to side.

Another artist might be ecstatic in the moment of imagining how steps might subtly transform the landscape and then pale at the effort needed actually to make them. Another artist might bring in the diggers once she had decided what was needed in the way of earth-shifting and rock haulage. Brook does the graft herself with pleasure. The remoteness often makes this necessary: there is no-one else around. Temperamentally, she finds solitude productive. But it's not a fetish of alone-ness or control: Brook delights in congenial help when it comes, and the exchange of ideas that ensues.

The building, stoking and filming of the *Firestacks* is a team effort each season, the participants choreographed in a shared routine. *Winter Wall* was built with a group of students, learning as they went. Brook, in turn, is a keen student of those who have guided her over the years, particularly in Libya, Namibia and Japan. Much of her desire to explore remote places lies in the transformative study of those who are there: she watches how desert travellers make and use pockets of precious shade, she watches how farmers on the Namibian plains use mattocks for one kind of clay and not another. In Komatsu, a retired builder watched her patiently shunting blocks of marble in the quarry to form her steps, and offered to help; she watched him back. Their joint effort, with no shared language except physical stone-work, was a felicitous convergence of more assistance to Brook than any pre-employed team of contractors.

'You have to keep your courage fine-tuned', she says. The phrase suggests how consciously she is preparing and playing these instruments of hers. There is the courage to climb rocks or fend for oneself in uninhabited places where there is no chance of help if it were needed. There is also the courage of conviction. Brook stands by her ideas. Their craziness does not strike her. People raise their brows in disbelief and she says 'let me show you what I mean'.

She gets as close as possible to living with, even living in, the materials she wants to work with, sleeping on the sand she will use in 'desert drawings', setting up home by the rocky shore where she will build a cairn, or following yellow ochre back to where the land is made of it, in the quarries of Komatsu. She is drawn to people who live in intimate partnership with the resources they use. She might not understand the resistance of the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnet 111 to what shapes or stains him: 'Almost thence my nature is subdued / To what it works in, like the dyer's hand'. Brook's own nature is liable to be enlivened by what it works in.

And she is admiring of dyers' hands. In Namibia she travelled with and learned from the the Himba people, especially the women who mine red ochre from the ground. The Himba do not wash off the stains after their work, but rub the red more deeply into their skin. The ochre is mixed with butterfat to make otjize, a paste that protects from the desert heat, and colours the body with the beauty of the earth.

5. Measuring

The rhythms of strenuous work – digging, hammering, shunting, heaving – are recorded in films made while construction is underway. These documentaries of place and process are highly crafted in themselves, evoking sounds and scales, the feel of the earth, the necessary movements of the body. Yet the finished piece of art is something that stands separate from this busyness of making. The debris is cleared away, the tools are taken from the scene, and the steps rise through the quarry as if they had been there a thousand years. Stone-built curves are left alone in the Libyan Fezzan, like fossils revealed by a receding tide. A few faint barrow tracks may be left in the sand, and the impress of a sandal sole or two. But the makers have not stayed to take a bow.

After the weight-lifting, the sculptures take on a curious weightlessness. It's an effect Brook emphasises in many of her photographs. Wedges of stone levitate. A triangle shimmers. The reading of scale and distance is confounded. Possibly these are mirages, risen in the heat. The image of a landscape stretching miles may be mistaken for a geometric design on paper, and vice versa. Abstract paintings and landscape views borrow each other's compositions. Immaculate stillness prevails. Are we looking at land at all?

The red river bank in the Marienfluss valley, so effortfully worked with mattock and spade, is now seen in panorama. The smoothly sliced earth is sensuously inviting, as if it were the consistency of butter, or the kind of ice cream that tempts a spoon to even up its edges. At the same time we see the vast resistant rockiness of the plain and mountain. In another Marienfluss work, a stretch of river bank has been cut to a startling curve. The shadow under it is a sweeping calligraphic mark, like a base clef. It's the shadow or void that we see first in the pictures, as we try to fathom surfaces and depths.

There is a special quality of precision in these photographs which share many qualities with abstract art. Some are classically composed, opposing weights held in delicate equilibrium. Nothing is accidental, though it may be unexpected. Some, though the camera captures only a moment, give the impression of time condensed, or time suspended.

Brook gives measurements to the centimetre whenever she presents her work. It's a standard gallery convention that need not attract notice, but when the work in question is a reshaped river bank, can the centimetres really matter? They do for Brook because what she brings to the wilderness is care and deliberation. She packs spirit-levels as essential equipment.

She plots her lines with taut string in the sand and builds to plan, getting her walls as straight as an architect with a sharp pencil in a studio.

In what seem to be undifferentiated miles of desert, she finds the spot she wants and makes a structure of firm, clear forms. Under the raw cliff of marble in Onjuva Quarry, she applies marquetry precision to the building of a drystone wall. From the ochre spoil heaps of Kanagaso, she makes a staircase so straight that seen from the front the three flights of steps form a single line, an arrow upward; if there are lines you can 'take for a walk', here is a line you can climb. The hand-made is not dwarfed or made to look vulnerable as it so easily might in such settings: all is composed to suggest a balance. In each case the hand-made and the elementally-made answer each other, revealing their characters.

Brook's work involves many kinds of balance. There is the balance she speaks of between responding to a new environment and 'staying within the language' of her own interests, her own ways of seeing and making. There is that 'fine-tuning' of courage. There is the tempering of each work to its site. Hers is not an art of grand gestures, dominating landscapes, but nor is Brook ambivalent or apologetic about making a clear mark. Balance again, as a guiding principle in the making of these poised works, though it's clear from films of Brook at work that some ingredients escape measure: mistakes, felicities, runaway energies, anarchic laughter.

6. Finding

Several months after constructing *Winter Wall* in summer with a group of students, Brook returned alone to see whether it aligned, as intended, with December sunset. The tightly-built circular room was not there, beacon-like, to greet her. It had fallen apart. Stones were scattered as if pushed outward by a centrifugal force, the circle unwinding itself. Preternaturally unfazed, Brook admired the 'exquisite' energy of the fallen or unfurled wall, and began, on her own, to rebuild. 'When something you build collapses, it reaches a very dynamic state', she noted later, impervious to frustration. Perhaps only Cornelia Parker could match this deep excitement at the un-making of her work. Brook's 2013 exhibition at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh was well-titled: *Made, Unmade*. Since then, nature's unmaking has been prominently incorporated into her work. Every time she lights a *Firestack*, it's in the knowledge that the sea will put out the fire and scatter the stones.

Brook returned to *Winter Wall* in 2022, the pilgrim making her seasonal visit to the sun-clock, the lighthouse-keeper going to check the lamp. This time there was no sun. Not a glimpse. The sundial stood sunless, the low cloud-light picked out nothing for special attention. That's the Hebrides: better luck next time, most people would say, packing to go. Brook watched with rapt concentration. She was thinking that under cloud, *Winter Wall* demanded longer and more patient observation. There was no obvious show playing in the cinema, from

dot-dot-dash to the rising sword and back again. She watched on in any case, and reported later her excitement at the perception of ‘volume rather than line’. Not for a moment had she been dismayed. She works with what she finds, and usually finds it more absorbing than she could have guessed.

Now, on the lawn of an eighteenth-century house in Cumbria, a staircase is appearing. Its elegant wide and shallow treads appear from rough blocks of slate. The stairs are caught in this act of emerging. They are half made – or perhaps half unmade and returning to the rock from which they came. Add a bannister quickly, in wrought iron or polished wood, if you want to hold on to the crafted domesticity. Hang a Gainsborough portrait, fit brass stair rods and a carpet. Leave them to the weather and the land, and the steps may at any moment revert to a heap of unworked quarry slates.

These stones on the lawn are ambassadors from the Kirkby Slate Quarries a few miles away from Abbot Hall, and they direct attention back there – to the deep open pits worked for generations, and the hard, shattered, lunar-looking ravines of dark grey-blue rock. Like Brook’s works in Komatsu and Onjuva, the effect is to suggest the sculptural power of such industrial sites. Imagine the whole quarry as a giant sculpture, they seem to say, a monumental series of carvings made in the land and revealing what the land can be. The slates on the lawn remind us, too, that every stone staircase, roof-tile and flag-stone, like every Michelangelo *Pietà* hewn from lumps of marble, has been land once. Sculpture, then, is a kind of landscaping. And the earth around us, as Brook knows, is already sculpture, there for the finding.