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Travel

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By Kevin Rushby

Sticks and stones: outdoor art on the Channel Islands

Andy Goldsworthy and Antony Gormley are transforming the open spaces of Alderney and Helm in an art project that hopes to draw the Channel Islands together



Andy Goldsworthy collecting stones on Alderney.
Photograph: Kevin Rushby

Along the headland, I find a sunny hollow and lie down out of the wind. I'm tired, having yomped over much of the island that day, and the warmth instantly grabs me. I will not sleep, however – there's a 100-metre drop into the sea just a few steps away. Where is Andy, I wonder. An hour ago I was walking with him – one of the world's best-known artists – and now he has disappeared, saying he has to work. That can only mean that he is out here, somewhere on this three-and-a-half-mile-long island, magicking things out of sticks and stones and splintered shards of rainbows.

I inch forwards on my belly, sending up scents of wild garlic, and peep over the edge. Down below is the sea, a jade sheet that's been ripped to tatters by tidal currents – little wonder there are so many wrecks under the surface. Glancing along the curving edge of the cliff top, I see that this is also a fabulous hanging garden: the glossy strokes of wild leeks topped with white flowers, the deep pink blooms of the hottentot fig surrounding patches of campion. Sensibly they are all hugging hard to the ground.

Then a little further away, almost hidden in yellow broom flowers, I spot the bony shank of a yellowing concrete wall. I crawl over to it and look into a gun embrasure. Inside is a very different world: stained concrete and a doorway with steps leading into darkness. I slide through the gap, stand up and look around. I know this is a second world war German battery, the guns long since removed, but it feels as though I've slipped into a Stygian underworld. I wait for my eyes to adjust to the gloom then, with some trepidation, walk down the steps.



There is nothing like walking with Andy Goldsworthy to make you readjust your eyesight, look a little harder, and longer. I spend a good 10 minutes examining the flaking crust of a gun mount, its ironwork bleeding russets and Nazi golds down its concrete flanks. Then I clamber back to the grassy path and move off, walking further, but not finding Andy. I'm seeing with his eyes, or I think I am, and that after all is what art can do – readjust your vision, make you appreciate the world differently.

Alderney cliffs Photograph: Kevin Rushby for the Guardian

Goldsworthy has been on Alderney, in the Channel Islands, for some weeks now, patiently bringing to fruition a remarkable venture – the Art and Islands project. This is an unprecedented attempt to draw the Channel Islands together by allowing renowned artists to investigate and interpret the very different characters of each island. There is already a standing figure by Antony Gormley on the tiny jewel of Herm, an island just a short ferry ride from the creamy cosiness of Guernsey, but Andy Goldsworthy has chosen to get to grips with the remoter and more brutal beauty of Alderney. Next year, organiser Eric Snell – himself an internationally recognised artist – hopes to bring Cornelia Parker to work on the tightly woven and ancient charms of Sark.

"We are in a new age for art," Eric told me when we met in Guernsey's St Peter Port at the start of my trip around the islands. "We can go beyond the gallery. A place like the Channel Islands can have great art. People like Andy Goldsworthy are proving that."

Eric is a keen apostle of the islands, well aware of the irony that in his youth he was desperate to escape to art school in London, convinced that nothing of any artistic consequence ever happened on Guernsey, or the other seven inhabited islands in the archipelago. Now, however, he wants to tune me in to the possibility that great things, unusual things, can indeed happen in a place often written off as a bankers' bonus bunkhole. We walk away from the quayside in St Peter Port, up a curling road of elegant whitewashed Georgian houses, to a green door at the head of stone steps.

"Victor Hugo lived here for 15 years," says Eric. "And in between writing *Les Misérables* and *Toilers of the Sea*, he did something to that house – made it a work of art. As his grandson said, 'a poem in three floors'."

I enter into darkness: the entire lower floor is cased with dark, heavily carved oak: casements and doors rescued from other buildings, then adorned in surreal profusion. Iron trivets act as heraldic devices in a canopied chair; tapestries and plates decorate the ceilings. As we climb the stairs, the house lightens, revealing more and more of Hugo's single-minded genius. When I stagger out into the street an hour later, I am ready: remarkable art, I have to concede, can happen anywhere, even in the Channel Islands.

We head down to the port, passing another fine piece of art, a five-metre-high modernistic granite pillar that is actually the gnomon of a sundial. Every Liberation Day, 9 May, it casts a shadow along an adjacent curved seating area, touching inscriptions describing the events of that day in 1945 at the precise times they occurred. "Accurate to five seconds," says Eric, who ought to know as he made it, together with astronomer David Le Conte.



Antony Gormley's standing figure on Herm.
Photograph: Kevin Rushby

A little way along the quayside, we board the ferry for a 20-minute ride to Herm, followed by a 20-minute walk along grassy footpaths to where the Antony Gormley figure stands on a low rocky knoll. I love this outdoor approach to a sculpture – striding up over boulders and tussocks of grass with views to Herm's famous Shell Beach. For someone like me who develops "gallery feet" when I am barely through the doors of Tate Modern, it is wonderful.

The Gormley figure is reached by just a short stroll from the harbour, but with Goldsworthy the Art and Islands project has hit on an artist who can make walking a major element in the experience. Next morning, after a spectacular 15-minute plane journey, I am finding out why. Goldsworthy is on Alderney, applying the finishing touches to his work, a collection of 11 rammed earth balls (earth mixed with other materials), each about five feet in diameter, which will be placed at significant points

around the island. The total route will be about 16 miles on lovely grassy footpaths and beachside shingle – a long day's hike or an easy weekend. And with the small town of St Anne in the centre of the island, there's always an easy escape from the circuit.

One of the first things I notice about Goldsworthy, however, is that he doesn't really do footpaths. He simply takes off in the direction he wants to go, changing course only when the brambles get too thick. "I didn't want to do something pretty," he tells me, as we stride across rough grassland near Saye Bay. "Alderney is beautiful, but not pretty. As an artist I have to respond to what I find."



One of Goldsworthy's 11 giant earth balls in a second world war bunker. Photograph: Chris George

What he has found is plenty of human and natural debris to bury within the earth globes, "the stones" as he calls them. And these things will gradually be revealed as the "stones" are eroded.

"Everything that went in was found on the island," he says, pointing to a spot next to a boulder-strewn beach. "There was a big rope here that I had to use a tractor to pull out. While I was doing it, someone came along and pointedly said, 'That rope's been there a long time.'" He grins.

"I'm working in a social context here. We're going to put that particular stone back here so the rope will slowly reappear, then eventually return to its place."

Goldsworthy's enthusiasm is clear. He loves the way the erosion process introduces an element of chaos and chance. "We simply don't know how the stones will react. Some will be close to the waves during storms and they might be gone within a year or two, leaving just a few marks. Others, like the one inside the machine gun post, will be around for longer."

What this means for admirers of Goldsworthy is that revisiting this work will be constantly rewarding – but an initial visit should not be put off for too long.

Andy is striding ahead of me and when I catch up, we are near the Cats Bay lighthouse. His mind is on to another creative obsession of his. "I made a rain shadow here," he says with a kind of grim glee. He does this by lying on the ground as rain begins to fall, then capturing on camera a dry shadow of his figure on the ground. In some American cities this activity is tantamount to subversion and has attracted heavy security reactions, but on Alderney there were different dangers. "I waited till it was about to rain then lay down in the road, but it was nearly dark and I had to listen for cars. With the sound of the wind and waves it was nerve-racking, but I had to be immobile. Then a woman's voice suddenly said, 'Are you all right?' I was so startled, I just leapt to my feet." He laughs at the recollection.

It's this type of ephemeral work that made Goldsworthy's reputation. His books documenting the creation of objects using materials such as ice, leaves, sticks and even rain, have reportedly out-sold works by any other living British artist. His other, more permanent, work is equally loved: crafted sheepfolds in Cumbria, the roof of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and the astonishing Refuges d'Art project in Provence. The Alderney stones project has clearly given him a great amount of inspiration. "I found a local farmer with a huge pile of old hand tools, which we put inside one stone. Then in another we put gloves – loads of fishermen's gloves – and they'll emerge fingers first. When the earth is all eroded, there'll just be a pile of gloves."

We walk through an old firing range and drop down on to one of Alderney's perfect beaches, a semi-circle of white sand backed by a concrete wall – built by the Nazis as an anti-tank measure, but now a rather convenient windbreak and sun reflector for the handful of people basking under it. Up on the hill is Fort Essex, an earlier defensive installation started by Henry VIII. The island is covered in forts, battlements and gun emplacements dating right back to Roman times. Not every islander likes to see second world war installations identified as visitor attractions, a view with which Goldsworthy has some sympathy. The German occupation was a brutal and violent time: the inhabitants of Alderney had fled to Guernsey but the SS brought prisoners in to work on the defences here. They lived in what would prove to be the only concentration camp on British soil, a place where hundreds died, from disease, over-work and starvation.



Andy Goldsworthy with one of the balls.
Photograph: Chris George

One of the Alderney stones will sit close to concrete pillars that mark what was the entrance to the camp. "In that stone we've included some poppy seeds," says Goldsworthy. "And they should sprout, maybe on top, maybe around it in a circle. And when the stone is gone, I hope the poppies will still be here."

We cut back across the island – this is not difficult as it is only a mile-and-a-half wide – and explore one of the German defensive installations

at Bibette Point. It's a warren of dark passageways, some flooded with seawater. Climbing out of a gun turret, we clamber across a concrete roof that's been camouflaged with stones, then jump down on to a plinth. Andy stops and points down. "See this?"

There are footprints in the concrete. One of the prisoners working here left a trace of himself. Was it deliberate? Andy is thoughtful. He starts tapping his fingertips together and says, "I think you should walk the cliff top section alone – you'll get the atmosphere better without me."

"And you?"

He smiles. "I'm going to do a bit of work – ephemeral stuff – on my own."

He's right. The atmosphere of the cliffs is better experienced alone, without the temptation of talking. But I don't find him or whatever he has gone off to do – a transitory piece of magic, no doubt, conjured out of flotsam. Perhaps it's still out there, waiting for a lost walker to stumble upon, one of those ghostly traces of a human presence that Alderney reveals to the careful observer – like the prisoner's footprints in the bunker or, in years to come, the eroded remains of the Goldsworthy stones.