

Earth, wind and fire

Julie Brook is drawn to remote, primordial landscapes where she makes powerful sculptural works, drawings and films.

As she prepares for a new exhibition, the artist talks to Mary Miers in her studio on the Isle of Skye



Julie Brook's *2 Curved Rising Lines* explores the formal sculptural relationship between two drystone walls in the Libyan desert

JULIE BROOK defies the conventions that have made wild landscapes such a fashionable source of literary and artistic inspiration. Not for her a few weeks' roughing it while passing through a place on a journey of self-discovery; this remarkable artist-film maker believes in fully immersing herself and, over the past 25 years, has spent prolonged periods—once, an entire year—living in remote terrains in order to explore ways of communicating the elemental through her art.

Drawn to raw, wild places, she has moved from inaccessible Hebridean islands to the deserts of Libya and Namibia, relying on her unusual mental and physical stamina to survive, often alone, in Atlantic winter gales and the searing African sun. Strong and

practical, she has laboured tirelessly to build shelters and fires while honing a distinctive form of living sculpture that she describes as 'realigning' elements of the land: 'I don't want to introduce new objects, but to re-order what's already there; I'm interested in the relationship between what I make and what I don't make.'

Julie's openness to the landscape and the responses it invites manifests itself artistically in various media. First, there are her astonishing interventions—transient works that merge her own experience with the physical reality of the features she seeks to rearrange. Through these sculptural works, she explores the effects of, for example, juxtaposing a straight line with a natural curve, cutting across a plane to create a geometric form, intercepting

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light, and the striking impact of shadow and weather.

Then, there are her films, conceived as part of the process rather than as documentary records. These create a 'three-dimensional immersive experience' through which the audience can engage with the immediacy of her making; they also contribute an element of permanence to works that will slowly erode back into the ground. Powerful and beautifully shot, Julie's films ring with the

intensity of her labours as she digs and slices the raw earth, marks out a line on the sand, hews and rearranges stone, sometimes assisted by her Tuareg or Himba guides, who seem completely at ease with her purpose.

One episode takes us into a quarry at a sacred place called Otjize, where three Himba girls have come to collect the red pigment they use to protect their skin. The film is not about the girls themselves but the landscape they embody, with its ancient rhythms and rituals. A soundtrack records the wind and the mesmerising clang of spades chipping away at the blocks of iron ore that they will grind into pigment, enhancing the sensory experience.

Drawing and painting are also fundamental to Julie's work and her land art provides a rich source

from which to distil and develop ideas back in her studio. Her bold, sculptural drawings are based on her three-dimensional work, layered with the pigment she collected in the desert. Complementing these are photographs abstracting the essence of her experience in sharp, large-scaled images that have been hand varnished and mounted on aluminium.

The inter-relationship of all these works is a striking aspect of Julie's new exhibition, which opens at Little Buckland Gallery near Broadway, Worcestershire, on Saturday. Nothing like this has been seen in the Cotswolds before. The old barn has been converted into three galleries and, here, Julie's film installation will be shown on five large screens alongside a body of her desert paintings, drawings and photographs.

The show is the fifth in her 'Made, Unmade' series, which has attracted international attention and seen her shortlisted for the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation Art Prize, the winner of which will be announced in June.

Visiting Julie at her home in Skye recently, where she lives with her film-producer husband Chris Young (creator of *The Inbetweeners*) and their four children, I ask what compels her to spend long periods of solitude in physically demanding places. She has always loved being outside, she says, and is good at building things and gathering food. The daughter of an Air Vice-Marshal, she had a peripatetic childhood, but holidays in Wales gave her a taste for roaming free and, later, after studying at the Ruskin School of Art, she spent time alone on Bodmin Moor making >

revelatory charcoal drawings redolent of Auerbach and Bomberg.

But it was a decision to go painting in Orkney in 1989 that was to change her life. There, she discovered Hoy, where she lived in a bothy at Rackwick, met her future husband, who was making *Venus Peter*, and produced a powerful body of work that was exhibited in Stromness. 'That was the beginning. Driving back down the west coast, I realised that this was the place I wanted to be and, since then, Scotland has always been my home.'

She lived in Glasgow, teaching children and prisoners and then, on a visit to Jura in 1991, discovered the sea arch on the west side of the island that for the next two summers and then a whole year would become her home. There were visitors, and provisions brought by boat, but Julie lived here alone, 4½ hours' walk from the nearest road, in a shelter she built within the arch, burning piles of driftwood and keeping the rats at bay with her cat.

It was during this time that she made her famous *Fire Stacks*—broad stone pillars constructed between high tides, which she fed from a raft, filming the sea slowly extinguish them and then rebuilding their fires as the water receded in a ceaseless ritual 'that connected me to the wind and tide, a rhythm that felt very ancient'.

In March 1996, by now married and weaning her eldest daughter, Julie spent 10 days alone on Mingulay and then got

Ian Dodds



Pigment Drawing, one of a series of photographic stills of a poured-earth drawing, Namibia, 2011

permission to return for longer periods. For the next 15 years, she came to this uninhabited, cliff-girt island every summer, sometimes alone, sometimes with her family, occupying the schoolhouse bothy on condition that she move out when the crofters came over for the annual sheep shearing (the village was abandoned in 1912).

From entertaining Cardinal Winning with a lavish tea ('I'd just been baking in the bothy and he came on a boat with the Northern Lighthouse Board') to pigment-collecting with Himba girls in the Namibian desert, Julie has had some amazing encounters.

Most unexpected, perhaps, was the lady who turned up on Mingulay

one morning while she was stretching canvasses outside the bothy. 'She asked me all about the island and my work, looked at my paintings and expressed concern about the leaks. Only when she took off her sunglasses did I realise it was The Queen. She was so relaxed and natural and completely alone. [The royal yacht was anchored in the bay.] I offered her a cup of tea and then helped her back across the burn. Before continuing, she popped back over with a last question: "Do you have any problems with drug trafficking here, or anything like that?"'

Since moving to Skye, where she has educated her children

in the Gaelic medium, Julie has been involved with a number of significant teaching projects. 'Juggling work with family life, I've had less time to spend alone in the wilds, but the finite nature of those trips—say about six weeks—makes me very focused and bold, with the feeling that anything is possible.'

Julie Brook 'Made, Unmade' is at Little Buckland Gallery, Little Buckland, Broadway, Worcestershire, from March 28 to April 19. There will be a series of 'Artists in Conversation' (01386 853739; www.littlebucklandgallery.co.uk)

Next week: C. R. Mackintosh



A sharp line in the sand highlights the rhythms of the desert landscape in *Blue Volcanic Plates* (2009)



Intercepting light: *Divided Block 2*