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Presidio Project Entwines Nature Into Artworks

By Chloe Veltman
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Andy Goldsworthy in the Presidio next to his piece *The Spire* on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2010. Photo by Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

It's a bright morning in the Presidio in San Francisco, and Andy Goldsworthy is trudging around a muddy forest clearing as he examines felled eucalyptus trees.

For two years, Presidio Trust workers have carefully set aside this lumber, the byproduct of various construction and environmental projects, at the behest of Mr. Goldsworthy, the celebrated British artist. Mr. Goldsworthy intends to repurpose the trunks for his latest artwork, "Wood Line."

Sorting through the logs at the start of the two-week installation process is an arduous task. Much of the wood is gnarled instead of gracefully curved, the shape necessary for creating a flowing wooden pathway through the tunnel-like eucalyptus grove bordering the Lovers' Lane trail.

But the artist isn't fazed. He is confident that another nearby cache of logs will yield better results.

Mr. Goldsworthy, who is internationally acclaimed for his often ephemeral and unobtrusive site-specific artworks

fashioned from leaves, icicles, twigs and other natural materials, has worked extensively in the Bay Area since the mid-1990s. Goldsworthy fans make the pilgrimage to the region to see works like “Stone River” at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford, “Drawn Stone” at the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park and “Spire” in the Presidio.

Mr. Goldsworthy’s art has developed over the years in response to his growing knowledge of the Bay Area landscape and history.

“It’s been fascinating to see how Andy’s ideas have evolved as he’s returned to the park,” said Michael Boland, the Presidio Trust’s chief of planning and park projects. “They’ve become truer expressions of the qualities of the space, and the public is benefiting from his matured knowledge.”

Mr. Goldsworthy first came to the Presidio in 2006 on a tour with the local art collectors Donald and Doris Fisher. He quickly became fascinated by the tension between the park’s natural beauty and its artifice.

“Unlike other national parks in this country, the Presidio possesses a strong social current,” Mr. Goldsworthy said during a

break from sorting logs. “It wasn’t just the topography that attracted me, but also the evidence of human involvement in creating the landscape.”



Andy Goldsworthy, center, directs work on his newest piece titled Wood Line in the Presidio on Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2010. Photo by Adithya Sambamurthy/The Bay Citizen

With its aromatic eucalyptus groves, rolling fog and swooping parrots, the Presidio may look like “The Land That Time Forgot,” but it was largely a barren sand dune before soldiers planted trees there in the late 19th century. These facts underpin both Mr. Goldsworthy’s 2008 work “Spire,” a 95-foot pinnacle constructed from felled cypress that stands on the ridge near the Arguello Gate, and the in-progress “Wood Line.”

Visible for miles, “Spire” is unlike most of Mr. Goldsworthy’s outdoor artworks, which generally avoid making a big statement. Owing to the complex logistics involved in erecting the structure, it is also one of his more expensive projects. “Spire” cost the donor, the For-Site Foundation, about \$750,000 to build.

“The project took 12 days to install, but we were prepping for five weeks before that and stayed for a month afterward to do the drainage system,” Jacob Ehrenberg, an assistant to Mr. Goldsworthy, said.

As with many of Mr. Goldsworthy’s works, “Spire” is as much about place as it is about time. “It’s unusual for me to put a sculpture on such a prominent site. But part of the idea is that it starts off being very visible and over time becomes invisible as the forest grows around it,” Mr. Goldsworthy said. “It’s not about creating a static object. It’s about describing the changes in this place.”

Mr. Goldsworthy hopes to achieve a similar result with “Wood Line,” a work that aims to draw attention to the missing cypress trees in the eucalyptus grove by weaving a curvaceous trail on the ground, in contrast to the rigid lines where they once stood.

As Mr. Goldsworthy has spent more time in the Bay Area undertaking installations, he has become increasingly attuned to changes in the region's landscape and culture. (An exhibition of his works is at the Haines Gallery in San Francisco through Dec. 24.)

Works created a few years ago reference the region's volatile plate tectonics, like "Stone River," which is built from sandstone bricks fashioned from rubble from the 1906 earthquake, and "Drawn Stone," which features a jagged crack running through otherwise solid ground.

But the artist's more recent pieces, like those at the Presidio, reflect a subtler understanding of the effects of time on Bay Area geography. The detailed knowledge of how to source and work with the Presidio's natural resources to make the biggest visual impact is the result of years of immersion in the region. "Coming back here is so important," Mr. Goldsworthy said. "It deepens my sense of the gradual transformation of the landscape. It's not just about drawing a line in the ground but seeing how its surface changes over time."