

Julie

MINIMALIST,

MONASTIC,

Encounters

Brook

MUSCULAR,

MAGICAL

Julie Brook lives and works on the Isle of Skye in the remote far north of Scotland. Fittingly, the subject of her art, and increasingly the materials she uses as well, are the land and her connection to it. As the artist says: 'My desire is to go to a landscape, inhabit it, listen to the landscape in a way, and then respond to it. It's a balance between what I bring to the landscape and what the landscape imposes on me.'

My first encounter with Brook's work was at the 'Made, Unmade' exhibition at Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh, Scotland in June 2013. The work – a kind of a 'land art-performance-photography-film' hybrid immersive installation – stayed with me and I was intrigued to find out more. So when the exhibition moved to the Wapping Project in London, I took the opportunity to see the work again and meet the artist. Open, engaging and warm, she speaks passionately and intelligently about her work. We had a number of animated discussions, at the Wapping Project, at a café in Kings Cross and via email from Skye and Sicily, where we talked about the results of her monastic way of working and muscular 'anything-is-possible' approach.

For the past 25 years Brook has lived and worked in a range of wild, remote places in her quest to get to the essence of the way the land makes her feel. This mission has taken her to remote and uninhabited parts of Scotland and to the deserts of central and south-west Libya and the semi-desert of north-west Namibia.

Scotland

It was here she honed her way of working, finding out what 'makes her tick' creatively. Key to this is the solitude that she found while living alone on the uninhabited west coast of the Isle of Jura, Inner Hebrides (population around 200) (1990–94), in a home and studio that she made in a natural stone arch. Solitude is vital for Brook to create: she uses it as a tool to reach deeper into herself and make her more alert to the landscape. It allows her to work unselfconsciously and forge her expressions free from the clutter and noise of modern life. This is when she is 'in her element', particularly in landscapes that feel 'unseen', untamed, unknown.

Time alone also allowed Brook to experiment with different ways to capture and convey the 'indescribable' feeling that she gets in the landscape, and her art practice has become more expansive. From her roots as an expressionist landscape painter, she has found her voice with a nomadic existence and practice, one that travels through and across disciplines – fusing aspects of body art, land art, performance, expressionism, minimalism, photography, film, drawing and sculpture into a multifaceted body of work that engages all the senses.

While on Jura, Brook moved from painting to a more direct engagement and interaction with the landscape – instead of depicting it, she began to draw the landscape with the landscape (using earth, sand and ash in her drawings), and to create works in the landscape using materials found on-site. Alongside this desire to seek out, understand and

communicate her connection to the land has been Brook's ability and facility to build things. A consummate 'maker', she had been building things her whole life, without giving it much thought, or certainly not in relationship to her artwork, which seemed something apart. This changed during her second stay on Jura in 1992, when it occurred to her that the energy that she expended and the joy she derived from building things, such as her shelter and studio, could become a part of her artwork. This was a seminal moment, when these two drives fused – resulting in her chimney-like stone 'volcano' and the 'firestacks', a series of stone cairns which she built, filled with wood, then lit, photographed and filmed. She built a number of these flaming 'firestacks' on the seabed at low tide, then lit them and filmed them at night as the sea came in.

I absolutely love fire. And fire is my everyday medium. It's what I cook on, what I survive with. I wanted to do something with directing fire. What I'll end up with is this inert, hollow, cold, grey stone, and on top this shooting flame.

It felt ancient, really ancient. Nights are frightening, we don't really know them very well. I wanted to have not just fire on water, but lines where I am drawing with light.

This watershed led to a fertile period of experimenting with new materials and sites for her art on Jura and the uninhabited Isle of Mingulay, Outer Hebrides (1996–2011). These works were introverted, private works – a means of developing and working out her ideas, a means of exploring, experimenting and sketching on a grand scale. This source material – the experiences, sculptures, photographs, films and drawings – were then reworked and transformed in her studio on Skye to become works on paper or land artworks on public sites. It is these later incarnations where a viewer is invited to interact, take part, become a part.

I am interested in the way sculptural forms change the dynamic of the surrounding landscape or urban site where a work will have a strong physical presence in itself but its interaction with the natural daylight and at night transforms its spatial qualities, such as *Inversion* [a sculpture consisting of 49 painted steel cube voids set into the ground in a grid pattern installed on Skye in 2007]. This began as an earthwork on a remote coastline which was developed on a larger scale for a formal public site. The spatial perception of the work was dependent on the conditions of light and from where the work was seen. Lit at night the work had a powerful elemental quality that I also want to express, and was shared by an audience.



The next major development in Brook's work took place when she began to explore the very different terrain of the Sahara desert.

Libya

In April 2008 I was able to travel to Libya for the first time. In the desert I was struck by the warmth of the colours, the rich variation of materials like different coloured gyp-sums, sands and stones, the forms of the sand dunes in stark contrast to the rock formations and sandstone mountains, the vast scale of open plains, the silence, dryness and clarity at night.

The light is very different in Libya and consistent day after day. This allowed me to make work about the relationship of form with light, shadow and reflected light, observing how they influence and change each other.

During this four-week expedition to the Jebel Acacus mountains in the Sahara Desert in south-west Libya, Brook produced a body of work that used the desert as a huge canvas, etching lines, circles and triangles into and onto the desert floor and the stony hills, made by rearranging sand and stones. She made 14 huge sand and stone drawings in the landscape which highlight the formal composition of the landscape itself.

The following year Brook returned to Libya, this time spending four weeks in the black volcanic desert of Al Haruj Al Aswad in central Libya and two weeks back in the

Jebel Acacus mountains. The work became more sculptural, as her 'drawings' became three-dimensional. She made 33 sculptures during the trip.

The volcanic region of Al Haruj is vast, a harsh and unrelenting landscape of black basalt that I found inspiring in its extremity. I began the journey by re-engaging with large drawings on site, as we travelled, responding to the specific materials, colours and situation. The work developed rapidly into three-dimensional forms using stone with both subtle and severe contrasts of tone and colour. I am interested in realigning materials in the landscape as well as making singular forms.

I initially wanted to work with as simple forms as possible in relation to the rhythms and lines I was surrounded by in the landscape. This became particularly clear when I made *White Line on Black* where I felt the context and siting of the line was crucial to the relationship the line had to the existing forms of the landscape. It was an important day for me in the development of the work and I went on to make *Black Line on White* that same day.

This led to the much more substantial work of *2 Rising Lines*. There was a powerful and discrete dynamic between the forms themselves as well as in their relationship to the landscape. The forms changed substantially according to the time of day due to the strong sunlight and shadow. I am interested in how this influences our perception of the work.

It was hard work in the heat but I found the work exhilarating in such a wild and remote landscape. My guides helped me collect the stone using a wheelbarrow which meant I could build much faster.

This was another seminal moment: *2 Rising Lines* (2009) echoes and highlights the composition of the linear hills and the relationship they have with each other. Brook originally made one wall, then had another look and realized that it had to have its complement.

Namibia

Brook's next sojourns were in the semi-desert of north-west Namibia, in 2011 and then again in 2012. Here she was fascinated by the graphic landscape and the graphic wildlife:

And then zebra! I thought about their extreme markings. They are absolute like the shadows. I love the calligraphic marks of their coat, like walking drawings. Beautifully painted. When they stand together they merge as one. Their stripes embody the exact spirit of the light and shadow here. (Diary, 6 June 2011, Palmwag.)

Her work became more ambitious still, with land sculptures that uncover and highlight patterns in nature, play with perspective and size, and use the stark light and cast shadows very distinctly as material. She built a number of large stone walls, which compel you to look up – at the shapes and forms in the horizon – as well as down – at those at your feet, in the ground and the rocks, and see the patterns in nature more clearly. She also dug out blocks of stone, excavating the forms within. Perhaps most extraordinary of all, though, are the river banks that she decided to re-shape – shaving one into a neat straight line and carving



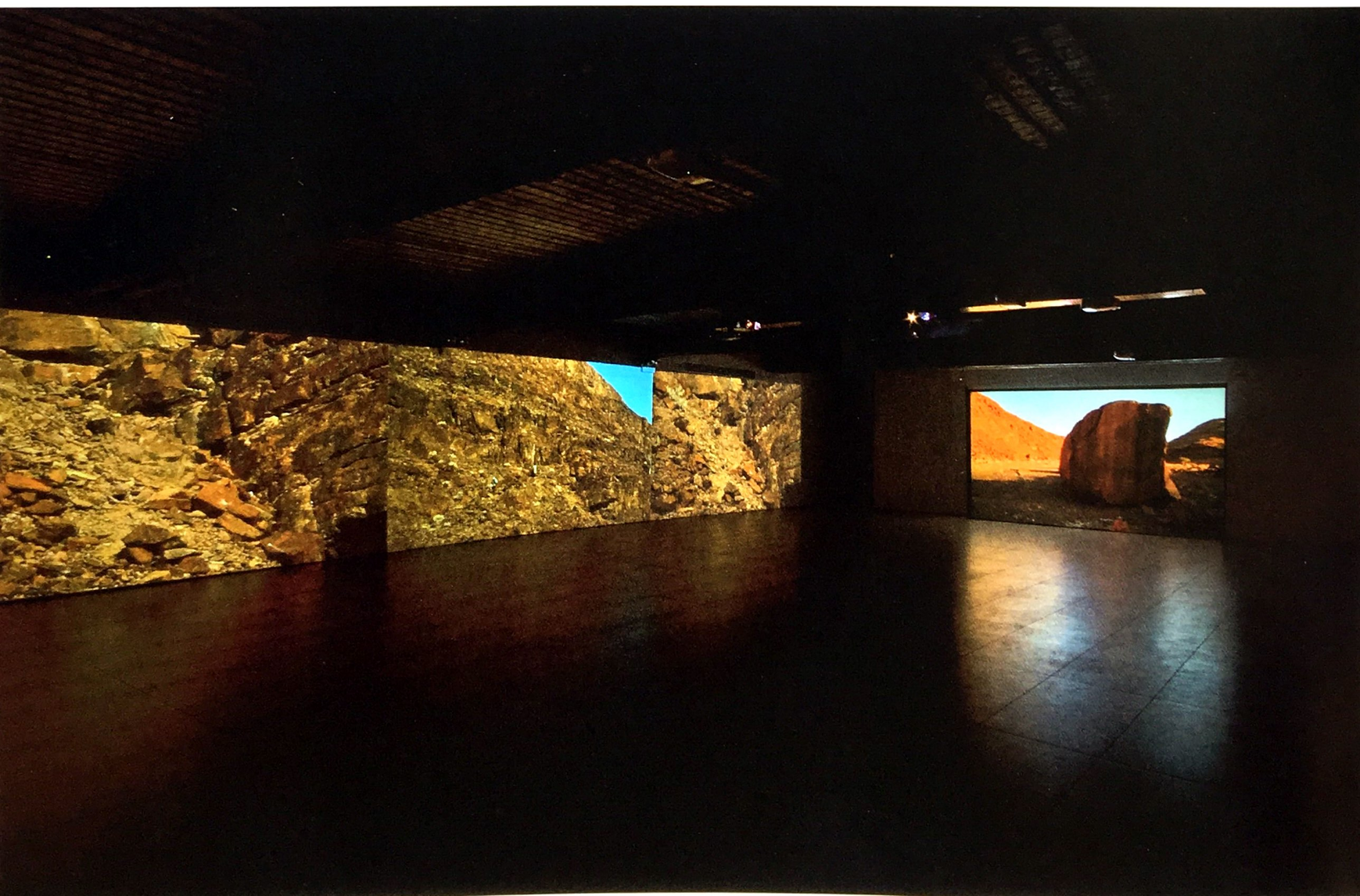
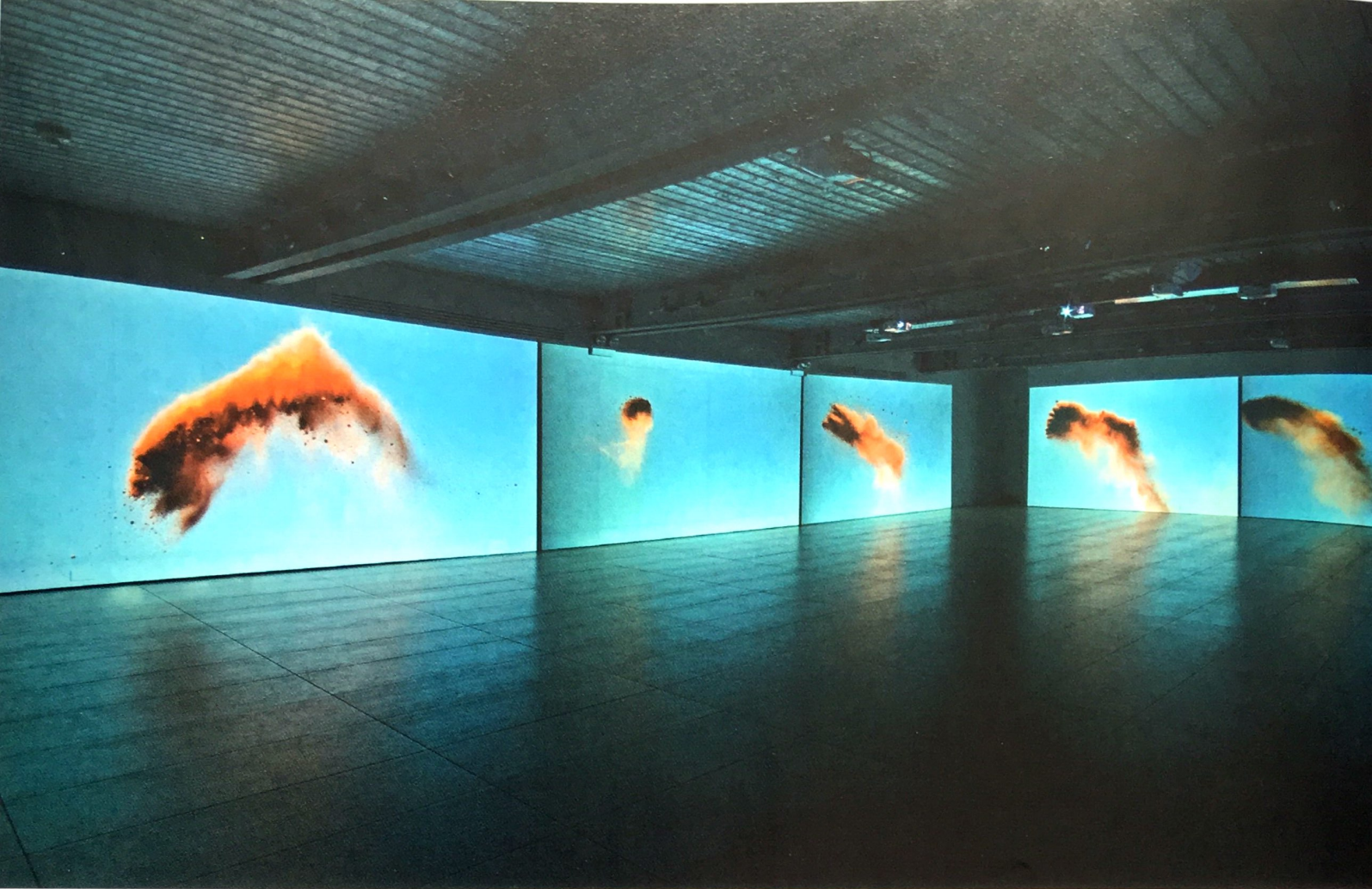
Volcano, West Coast, Isle of Jura, 1994, stone and fire, 170 x 140 cm. Image courtesy the artist, photograph by Julie Brook







Sand Cones, Mingulay, Outer Hebrides, 2003, sand, height 150 cm.
Image courtesy the artist, photograph by Julie Brook



Brook shares her joy of discovery and her joy in making, touching, discovering and feeling

another into a smooth curve. All of these interventions – be they constructions, excavations or reconfigurations – then become vehicles for her investigations into the relationships between constructed and suggested forms, light and shadow.

Where I had been washing was a good high river bank so I returned after some tea. I had the idea of cutting a very sharp straight line. It was satisfying work working with the mattock as lumps of sand fell away and then the more exacting work of making the wall of the river bank vertical and flat. I wanted to do this well without exactly knowing where it was going. When I went back to the bank the sun had moved around sufficiently for the bank to create its own shadow. I had not thought this through but carried on completing my work in making the face good. I climbed up onto the higher plain of the bank and stood carefully on the most protruding part at the end of the line. Suddenly the work sprang into life. The sharpness of the shadow gave an edge to the golden plains of the grass. The work was about the shadow and not about the wall itself. At this moment the work had made a beginning. I feel uplifted and full of energy. So unexpected. (Diary, 9 June 2011, Ganamub.)

Expanding Practice

Photography and, increasingly, film are integral parts of Brook's art practice. For her ephemeral works, which are usually created in private or in remote locations, photography is essential. Fleeting works, such as those where light and cast shadow are the main components, or the drawing was created by rearranging the sand, the artwork is photographed right after it is made and the photograph becomes, in a sense, the work, or at least that part of the work which can be shared with, and collected by, others. Brook also photographs and films her more permanent works – documenting the process of making as well as the changing nature of the works throughout the day and night and through different weather and seasons. These images serve both as documents, or traces, of the events or artworks and also as another form of the art itself.

The large works on paper based on Brook's interventions come at the end of her travels, when she is back in her studio on Skye, where her travels, life, drawing and sculptures merge into one (for instance, the drawings of the interventions in the Namibian desert are also made of it – the pigment used is made from the iron ore that she helped to mine).

As her breakthroughs on Jura pushed her to new ways of working, so too did her experiences in the desert, especially Namibia. Brook felt that the desert sculptures and the process of making needed to be shared in a more immediate way and this required a new mode of expression.

The challenge was how best to convey the fullness of the experience with a viewer, particularly in a gallery setting. The result is *Intercepting Light* (2011–12), 11 short films woven together with sound into a 48-minute film cycle, shown on eight screens surrounding the viewer. Through this immersive film environment, Brook shares her joy of discovery – Look here! Isn't this amazing! – and her joy in making, touching, discovering and feeling.

Made, Unmade

Intercepting Light, together with drawings, photographs and another 28-minute film cycle shown on two screens, toured three venues as 'Julie Brook – Made, Unmade' in Britain in 2013. The installation, and immersion into Brook's world, was a multi-sensory, thought-provoking one. These are some of the things that *Intercepting Light* made me think or feel: To a soundscape of shovelling, chopping, the wind, birds, women talking and singing, you are surrounded by scenes of a beautiful but stark, arid, striped Rothkoesque red and white landscape. The occasional appearance of a human figure (Brook or one of her guides) gives a sense of the sheer vastness of the open landscape.

In a place without any buildings or any apparent human presence or activity, the man-made walls make a stark contrast, a distinct presence. In one composition, we see *Divided Block*, a neat, orderly form rising out of the chaos of the stony river bed, framed by two trees, almost the only trees that we see. While certainly about light, shadow and form, this to me was also a rather poignant scene, conjuring up images of pioneers, homesteaders, immigrants in new lands trying to create a bit of something familiar, homey, orderly, no matter how incongruous in the new place (Scottish stone walls in the African desert).

Light and shadow: making shapes, voids, almost as solids, also creates a sense of coolness and shelter, a sense of escape, a place of relief from the unrelenting heat and sun. The dusty bits of the film made me feel like I couldn't breathe.

A giraffe walking by reminds you that this a very special place where the landscape is dramatic and so is the wildlife. The patterns and shapes of nature as fertile source material: playing with size and scale – those found in the stone, in the dry sand beds, have been enlarged onto the desert landscape by Brook and the patterns, shapes and composition of the larger landscape are brought down to size in the sculptures, her walls as enlarged patterns found in the rocky hills or dry ground, the rocky hills look like her stone walls.

The stills of sand thrown into the air turn into big gestural brushstrokes and the glittering, swirling red sand is magical and hypnotic. Brook's art heightens your awareness of certain aspects of nature – its beauty, its brutality, its transience and its permanence.