On the far wall of Andy Goldsworthy’s new exhibition "Andy Goldsworthy: Leaning into the Wind" at Galerie Lelong hangs a vibrant triptych. The show’s titular work, it depicts a man—Goldsworthy himself—standing on a cliff, posed at...
three different angles across three images. In the first, he stands erect; in the second, he’s tipped over at a precarious 45-degree angle; in the third, he rights himself halfway between the two extremes. The images are less of a physical marvel than a mechanical one—the British artist literally leaned into a gust of wind that supported and suspended him at the improbable angles depicted within the images.

“You’re trying to deal with that moment of harmony, or equilibrium, in this impossibly visceral sort of atmosphere,” Goldsworthy explains. The work encapsulates the tension and the resistance, or as he says, “that quiet moment in all that chaos,” which is rife in his works made throughout the past 40 years.

“Andy Goldsworthy: Leaning into the Wind” is a rare collection for the artist; it showcases images in which Goldsworthy uses his own body (and all its functions: spitting, digging, jumping, throwing) as a subject, even though he’s arguably better known for sculptures made of media found in the natural world—twigs, mud, flower petals, icicles—that often begin to come apart during assemblage. But through a combination of vintage still and moving images from the ‘70s and ‘80s with more recent pieces, the exhibit proves that Goldsworthy has never really left the body.

“The sensation of doing is what drove a lot of the body works,” he says. “It was about contact, about touch, about working. And you can only do that for so long before it becomes a little hollow and a little meaningless.” These sensations pulled him away from explicitly corporeal images, though the body continues to play an integral role in permanent and ephemeral works alike—even those that don’t directly depict the human form.

The show at Galerie Lelong coincides with the release of Ephemeral Works 2004-2014, a massive tome filled with images of fleeting sculptures that will be succeeded by the equally heavy volume Projects. He assures us the timing of the installation and book is pure coincidence, but it’s his first gallery show in five years and first book in eight, so if it is coincidence, it’s also serendipitous.

A self-described “private person,” Goldsworthy began the conversation quite reserved, becoming more animated over the near-hour that we spoke. His young son also joined the discussion, as he sat nearby, plugged into Despicable Me, punctuating our interview with the occasional laugh. “It sounded like he was giggling at my answers, it’s great,” Goldsworthy says. During a break from installing at the gallery, we broached everything from the idea of ephemerality and the process of documentation to the sculptor-photographer Constantin Brancusi.

KATHERINE CUSUMANO: Is there a division, in your portfolio, between your body work and your sculptural work?

ANDY GOLDSWORTHY: In the genre of the ephemeral work, they’re the same. Whilst I’m not in every picture of every work in this book, I am there, in every work, so I’m part of that. The bigger difference is between the ephemeral work and the projects, the big works, the big sculptures that require equipment. It is like being two artists. I am the same artist, but a lot of people can’t reconcile that. It all makes perfect sense to me, but they are very, very different in tension, in the way they’re carried out, in the scale—everything is different. It’s a wonderful way to have this relationship with the land. The big difference is the ephemeral work is something that feeds me and the projects are things that take.

CUSUMANO: What is it about the idea of ephemerality that attracts you?

GOLDSWORTHY: If I’m going to work with the nature of things, things change, and things die, and things are mortal. Really, it just reflects what life and nature is. That’s all. It’s no stance about anti-art or anti-permanence; there’s many of my things that do last. But if I’m going to understand the land, I have to understand the wind, the snow, the rain, the leaves, the ice, and changes in temperature. It just reflects a reality for me.

CUSUMANO: Documentation has also been a pretty important part of your sculptural works. How do you know when something that sort of starts to come apart at the same time as you’re putting it together is ready to be photographed?
GOLDSWORTHY: That is really the moment it’s finished. It’s not a matter of being ready for a photograph; it’s when the work is completed. It’s difficult to define that. Sometimes the work is about a particular light and about certain conditions. So if the conditions change, then it’s over. There are times when it’s not completed in time, and it’s lost.

CUSUMANO: Is there a part of you that’s sad to see those go?

GOLDSWORTHY: After you’ve worked for a long time on something, of course, but then we all have to deal with loss. You’re very young. You will only have to deal with more loss, and trying to make sense of the loss. Sometimes, some of the ways in which the work has decayed is far too interesting and beautiful in its own way to be just called “decay.” It’s actually become almost richer as it’s gone, so the changes can be really as important as the making.

CUSUMANO: If you think about the biological foundation of decay, in a way, there is a lot more richness to that process. There is a lot more life in decay than there are in a living thing.

GOLDSWORTHY: There certainly is.

CUSUMANO: There are going to be films incorporated into this installation as well. I was wondering how you choose to document something as static versus moving? What are the different concerns that go into photography versus film?

GOLDSWORTHY: I tend to keep the photography fairly simple. The photography often happens at the end of a work. With these body works, they’re very much integral to it, and when it was on film, film tended to be [just the] tripod and single-image and sort of static. The main reason I went to digital was because I got time-lapse, video, and still [images] all in one camera. Having a minimal amount of gear is really important for someone who wants to walk around. That allowed me to have this flexibility to document things in different ways. I’m still figuring out the best way to use those new tools, and this exhibition is the first response to that. I made the movies really early on, in the ’70s. I’ve not really made movies since then. The photography is not the aim of the work; the articulation of the work through photography is another way of understanding what’s going on and what’s happening outside. As Brancusi said, “Why talk about sculpture when I can photograph it?”

CUSUMANO: The end result and the process are two separate things, but they’re both really important to the experience.

GOLDSWORTHY: I would like, the next time it’s really windy, to do a film version of *Leaning into the Wind*. There’s this really wonderful ebb and flow in the wind, but there’s something about the still image that is so close to that expressing that moment, where I was just there for a second or two suspended in the wind. Somehow it’s more true to the experience than all the activity of film.

CUSUMANO: It almost doesn’t matter what happens before or after the image.

GOLDSWORTHY: It’s implicit in that moment that time can stop still for a second.

CUSUMANO: Has your move to digital impacted your work in any way that you’ve noted recently?

GOLDSWORTHY: It’s freed the documentation up. There’s a certain wonderful tyranny about still photography with a medium-format camera, with only 12 shots on a roll. By the time you’ve bracketed, you’ve got only maybe four shots on that roll, and then you put another one in. If I’m using a panoramic camera, you really only get one shot per roll. That puts a discipline on the process. You’re much more careful about where you take the image from, you’re more considered. I quite like the fact that the image has been loosened up a little bit, you know? I can take it from different angles; I can just explore a little more freely.

CUSUMANO: I wanted to talk about your decision to return to the body. You said that sort of process can start to feel a little hollow—how do you reinvest it with meaning?
GOLDSWORTHY: It's difficult. If you repeat something, it can become pointless. Some things can repeat and be endlessly fascinating.

CUSUMANO: When you say a word over and over again, it starts to lose its meaning.

GOLDSWORTHY: If you lay in the rain, every rain shower, storm, whatever, is different. Every surface is different. So there's endless things to be learnt about that experience, and it's launching yourself off into the unknown that's really important with the body works. You are experiencing this in a very raw way, and that always should be the case to some extent. These new works are certainly doing that. They take me into territory, both physically and conceptually, that I've never been into before. I've walked alongside many, many hedgerows; I've never walked inside one. There's a totally different experience of that same space. The hedge is a very human space. It's constructed by people. They're boundary markers in Britain's agricultural boundary. They're formed by people. They're passages made by people.

CUSUMANO: How did you start working with your body as a medium?

GOLDSWORTHY: When I was at art school, a lot of art education is about art being a means of self-expression, and as an 18-year-old I didn't know if I had a huge amount I wanted to express. It was a big moment when I decided I wanted to shift the emphasis or the intention of my art from something I disgorged myself upon and something that actually fed me or made me see the world or understand the world. So that contact with materials—I can see so much more with my hands than I can just with my eyes. I'm a participant, not a spectator. I see myself both as an object and a material, and the human presence is really important to the landscapes in which I work. My art recognizes the human place, the human context—especially in Britain, which is a landscape so worked by people for thousands of years, written, deeply ingrained with the presence of people.

CUSUMANO: When I think of a sculpture I think of a static object, and your work sort of subverts this idea of finished art object, because it is always in the process of creation or decay. I was wondering how movement plays into sculpture for you?

GOLDSWORTHY: Well, I think that any sculpture is a response to its environment. It can be brought to life or put to sleep by the environment. Brancusi's sculptures really need a space that is changing all the time—with light, and the time of the day, and people passing by. They're given life by that. When you see them sometimes huddled in a ground on a white plinth and a white background, they do go to sleep. I believe that sculpture can be awake or asleep.

CUSUMANO: It has been five years since your last gallery show. Why has it been so long?

GOLDSWORTHY: I didn't know it was five years. And it's been eight years since I made the [first] book. I just felt totally out of sorts with books and photography, to be honest. I've always made the ephemeral work and always documented it. That's really important. But the whole print of it—putting it on a wall, putting it in a gallery—seems to so take it away from when it was made. So this show marks a return to trying to put energy and attention into the way I present the photographs. Sometimes you need to stop doing something to really see it afresh. This particular group of work, bringing the old work with the new work, is a very interesting connection to make—1976 and 2015.

CUSUMANO: Is it ever challenging for you, because you're a very private person, to be so present in your art?

GOLDSWORTHY: Strangely enough, no, because I just see myself as an object in the final image. I know I'm experiencing it when I'm there working on it. I'm there to be worked with, as anything else that I work with, so no, I never think about that, really. I'll think about that.