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There Can Be Beauty in Barriers

SOMETIMES inspiration arrives when you least expect it. That's certainly true for "Stone Walls: Personal Boundaries," the latest book by the photographer Mariana Cook. For eight years Ms. Cook took her two medium-format cameras and a tripod to places as far afield as Malta, Peru and the Aran Islands, searching for dry stone walls built without mortar but with plenty of patience and ingenuity.

"It was their beauty that kept me going," Ms. Cook said. "You've got to be a little nuts to go all over the world, tramping around fields looking for walls."

The quest began on her own property on Martha's Vineyard, and expanded out from there. As she traveled New England in search of more walls, her interest in them only grew.

"Seeing the juxtaposition of two or three stones together could just be so beautiful," she said. "Their intricacies were remarkable and endless."

Because the practice of building them is on the wane worldwide — a direct result of the decline in family farms — Ms. Cook is donating a portion of profits from the book to the nonprofit Dry Stone Conservancy in Lexington, Ky., which is dedicated to preserving existing walls and revivifying the craft.

At first glance this subject seems something of a departure for Ms. Cook, 56, best known for books of portraits and family relationship pictures, like "Fathers and Daughters" (1994) and "Mothers and Sons" (1996). In 1996, while working on her 2000 book, "Couples," she also made a portrait of a young Barack and Michele Obama, which was finally published just before he was inaugurated.

"My father was a psychoanalyst, and I was always interested in what beneath the surface made a person who they were," Ms. Cook said.

Early on, however, she received a strong grounding in landscape photography as the last protégée of Ansel Adams, with whom she studied from 1978, after graduating from college, until his death in 1984. "Ansel taught me my craft," she said.

Besides, Ms. Cook also says that a stone wall says a lot about the psychology of the person who made it. If you encounter a wall made with little stones shoring up the big ones, she noted, "you can tell that's a lazy person who didn't want to take the time and trouble to fit two big stones together." But when it's a well-made wall, "the stones are generally of a good size, and they rest on each other comfortably," she said. "They look like they belong together."

CAROL KINO

'Stone Wall Detail,' Shetland Islands

July 3, 2007



Ms. Cook took the project international in 2004, after travelling to Britain to photograph the Czech archeologist Marek Zvelebil for her 2005 book "Faces of Science." A professor at the University of Sheffield known for his work on Mesolithic hunter-gatherer societies and the transition to farming, he volunteered to show her the Roman, medieval and 18th- and 19th-century walls of the Peak district. Ms. Cook took him up on it and then struck out further afield on her own.

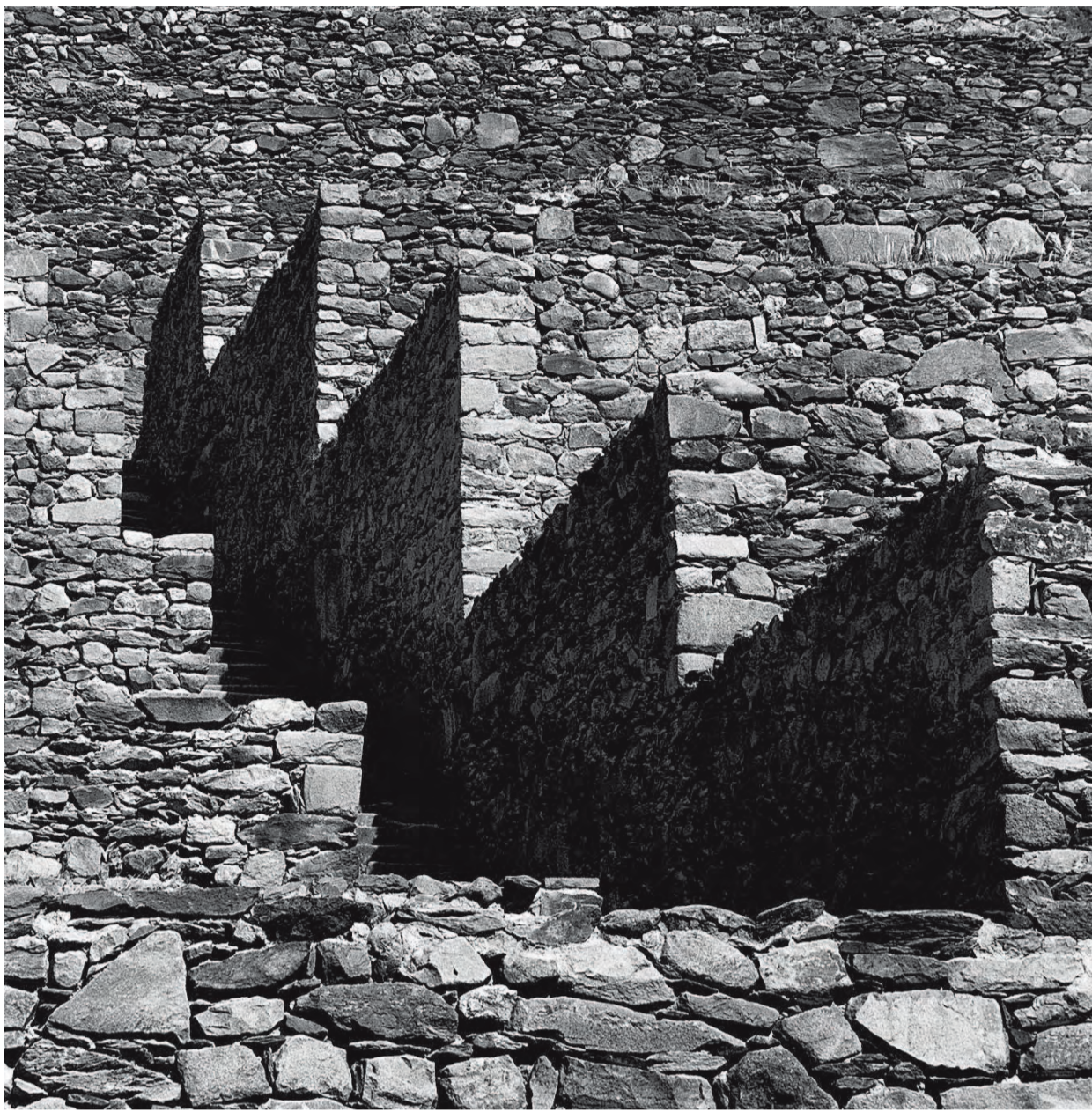
She found this construction on the Shetland Islands, which still have walls dating back to the introduction of farming into Britain 6,000 years ago. As is typical on small islands, which tend to be windy, it is a so-called lace wall, assembled with enough space between the stones to let the wind pass through without knocking it down. At first glance the open-work construction looks precarious, Ms. Cook said, "but then you realize it's been standing for centuries."

At its base, out of range of her camera, stand stones known as blow-ins or erratics. "That means the rock is not indigenous to that area," Ms. Cook explained. "It was blown in by the ice age, from someplace mysterious."

ONLINE: WALLS

More photos by Mariana Cook:

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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM LEE MARKS FINE ART

'Terraces,' Ollantaytambo, Peru

March 2, 2005

Ms. Cook discovered Peruvian walls on a 2004 family vacation, when she was travelling with only her hand-held camera. "I went back six weeks later with the Hasselblad and the tripod, because I just thought they were so fantastic," she said. "I found the geometry remarkable." She was especially drawn by the rigorous assembly of the granite walls at Machu Picchu. "I was fascinated by how tightly the stones were fit together," she said. "You can't even get a coin through."

The photograph here shows the terraced gardens at Ollantaytambo, an unfinished estate near the former Inca capital of Cusco that was conquered, razed and redeveloped by the Inca emperor Pachacuti in the late 15th century. Long ledges were carved into the mountainside to create farmland, and the walls above each shelf were packed with quarried rocks of hard andesite and red porphyry to keep the soil in place. Although these walls aren't strictly dry-stone, because the earth serves as mortar, they were so awe inspiring that Ms. Cook put her self-imposed restrictions aside. "I decided that this was not an academic treatise," she said. "And I am an artist and should be able to photograph whatever I feel like, so I did."



'Sheep Shearing Shed Wall in Mist,' Chilmark, Mass.

Nov. 28, 2003

The idea for the project first came to Ms. Cook over Thanksgiving weekend of 2002, when she and her husband, the New York photography dealer Hans P. Kraus Jr., arrived at their home on the Vineyard to find their front lawn filled with 56 cows.

Clearly the 17th-century granite stone wall dividing their property from the next-door pasture was broken. But when her neighbor, a longtime Cook family friend, refused to share the cost of rebuilding, "tension between us ensued," Ms. Cook said. "I kept remembering that Robert Frost line my father used to recite

to me as a child, 'Good fences make good neighbors.' I suddenly understood what he meant."

While the matter simmered, Ms. Cook began examining the wall and making pictures of it, with the idea of selling some to underwrite a repair. By the time her neighbor came around, she was already hooked on it as a subject. "I had become very interested in what a wall says about personal boundaries," she said, "and what it means between people and to the individuals who built it."



'Sheep Creep,' Biniforani-Teix, Mallorca

June 20, 2009

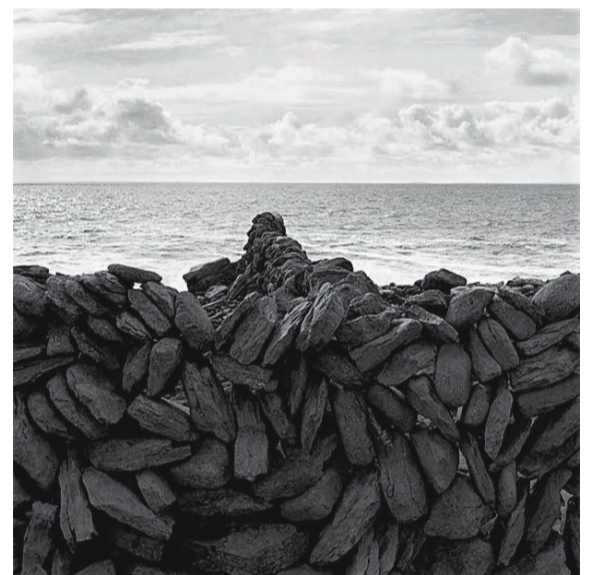
In the Mediterranean Basin, known for craggy stone walls of schist, limestone and granite, Ms. Cook started in the south of France and then ventured to Sicily and the Maltese archipelago, home to some of the oldest standing stone structures in the world.

Toward the end of her project she visited Mallorca, where she found walls built to divide property — even inside caves — and to pen animals, like the one pictured here. At the bottom is an opening known as a sheep creep, which works like a cat door. It's large enough to let the sheep move from one field to another to graze, without enabling the cows to do the same. At the top, to discourage sheep from jumping over the edge "more than once," as Ms. Cook put it, stands a ridge of upright stones whose sharp tips serve the same function as barbed wire.

"Even though the farmers didn't see what the British or Irish were doing, everybody seems to have discovered it simultaneously as a method of discouraging sheep," Ms. Cook said.

'Sea Wall,' Blackhead, Burren, Ireland

July 3, 2005



One of the first things Ms. Cook learned on her travels is that people around the world built walls for very similar reasons: to demarcate private property, to pen animals and to clear land. "Farmers had to get the stones out of the field," Ms. Cook said. "It was a story that began in many places at the same time."

Yet the walls themselves often have striking aesthetic differences, depending on location, a prime example being those of the Aran Islands and Western Ireland.

In contrast to the British, Ms. Cook said, who stacked their stones quite neatly, the Irish often placed them on a diagonal (increasing their tensile strength) and buttressed them with vertical stones at regular intervals. The sea wall pictured here is at the edge of the Burren, a 100-square-mile landscape dominated by limestone outcroppings and fissured plateaus. At its center the wall projects out into the Atlantic Ocean like a jetty, the aim being "to break the force of the waves so they don't flood the fields," said Ms. Cook, who added that she had "never seen a hand-built sea wall before."