

Prairie Cairn



Andy Goldsworthy: Three Cairns is the largest project in the Western Hemisphere by British artist Andy Goldsworthy (born 1956, Cheshire, England). The project spans the continent with permanent and temporary stone markers called “cairns” at sites on the two coasts of America and the Midwest. Two key components of the project in Iowa are Prairie Cairn (Midwest temporary cairn) near Grinnell and the Three Cairns (Iowa permanent cairn) at the Des Moines Art Center.

Prairie Cairn, the first component of Andy Goldsworthy: Three Cairns to be built, was created in early spring 2001 at Grinnell College’s Conard Environmental Research Area near Kellogg, Iowa. Prairie Cairn was completed before the prairie grass had begun to grow and was photographed over a period of 18 months to document the sculpture in varied weather conditions. The result is a suite of large-scale panoramic images—now in the collection of the Des Moines Art Center—showing the cairn with varying heights of grass, in snow, and amid flames as the prairie was subjected to a controlled maintenance burn. Although considered a temporary work, Prairie Cairn should last for decades before eventually succumbing to the effects of the weather.