

BAY AREA

VISUAL ARTS

Perfecting rock creations a tall order

By Erin Allday

Standing among the scraggly stones on the western shore of Crissy Field, Howard Koel was in the zone. He had a stack of fist-size rocks — 10 or 12 of them, maybe — balanced precariously in front of him, and he had one more rock in his hand, ready to go on top.

His second rock tower, standing 3 or so feet tall, looked strong and stable. “The first one? That was that sound you heard a few minutes ago,” Koel, 55, said with a chuckle.

That sound — the rumble and crunch of a dozen stones toppling over — was a common one on the breezy Saturday morning. Two expert rock balancers were giving lessons in their trade, and by noon they’d collected 50 or so students, who worked quietly alone or in pairs to build their delicate sculptures.

Bill Dan, 59, is a local legend of Crissy Field, known by regular runners, walkers and bikers for his incredible towers, which aren’t tall so much as unbelievably, improbably well balanced. In one stack, a rectangular stone the size of a microwave oven stood on one pointy corner on a smoothly sloped rock beneath it.

The tower is steady as, well, a rock.

“People sometimes ask if I use glue,” Dan said. He doesn’t. “I’ve overheard some people talking about UFOs doing it.”

Dan and his teaching partner, Zach Pine, consider their work a sort of ephemeral art. They never expect the towers to last longer than a day or two, and the creation is more important than the final product anyway.

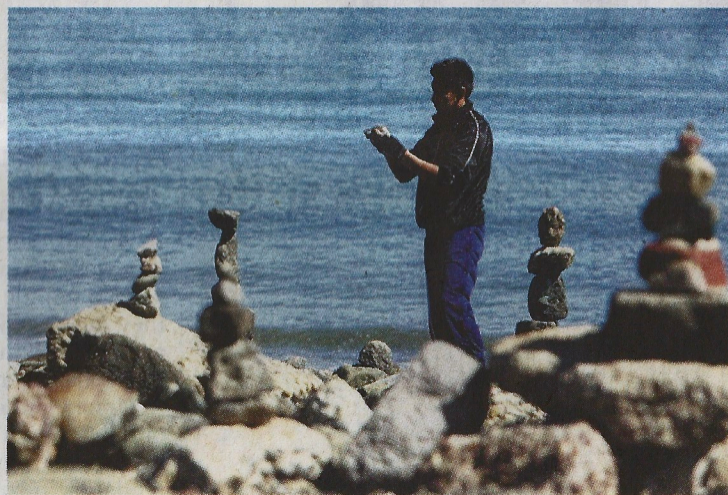
“My purpose is to connect people with the earth,” said Pine, 54. “Some people have lost that connection. This is a way to bring them back.”

People have been drawn to the simple practice of building rock towers for centuries,



Photos by Codi Mills / The Chronicle

Mel Omega (left) watches her daughter Elliot Lansender, 6, stack rocks with the help of Bill Dan (right) at Crissy Field.

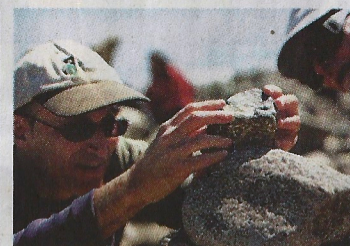


Gregorio Calva examines a rock before adding it to his artisanal stack at a Crissy Field display of rock towers.

Dan pointed out. They’re art, but rock cairns are also used to identify trails in the High Sierra or mark the tops of peaks in Bay Area parks.

The work itself can be soothing and relaxing, or it

can be thrilling, depending on the artist, Pine said. There’s almost always a little bit of danger involved — Dan has the black fingernails and permanently bent pinkie finger to prove it.



Zach Pine (left) aligns a rock while Don Switlick keeps an eye on the creative process.

On Saturday, the amateur rock-builders were a mix of both Zen and exhilaration. Koel’s daughter, 14-year-old Shannon, worked in silence and concentration on her towers. But nearby, two children laughed as they repeatedly built up and knocked over their sculptures.

“It relaxes me,” said Corey Kline, 38. “It’s unusual these days to be able to focus on one thing so much. To not be distracted.”

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Bill Dan, master rock tower builder

Kline was at Crissy Field with his daughter Sophia, 5, who was helping by finding rocks for her father to stack. He’d try them all, he said. But he encourages her to make her own short stacks.

“It teaches her focus, patience,” he said. “And it’s also the importance of continuing even when it all falls down, and trying again and again and again.”

Erin Allday is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: eallday@sfgate.com