

## A Walkthrough of Hollow Earth: Art, Caves & The Subterranean Imaginary by Sam Thorne

### KEYWORDS

exhibition, cave, artists, work, paintings, titled, Plato, mouth, space, volcano, Nottingham, sculpture, geological, different ways, gallery, 18th century, darkness, ways, architectural, Wright of Derby

### SPEAKERS

Sam Thorne

Sam Thorne

Welcome to *Hollow Earth* at Nottingham Contemporary. You know, the starting point for this exhibition is that our gallery sits above caves. The whole of Nottingham as a city is built on a network of about 800 caves that go back about 1000 years. All of them are hand carved and it's the largest collection of its kind in the UK. And it's got us thinking about the relationship between art and the cave, a way of thinking about questions of prehistory, of future, of darkness, of community and so many other things besides. I'm going to talk you through some of my own personal highlights for the show. The title of the exhibition, *Hollow Earth* comes from a theory that goes back to about the 1600s that the earth is completely empty inside. And this wasn't debunked until the 18th century. But one of the first works in the exhibition is a page from a book by Athanasius Kircher, who was a German scholar, who actually in the 17th century had himself winched into a volcano, to understand what lay below and from that experience, he understood well, the Earth is completely empty, and that the interior of our world is criss crossed by lakes and rivers of fire. So we have this beautiful illustration from his book 1665 called *Mundus Subterraneus*, or the underground world.

So the exhibition is structured like a journey into a cave. So this opening gallery is titled The Threshold and it explores artists' responses to that

# msdgnittoI Contemporary

experience of crossing into a cave and it's an experience that crops up in just about every world religion, every myth - spaces are often places of transformation. And so it's no surprise I think that they've been a source of continual attraction, even obsession, for artists. One of the first works in the show by Joseph Wright of Derby, who was one of the most significant painters of the scientific enlightenment, is from 1780. It's from the inside of a cave mouth of a grotto in the Gulf of Salerno near Naples. This was a regular stop off for artists and aristocrats undertaking the Grand Tour in the late 18th century. And this was actually painted about 5 or 10 years after Wright visited so would have been painted from his sketches. One of the things I love about this work when you get up close is that the moonlit reflections on the water is actually made with sgraffito by scratching into the paint surface. This work by Wright of Derby is paired with another more recent work that was also made in Naples by a London based artist Caragh Thuring. It's titled *Inferno*. And it takes this impossible eye view as though the viewer is situated in the mouth of the volcano, looking up, and we see these figures who seem to be dressed as though they were 18th century Grand Tourists standing around the the mouth of this volcano of this inferno. And so I think within this opening gallery, we have these shifts of perspective where often the artist is seeming to merge with the earth beneath. We're really thrilled to have this remarkable painting by René Magritte, the Belgian Surrealist from 1935. And it's titled *The Human Condition*. It's one of a handful of paintings he made with that title. Each of them have the same motif of a canvas on an easel. And in this case, again, we're looking out of a cave mouth. And I think what we're looking at recalls Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, this is an episode in his work *The Republic*, and it tells a story of prisoners who are chained at the back of a cave, forced to look at the wall and to see only the shadows of what passes behind them, or crosses the cave mouth. And the prisoners in Plato's text take these shadows to be reality. And for Plato, it's the job of philosophy, perhaps the job of art as well, to free people from these chains, and to let them see the light. And so as long as people have been writing about caves, they've always been associated with the space of not knowing, of confusion, of irrationality. And in lots of ways, these are some of the key themes of this exhibition. And Plato's allegory emerges in different works in different ways throughout the show.

# Nottingham Contemporary

The second section of the exhibition is titled **The Wall**, and it explores artists' encounters with cave paintings in a range of different countries from Greece to Algeria, from Guyana to Egypt, and the transformative effects that coming across these remarkable Neolithic paintings dating back 30,000 years had on their work, whether that's photography, painting or film. We have a number of photographs from the 1920s and 30s, which are documentation of expeditions that were led by Leo Frobenius, German anthropologist who, between the wars was travelling across Europe, Central and Southern Africa and Indonesia, in search of cave art. On each of these expeditions he took with him a team of artists, mostly women, who were tasked with copying the paintings, the carvings, that they discovered along the way. And I think these are such fascinating works, because, you know, in some ways, caves could be argued to have been the first artist studio, as well as the first museum. And in these photos, which often seem quite staged, you see people using them again, like a studio, to make these facsimiles, or rubbings in some cases, of these paintings. These replicas of which they made about 5000 had a really significant afterlife, they toured around the world. And so many artists found inspiration in them from Jackson Pollock to Paul Klee and Giacometti. So these photos for me are really about how the work of artists working 10 or 30,000 years ago, got retransmitted and reinterpreted in the 20th century.

Even while the space of the cave has been this kind of magnet for artists over centuries, even millennia, in some ways, caves are kind of difficult, even impossible to adequately represent. Because how do you draw darkness, right? How do you accurately convey that experience of being in complete darkness, what scientists called the dark zone. And this section of the exhibition is quite dense and brings together a number of small, often quite esoteric works that think about the cave as the space of total darkness. So within it, we have a number of really strange objects. This is a piece of earthenware that was actually discovered in caves in Nottingham, and just behind it, a strange sculpture that would have been carved directly into the sandstone wall, and then was more recently cut off, and as one curator noted at the opening, you know, does that mean that this is a new sculpture, or an old sculpture? And I think throughout this gallery, there's this back and forth between the very ancient and the very new, very modern.

# Nottingham Contemporary

This section of the exhibition is called The City, and it's exploring dwellings, infrastructure, building below. And you know, quite often we reach for architectural terms to make sense of caves, we talk about them having chimneys, or vaults or chambers. And this is a part of the exhibition that's thinking about that blurry blurriness between the geological and the architectural.

So we're standing inside installation by Goshka Macuga. Goshka is a Polish artist based in London. And this is, I suppose, in a sense, a new work, but also an older work. It's a reconstruction, a reimagining, of an exhibition that Goshka had in 1999, one of her first shows, in which she used very simple materials, brown packing paper, crumpled up to cover every surface of an artist run space in South London. And she then installed in that space works by friends of hers. So for her, it's an important exhibition. It's the first time I suppose for her, she starts to think about the curatorial as part of her working process, or the exhibition design as a central part of what her project might be. And so for this exhibition, Goshka revisited *Cave*, reconstructed *Cave* and brought into it new works, works by both herself, friends, collaborators, and all of them in different ways are failures - they're broken, they're rejected, they're unused. And I think for Goshka she sees it as this kind of ambivalent space, perhaps a post apocalyptic space, a future that is full of hope, but also possible despair or failure too.

The final section of the exhibition is called The Deep. It's about deep time, meaning a kind of long, long geological prehuman kind of sense of history, and these artists who are thinking in different ways about these long stretches or expanses of time, whether by way of myth and folklore, or by collaborating with caves to produce sculpture, or to think about the communities of cavers, storytellers or mystics who are drawn to caves and and drawn to the darkness. So that's where the exhibition ends.