

## Welcome Walkthrough - Hollow Earth: Art, Caves & The Subterranean Imaginary with Karen Lunt

**Karen Lunt:**

So here we are in the threshold of our cave. Why caves you might ask? Well, Nottingham is a city of caves, it's got up to 800 manmade caves beneath the city. This building itself sits on top of a cliff which is on top of some caves, rather magically sort of perches there. And caves were both the first art galleries, and also the first artists' studios. And we're very lucky in that 20 miles or so away we've got Creswell crags, which has got the, I think the oldest cave art in Europe, certainly the oldest in the UK, and some say they might be up to 25,000 years old. So we've got in this gallery, we've got three paintings of caves. We've got this one by Joseph Wright of Derby, which is a scene of a cave, a grotto in the Bay of Naples, in Italy. We've got at the other side of the gallery, a painting by the Belgian artist Rene Magritte, which was painted about 150 years after Joseph Wright painted this in 1780, or thereabouts. The two are similar in composition, but Magritte's painting is not so much about the landscape, it's about the perception of the person looking at it, it's part of a set of four paintings he did called the human condition, the other three are scattered around Europe. And that was painted in 1935. Over here, we've got the third picture, which is a painting by Caragh Thuring, which she calls Inferno. She also says that it's an impossible viewpoint because to be able to see a volcano like that, you'd have to be either above it, or below it, neither of which is possible. She also just she's there's some little figures at the bottom of this painting, which looked to be in clothes of the 18th century, a kind of nod to the Grand Tour that included Naples from the late 1770s. If you took the figures out of that painting, it's completely abstract.

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And so in a sense, we've got 250 years of European art displayed here in these three pictures. So Joseph Wright, was a local young man born to a family who lived in Derby. And he was the son of a lawyer who became the town clerk for Derby. He's known as Joseph Wright or Wright of Derby because there were other Wrights painting pictures at the time. So it's just used to distinguish him from them. So in the late 1760s 70s, Joseph Wright went to Europe for a period of 18 months or so, not the classical Grand Tour that young aristocrats and gentry would take; he went to study painting in France and in Italy, and he took with him his new wife and two of his pupils. And in fact, his first child was born while they were in Rome, and she was called Anna Romana Wright as an acknowledgement of where she was born. And Wright painted this several years after he'd been to Naples. So it's done from sketches, but it was done as probably to sell it as a souvenir for people who'd been on the Grand Tour and wanted a souvenir of that. So there was quite a market. Joseph's Wright's, like very versatile artist and produced a lot of work. And he produced landscapes, not just of Naples but also of the Peak District, of Derbyshire. Because at the time there was a growing sort of demand for holidays in the UK from the sort of gentry and well off middle classes. And Matlock spa became the centre of some of that and Buxton spa, because they used to go and take the waters like at Bath, and in fact in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennett family go to Derbyshire for a holiday and Elizabeth's not very happy because she wants to go to the Lake District. And it's said by Mrs. Bennett I think that Mr. Darcy owns half of Derbyshire. So that was quite yeah, it's quite in vogue really. And *Pride and Prejudice* was published in 1813. But Jane Austen started to write it some years before. So it's all at one with this period. He did lots of portraits, and his bread and butter was portraits really, he made quite a good living from painting. And if we look at the portraits that are still around with us, he's painting not the nobility and aristocracy, he's painting the sort of new captains of industry who are coming up both in the East Midlands and the West Midlands. And notable amongst those were, Josiah

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Wedgwood, the famous pottery family who basically introduced the factory system for pots and also worked on bringing the price of nice pottery down so that those in the new middle class could afford that. He was a master of marketing, like most of the marketing terms we, things we use today, like advertising, two for one offers, by appointment with her majesty and so on and so forth. They were first used by Josiah Wedgwood. In the East Midlands, we've got Richard Arkwright, who invented the spinning machine, basically, and the factory system for textiles. And he built a huge, more than one huge factory in the village of Cromford near Matlock, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, you can go and visit it if you want to. So both of those were, they were like the dotcom millionaires of today. They were Elon Musk and Bill Gates, and they did become fabulously wealthy. So Joseph worked with Josiah Wedgwood, not just on portraits of his children and grandchildren, and other family members. But pictures for his show rooms. One famous one was the Corinthian Maid, which is a picture illustrating a Greek story, an ancient Greek story about how the first portrait painting was made. And the tale is that a Corinthian maid is, her fiance is going off to fight in a war. And as he sleeps, he's got his shadows on the wall behind him, and she draws around it. So she's got his profile to look at when he's away. And then her father who's a potter comes along and copies it in relief on the wall. So we've got the first drawing of a portrait, and we've got the first sculpture of a face. And those sorts of reliefs, of course, were very much like what Wedgwood was pushing on to his pots, and the that particular painting was turned into a motif for pottery, which is actually still in production today. So you can get one on etsy for 50 quid, if you're that way inclined. And I think he's mostly famous really, for his allegory or genre paintings. And the two most famous ones are the illustration of people looking at an orrery, which was an early planetarium kind of structure. And also one of an experiment where the air is taken out of a jar, that a bird's in, and that one's it's in the National Gallery. So Wright chronicles the early years of the Industrial Revolution, and the scientific explosion that took

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place in the 18th century, the period we know as the Enlightenment where ideas of experimental science, of political thought, political views, absolutely fizzed and exploded and really took us into the start of the modern world. I think we often think of the industrial revolution as being a 19th century Victorian thing. But in fact, William Blake wrote the words for Jerusalem in 1804. So the dark satanic mills were there at that time. And here we have a selection of pots by the contemporary artist, Steven Claydon. They're made using a Japanese firing technique called Anagama, which is Japanese for cave hence the inclusion really. These are called this collection is called tomb and womb, because anagama works by you, you bury the pots, hence the tomb. You then fire them whilst they're buried, and then they're reborn from the womb when you take them out. This is a technique used in Japan though these are made in the UK. And Stephen Claydon was particularly inspired, I suppose, by some of the work that was done in this technique at the end of the Second World War. So as in the later years of the Second World War, Japan found itself with few if any, resources left and it certainly didn't have the metals that it needed. So it commandeered the potteries to experiment with making munitions out of clay. So that would be grenade covers, shell covers, and even landmine covers. Most of these were destroyed at the end of the war and just seen as rubbish thrown away. But a few survived, and we've actually got one in this exhibition, a couple of rooms over, which is a mine cover from the Second World War. So Stephen Claydon's work often resembles the experiments that they made, so we have kind of markings on them a bit like shells. And then we've got things that do resemble hand grenades, as well as making traditional things like sake jugs, sake flasks and drinking cups and so on. So these three photographs are by a photographer by the name of Gordon Parks, and they were taken for an illustrated magazine shoot about the novel Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, which was published in 1951. Ralph Ellison's story is about a young man coming of age, in the 1930s, 40s, who gets so browbeaten and depressed by the sort of casual, everyday

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everywhere racism, that he suffers that he escaped below the streets of New York. And in the infrastructure down there, he built himself a little dwelling place, and he fills it with light so that he'll never be invisible again because the racism makes him feel invisible. And so we come to the remarkable life of Gordon Parks. Gordon Parks was born in 1912. He was the youngest child of 15. And at the age of 14, his mother died and he was sent off to Minnesota to live with an adult sister and her husband. The husband wasn't sort of keen really on having this adolescent mouth to feed and things broke down fairly quickly. And Gordon, at 15, ended up on the streets, couldn't finish high school, which is something he'd really wanted to do. And he made a living for himself. He scratched a living for himself over the next couple of years. He had lots of jobs, he played piano in a brothel, got his piano skills up, he'd clean a homeless shelter, for in exchange for a bed, and he got a job cleaning the trains at the you know at the local station. And one night while cleaning the the trains he picked up a photo magazine which a passenger had left and it was a copy of Life magazine, which at that time was a weekly news magazine that didn't just have written stories, it told stories in pictures as well. And Gordon had one of those like road to Damascus moments and decided he wanted to be a photographer and he saved up and he bought a secondhand camera and he taught himself. And he showed sort of quite extraordinary talent so that several years later he's in Chicago. And he's opened a photography studio where he takes pictures of weddings, social events of the rising Black middle class and is making a decent living of that. And then in 1929, Wall Street crashes, employment's like huge, people have got no money to spend on luxuries like photographs, and, you know, Gordon's on his uppers again. Now, during the mid 30s, President Franklin Roosevelt kind of realised that the way to get out of the depression, very deep depression was to spend and create jobs. And he did that not just in kind of infrastructure jobs, so but he did fund projects like the Hoover Dam, and, you know, other dams in the Western United States. But he also saw the need for artists and people related to the arts to work as well.

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And so on the back of that, Gordon got a job with an organisation called the Farm Services Authority, which is a kind of government agricultural advisory body. And he was sent to document the lives of people, particularly black people who were affected by the depression. And he showed a real talent for this. And Gordon would say two things he sort of would stand by was that if you get the subject right, the pictures take themselves, which I don't actually agree with, but he also said his camera was his weapon in the fight against poverty and the fight against racism. So he worked for the Farm Services Authority through to the end of the 30s, and up to the Second World War, where he took photographs for the army. And then post war when those schemes were folded, he applied to Life magazine as a job as a photographer, using his portfolio of things that he'd done by the farms for the Farm Services Authority. So Life magazine gave him a couple of freelance jobs, and were so impressed by what he did that they took him on as the first Black staff photographer, and he spent the next 20 odd years working full time for them. Segregation was still operated in the United States. And Gordon famously took pictures demonstrating that and as time moved on, and we went into the civil rights era, he documented that as well. And he worked for Life magazine until about 1972, when such magazines had kind of had their day really, though at it's peak, it had a circulation of over 5 million copies a week. So Gordon would go and stay with people he decided he wanted to study, and Gordon would get to know his subjects before taking his camera out, so that he could tell the story from their point of view basically. The magazine sent him off to Europe for quite a lot of time, because Gordon himself of course, whilst he was documenting the segregation laws, which affected Black people, he himself was affected by them. So there were lots of places that he couldn't go, which his editors felt that in Europe, doors were open to him. So he spent a lot of time there doing fashion shoots, taking doing photo essays of artists, pop singers, and so on and so forth. And when most of us would be thinking about retirement in his very late 50s,

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**Gordon had a second career. He's always been a sort of powerhouse of creativity. So in his lifetime, he published about 12 books on photography, books of poetry, novels, and autobiographical fictionalised stories. And he made films as well, both documentary films about the lives of significant Black people and also autobiographical films about himself. And one was actually distributed by Warner Brothers, which had a decent audience called The Learning Tree. And it's on YouTube, if you want to look at it. And on the back of that he was actually the first African American to be asked to direct a major Hollywood movie. And he directed the movie Shaft in 1971. And that was a very successful film, it made many times what it cost at the box office. And so Gordon kind of developed this sub genre called Blacksploitation. And it's fair to say that some members of the African American community did not like it and thought it upheld stereotypes of Black people as pimps and gangsters and so on. But Gordon's attitude was that it gets worked for Black actors, work for Black technicians, cameramen, and so on and so forth, and carried on. One of his follow up Shaft films gave the young Samuel Jackson his first big break into the movies. And Gordon carried on doing that for several years. He lived to be 93, which is more than twice what an African American man born when he was could hope to live. It is like Gordon lived two lives. He might not have finished high school but he ended up with dozens of honorary degrees and citations, medals and so on and so forth. His film The Learning Tree was one of the first 25 movies that were chosen by the library of congress for their kind of film heritage vault or collection. And later on Shaft went into there as well. And so that's Gordon.**