**The Photography and Subterranean Imaginary of “Hollow Earth”**

As a recent Photography graduate I was pulled in by the wide range of photographic art on show in Nottingham Contemporary’s latest exhibition “Hollow Earth: Art, Caves & The Subterranean Imaginary”. Much like the “Our Silver City, 2094” Exhibition of last year, the Contemporary continues its exploration of melding fact and fiction by mixing the two as you walk through the space. The galleries are filled with artefacts and documents from historical archives, libraries and research institutions. As the viewer goes deeper and deeper into the “Subterranean Imaginary” as referenced in the exhibition’s title, the historical context helps immerse them in the experience by couching it in reality.

To this end, this exhibition employs one of the great traditional functions of photography; to document. This begins in Gallery 1 “The Threshold” where we find one of the first uses of photography in the exhibition. Documentary photographer Santu Mofokeng’s Chasing Shadows series shows us an environment in the caves of central South Africa where locals practise their spirituality stemming from animist religions, but also including pagan and christian rituals in order to heal and find salvation. The stunning series shows us the Motouleng cave, particularly the large sandstone overhang, adorned with carvings, candles and animal carcasses as well as showing all the different communities gathering to pray, gather and worship. The black and white Giclée print compliments the content beautifully, particularly the photos containing lit candles have a truly glowing quality to them. The photos are high contrast which helps us understand the depths of the environment as well as juxtaposing the black and grey cave walls to the much brighter almost white objects and clothing featured by the locals.

Opposite this work in the same gallery stands *Barry Flanagan*’s *Hole in the Sea* Triptych. This series uses photo etchings to display the photography. Speculating on the process, these kinds of etchings are typically made by creating a lithograph of the original image by printing it onto stone or metal and then treating it with acid and gum arabic in order to *etch* the image into the surface. This etching can then be used to reproduce the photo using various methods such as ink printing. The photos are lifted from a film produced for a TV exhibition and show a plastic drum buried in sand as the sea crashes over it. The triptych shows the black hole created by the drum becoming smaller and smaller as the tide comes in. Centred in the middle of the composition the hole is pitch black and is being completely engulfed by the foamy white waves around it. It feels as though nature is consuming and burying this little cave of nothingness, not disappearing entirely, but hiding it beneath the earth's surface. How many of these pitch tunnels of nothing do we walk over everyday? How much history is encapsulated in these spaces? These questions lead us further into the “Subterranean Imaginary”.

As we transition from Gallery 1 to Gallery 2 there is a small room in between showing more archival photography from various museums and archives in the Nottinghamshire/Derbyshire area displayed upon a table. There are 3 photos grouped together on the top left section of the table that are all from different photographers (mostly unknown) and different time periods. G.F. Campion’s photo in particular puts the viewer in the shoes of workers who had to maintain the caves at Nottingham Castle. The low depth of field puts the foreground out of focus and forces this perspective on the viewer. We feel compacted into this space and this continues the themes of how caves have this all engulfing quality that we saw in the previous works. There may be a misconception that the exploration of these caves is a thing mainly resigned to the past. An unknown photographer’s Giclée print “Cave Photographs” from 2022 disrupts this notion by showing a sign with bright pink and blue text reading “nice cold, ice cold, milk” juxtaposed as an artificial creation amongst the ancient, naturalistic walls of the cave. This makes the audience ponder how the sign got here and we can imagine people exploring these caves and leaving evidence of their time behind.

In our exploration of the photography of this Exhibition we will now skip through “The Wall” section of Gallery 2 to get to “The Dark” which again bridges the transition from Gallery 2 to 3. The room is encased in darkness and continues the immersive nature of the exhibition as we may squint and struggle our way around the walls to view the art work, clearly paralleling cave exploration and pulling us deeper into “The Dark”.

In this room hangs a photograph by Mary Beth Edelson called “Grapceva Neolithic Cave/See for Yourself”. The image shows a ghostly figure in the centre of the composition, surrounded by bright, radiating lights. The image is quite high contrast and the inclusion of the deep dark, almost black spots makes the white dots of light burst out of the image, giving the image a glowy quality, an effect made even more pronounced by the darkness of the room. Edelson was part of the feminist art movement and was creating a series of performances by herself which she called “private rituals” undertaken in isolated environments. She was drawn to prehistoric caves because she wanted to experience all the senses associated with the earth, soil and air. She remarked that “the cave air had circulated through my body and became a part of me” and she assigned great spiritual meaning to this ritual going on to say that she “felt like the centre of the universe”. Her obfuscated, blurry appearance surrounded by the emanating candle lights adds to the effect of the image, which comes across as a scene we perhaps have stumbled upon, deep in cave exploration, where a figure sits surrounded ritualistically by light.

Close by we can see the “Paris Catacombs” series by Nadar. He used a Serrin Regulator, similar to an Arc Lamp, to light the depths of the caves. These types of lights were a more safe and longer lasting alternative to gas lamps which made them popular to use when caving. Despite this the caves were still extremely dark and made it difficult to capture photographs. For this reason Nadar used a mannequin as opposed to a live model so that he could have exposure times as long as 18 minutes without having the subject become blurred. These photos show this uncanny mannequin figure working in the catacombs surrounded by bright white human bones prominently featured in the frame. This spine chilling scene brings the audience into this experience of the catacombs and we can understand why Nadar would assert that the catacombs were “one of those places that everyone wants to see and no one wants to see again”.

As opposed to the previous gallery these sets of photographs are bringing us further into the “Subterranean Imaginary” opting for distorted, uncanny, unhuman subjects as opposed to the documentary style used for the previous gallery. The audience is more inclined to imagine stories and project more fictitious meaning into these photographs than previous ones and this will help guide them to the next gallery which continues to explore this as well as the future modernised version of the ancient figure of “The Cave”.

Gallery 3, dubbed “The City” explores this modern cave experience. As humanity expands more and more space becomes repurposed for our use. We see this explored in a series created by The Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) called “Hallowed Earth: The World of Underground Business Parks”. This series shows us that the underground has been moulded into a space that can provide a function for business. This shows us another side of caves than what we have seen previously. Before in this exhibition we have seen the figure of “The Cave” as an entity in and of itself. One that can either consume all those who enter, or one that can give humanity access to a higher level of understanding by working alongside it through ritual. In this series however we see humanity use the cave as an object to their own end. Simply a space of land to be developed, no different than land above ground. The CLUI provides commentary to support this when they write that the caves “house a subterranean analog of the world above” including “office, storage and logistics facilities in the former limestone mines of the USA”. We can see a seed of the future as to how caves may be more commonly repurposed in this way. Corporate logos invade the space. The ancient, naturalistic, sandy cave walls crash into the shiny brightly coloured artificial walls. Health and safety signs are hammered disruptively into the rock alongside photographs and neon signage. The walls are utilised for signposting with a violent red spray paint. Humanity has divided and conquered.

In Gallery 4, “The Deep” this journey culminates in a piece utilising one of the most abstract methods we can find in the field of photography: the collage, finally bringing us completely into the “Subterranean Imaginary”. Collage photography cuts reality into pieces and joins them together to create a new imagined reality. Ailbhe Ní Bhriain presents a scene within her photo-collage made specially for this exhibition. This scene shows the silhouette of a group of adults sitting to pose for a photograph. Within the silhouette we see ripples of rock and cave walls spliced with human anatomy and manmade furniture. We see amalgamated creatures bounding out of the scene. In the middle of the composition the underside of the desk is shrouded in complete black darkness. Bhriain encapsulates the ephemeral theme of the “Subterranean Imaginary” when she describes the process of collage as “a way of accessing a space of strangeness - to imagine the possibility of an image’s interiority and what might lurk beneath surface presentation”.

The photography of this exhibition has taken the viewer on a journey through this space of strangeness, grounding us in reality with historical and archival pieces, guiding us through spiritualistic thinking, to fictional visual stories, to the reality and future of modernization, landing us here at this collage. We stand in front of it with all of that context where we are able to engage in the world of the “Subterranean Imaginary”.