

CAVES & ART

Caves

Caves and art have a long and distinguished association. Man's earliest known pictures are painted on the walls of caves, usually before any other sign of domestication, often remote from easy access or convenient residence. Caves provided prehistoric man with ready shelter, certainly, but the extent of caves, the option for deeper and more remote retreat, would seem to have inspired an equally profound discovery—the ability to generate and preserve pictures.

Man's first pictures are generally accepted as having a magical or mystical function – a summoning of higher powers or spirits. This is not disputed, however the exact nature of pictures and their appearance in caves, suggests another, more pragmatic development.

Significantly, pictures arise spontaneously in child development, long before writing or other notation are learned. The pre-school and prehistoric artist share a simple but crucial discovery – in extracting two dimensions from three, devising two-dimensional systems for representing three-dimensional objects. This is what pictures are and do. It is a momentous discovery because it offers means of discerning sides or aspects of an object, of literally making more of the world. Indeed, it allows the artist to transcend the world through ideals and fiction, to raise cognition to new and higher levels, to refine and prime perception with possibilities. Sculpture, or three-dimensional modelling, through carving or assembly, offers similar options and introduces fundamental concepts of scale and proportion. However three-dimensional works initially lack the appeal of a site-specific confinement and remain tethered to other functions or tools. Pictures at first, offer a purer, more abstract tool.

The power and scope of this tool can be measured by how far it precedes writing, how central it remains to cognition and how elaborate and diverse pictures subsequently become. This potency sits well with notions of magic and spirit. But while the importance of prehistoric pictures may be clearer for this explanation, the importance of caves begs something more. Clearly, the pre-school artist feels no need for such refuge to exercise these abilities. Why should the pre-historic artist? Caves used for painting, as noted, were not simply those convenient, or where the prehistoric artist happened to be residing. They are often in deep and impractical recesses or remote corners, and, apart from discovery, their function more plausibly, is one of ritualistic retreat or withdrawal, preservation and privacy.

At a certain point, caves present the prehistoric artist with an irresistible metaphor for internalising experience, for storing knowledge away from the world, or in the mind. And it is this greater remove from the outside world that inspires more challenging depiction or art. The depiction of animals for example, out of sight, sets a challenge to the artist's memory and dreams as well as fluency in painting. And in turn, attunes subsequent encounters with the subject matter. Enacting or exemplifying this withdrawal enables prehistoric man to structure recollection and reflection, to externalise puzzling mental abilities, once confined within an enclosed, skull-like haven. In other instances, complex relations between superiors and followers, men and women, find codes or styles of picture and grant the site a special legislative and religious sanctity. Caves thus elevate pictures, while pictures make for vital distinctions between caves.

Eventually, man outgrows a dependence upon caves, of course, and they become an uncomfortable reminder of more primitive times. Subsequently, caves as subject matter, in western culture at least, are associated with outcasts or hermits, the underworld or after-world, the wayward or outlawed. But beneath this veil of disapproval one might detect a more fundamental rejection of first comforts and nurture. The transfer of caves from form to content brings particular repugnance because we still sense an earlier, more humble and helpless existence. Where caves once offered a welcome metaphor for the mind, they subsequently suggest the body at its most egregious in egress, expelling or expletive. Caves suggest wombs or tombs that diminish or demolish us. But notice, while the metaphor may be re-directed to more troubling realms, this only reinforces its potency. We can frown upon caves, but we cannot do without them. And so caves are now demonised, as a way of shunning low origins, extolling mastery and civilisation.

Art

Apart from illustration of text, caves do not figure greatly in pictures, for the simple reason that most of the time there is little to see beyond the mouth of cave, for lack of light. Viewing the interiors of caves usually requires artificial illumination, and in pictures dedicated to, say, the purity of nature or spontaneity of encounter, artificial lighting rather begs the question. There are more specialised interests of course, particularly scientific documentation that narrow the terms of light and record geological or geophysical features to scrupulous standards. But these more specialised pictures are rarely of interest as art. Art seeks wider, more engaging meaning. Equally, the wonders of underground erosion, biological interaction, the elegant effects of heat and pressure on rock or the stalactites and stalagmites created by drainage through limestone, while a popular attraction, for the most part fail to engage beyond idle curiosity.

They are beautiful, but superficial or obvious, like sunsets, rainbows or driftwood, for example. The beautiful subject in many ways inhibits the beautiful picture, since key qualities or properties of the subject are usually those that promptly urge depiction. In such cases the picture accomplishes its task too easily, or arrives at merely the picturesque. Where these qualities are heightened or exaggerated, while preserving realism in other respects, the picture risks kitsch or an indulgence of sentiment. This is especially true where persons or figures are concerned, but has its equivalent in landscapes where elements like water reflections, foreground silhouettes and clichés of weather or season prevail.

Art Photography

Pictures, much less art, obviously need not be paintings. Prints of many kinds, including photography and movies, provide other means for devising and revising potent aspects of a subject or indeed, its categories. Art prizes novelty, but measures it against an elaborate canon and in extensive argument. All kinds of pictures may pursue art through a shrewd balance of invention yet compliance to form or content, technique or theme. For photography, the advent of digital means has inspired new and intricate levels of fiction and abstraction. This in turn has presented disturbing challenges to realism.

Photography, through its dominance in many other fields including science, education, media and government, acquires a reputation for realism, a procedural disposition, even while offering no

guarantees of realism. The work of photographers such as Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky and Thomas Ruff exploits seamless digital modification to the 'realistic' photograph; grants printing and publication greater licence, less rigid category.

Partly as a consequence of this expansion of resources, partly in parallel, there has been renewed attention to the natural world and landscape in art photography. There is perhaps a need to balance ample options against reliable content, to reassert a given world beyond competing pictures. The trend is literally to a higher, wider prospect, the panorama or bird's eye view, revealing some greater organisation or structure to familiar subjects. Other key traits are extreme depth of field or focus, impressive clarity or resolution to lens or stock, fixed or static subjects and symmetrical or frontal framing. Amongst many drawn to this more restrained approach in the closing decades of the 20th century, the catalogues of industrial architecture by Bernd and Hilla Becher and the American urban west of Stephan Shore have proved particularly influential. Such work is often described as 'objective' or 'artless', since it would seem to leave no room for manipulation or point of view. However, striking distance in point of view to familiar objects, and careful framing that tends to reveal underlying patterns to civic planning or general geographical features, are as much a matter of construction as observation.

This approach might be called the *Macro Form*, since the ability to step back from a recognised subject and frame it in some wider context, assumes there is some wider form available. But back away too far, and the subject may easily lapse into an exercise in cartography or geography. Judging where more content makes for form is a delicate matter. Use, efficiency and value of subject are factors. However, where a subject's extended properties are aligned to the picture frame in a conspicuous relation, or pattern, content turns into form. Are these then properties of the picture or of the subject? The Macro Form belongs to both. It is the Olympian view available only to a picture frame. And this cunning continuum similarly finds or makes nature from its more distant relations; is a natural continuation of nature as it is cultivated.

The Bechers' work inspires Gursky, Thomas Struth and Axel Hütte, amongst others, to more formalised panoramas. Hütte, in particular, applies the approach to nature, as the uncultivated landscape. Surprising formations to forest and mountains are gained through discreet frontalities or symmetries to framing. They are a way of structuring or identifying nature as deviation or permutation on underlying geometry, of expressing artful remove and restraint. The work is both intensely realistic yet strictly composed.

The natural world also takes on greater prominence in photography with the growing urgency of ecological concerns. These are not automatically of interest as art, of course, but since large-scale effects of pollution and climate change tend to require wider pictures or panoramas, the results often coincide with Macro Form in potent ways. Nature here is balanced, not just against the formalities of framing but adverse or disturbing changes to landscape. The measure of nature becomes a pattern of decline or destabilization. There is also a subtle parallel with the liberties available to digital means.

In the work of photographers such as [Edward Burtynsky](#) and [David Maisel](#), man's large-scale activities are matched to elegant framing or patterns, as well, so that beauty of picture is accompanied by an uncomfortable ugliness of subject; a longstanding aim of romantic aesthetics.

(see gallery discussion on **The Sublime**) This grasp of nature through a smooth shift to scale of subject is of a piece with contemporary art photography's approach to nature.

Caves and Art Photography

Clearly, most caves do not lend themselves to panoramas, beyond their entrances. And the interiors of caves, while perfectly natural, cannot easily be pictured perfectly naturally. While art photographers may be attracted to them as a challenging niche in nature, the subject does not readily lend itself to Macro Form, or distant framing. Equally, caves do not hold a strong attraction for ecological issues, although undoubtedly affected by sweeping changes to soil, sea and air. Rather, the challenge of caves for the art photographer lies with their deep connotations, as indicated above, and how these are reflected in positioning and approach. Before turning to Crispin Hughes' contribution, two other recent photographer's work provides useful contrast.

There is firstly [Thomas Demand's](#) elaborate cardboard model and photograph – *Grotto* (2006), based on a postcard of a popular tourist destination in Mallorca. Demand's approach throughout his career has been to construct three-dimensional models based on published photographs of scenes without figures, usually architectural. Models are painstakingly built from card and then re-photographed from exactly the same angle as the source photograph, rendering the content accurate in colour, volume and lighting, but curiously stripped of surface detail and incident. The effect is an acute awareness of volume and proportion but strangely remote, even playful.

With *Grotto*, sophisticated computer modelling reduces the intricate rock formations to discreet layers, patiently assembled from thick card, accenting construction and somewhat fragmenting volumes. The photograph of *Grotto* is interesting since the rock formations do not suggest any human scale or proportion, apart from details to the layers of card, so that the cave is reduced to a scrupulous exercise in volumes and space, denying or avoiding any greater engagement. This treatment accords well with the traditional aversion to caves, a literal distancing of the form from its content, the card from the cave.

The second approach also introduces additional content, but in a more straightforward way. [Ryan McGinley's](#) series *Moonmilk* (2008) supplies [vivid coloured lighting](#) and naked young men and women posed in intensely theatrical presentations; that wholly embrace the kitsch hyperbole of the limestone cave as bodily, even [erotic metaphor](#). Caves offer McGinley a way of connecting a fugitive youth sub-culture of drugs and hedonism with older intuitions and taboos. The work cannot quite renew romantic clichés, although it perhaps adds a certain pathos to the activities of his models.

Significantly, both Demand and McGinley prefer a wide-angle lens, deep focus and immobile subject. This concentrates attention on properties to the cave rather than composition, which are variously natural or cultivated, found or made. While their approaches are far less restrained than Macro Form, the use of deliberate staging, or a more cultivated content surely arises in response to the acceptance of Macro Form, the distant framing of nature as a graded or continuous subject.

Crispin Hughes

Hughes' approach differs firstly in geology. His choice of caves is drawn from the coast of North Cornwall, where caves arise through sea erosion to layers of slate where it has broken or collides with igneous rocks, and weakened through contact of corrosive solutions containing antimony, arsenic and even gold. Together with vibrant algal adhesions, the caves present quite different, but equally appealing shapes and colours to the more familiar limestone grottos, with stalactites and stalagmites. Hughes' caves also remain close to the surface with multiple openings or light sources that allow natural lighting for photography, at least on long exposures.

Many of the works adopt a panoramic format, not because of a radically wide-angle lens or generous width to caves, but through software compositing. This seamlessly combines many separate exposures, taken of different angles, yet from the same or similar position. The result maintains spectacularly sharp focus, although uncertain depth or scale. For example, in *Epphaven 8-10-06*, lighting indicates an opening to the right of frame, yet the large stone mass obstructing its view shares exactly the same focus, allowing no differentiation to scale or foreground. The space is compressed or thwarts perspective. Together with the irregularity and unfamiliarity of geology, the approach levels out features, spatially, renders the cave as virtually a wall, a dense array of diverse rock shapes and surfaces. In the example, various tide-driven plastic buoys and receptacles add to the range, hint at possible scales. Indeed, in many of the works it is not entirely clear that the arrays are actually caves at all, but might as easily be external rock faces, starkly lit, beneath or above ledges.

The emphasis is not upon the cave as a place or space, so much as a fabulous collection of stones, their variety of surface and colour; their compact and chaotic relations. Interestingly, Hughes explains that his inspiration lay with Renaissance paintings of saints in refuge and sufferance, the hospitable geologies provided. But little of this survives in the Stone Hole series. In *Trebarwith 27-10-07*, there is a convenient niche padded by pooled sea grass and twines, looking almost like a nest, but it is clearly at the whim of tide and the impression is not one of comfort but precariousness, entrapment. Nature, while colourful and ingenious, is not accommodating for long.

The presence of tides and the allusion to human activities through detritus, only adds to the sexual metaphor for caves. While hardly a home for a saint, the caves' smooth and rounded forms occasionally suggest prone figures, glistening on a dark tide, as in the centre foreground to *Lundy Hole 18-04-006*. But tellingly, the figure is half-submerged, shares colour and markings with surrounding rock and struggles for differentiation. This actually becomes the abiding theme - everything squeezed together, crowded and confused, brilliant yet finally oppressive. In fact, many of the smaller or squarer works are devoted to simply the vivid markings and fissures that rocks share, that are yet elements in themselves, as in *Epphaven 10-04-07*, and *Port Quin 11-04-07*. The task is one of discerning what belongs with what, of finding space, surface and relations, of dividing and disengaging.

The work shuns the obvious rhetoric of McGinley's caves, but addresses similar bodily metaphors, on more disturbing terms. In works, such as *Trebarwith 25-12-07 (2)* and *Trebarwith 27-12-07* small windows of daylight again tease scale and distance and contrast with the powerful compression and cementing of rock layers. And the effect is unmistakably one of imprisonment. While McGinley's

figures may be victims of indulgence, Hughes' caves display an equalling stony view of commitment. Caves, as home at its most bodily, are not so much moments of ecstatic release as opportunities for patient stocktaking.

While the work favours panoramas, it does not really amount to Macro Form. As noted, depth is strangely compressed and ambiguous through software compositing, so that novel properties are revealed not through extended content but rather a subtle reduction. The pictures sacrifice reliable perspective to gather volumes in a dense array, to concentrate on rich and varied surfaces. They thus gently converge upon the heavily encrusted plane, vivid striation and inviting crack or rift. The results inevitably recall abstract painting and the fundamentals of two-dimensional reference. To summon this within caves, against the long traditions to meaning outlined above, gives the work profound resonance, thrilling beauty.

Where Demand's Grotto separates out the architecture of the cave through volumes of card and leaves nature as simply an absence or inference, Hughes reverses the priority. It is the myriad dazzling surfaces, the kaleidoscope of shapes and shadow that are to be negotiated. It is the prospect of integration, the riddle of disparity and the consolations of the tide that here define nature, against a chastened culture.

Susi Arnott

Stone Hole, the exhibition, also includes a short digital movie (eight minutes, fifty seconds) of the same name by Susi Arnott. This cleverly complements the photographs in several ways. Using a cave in Port Quin Bay (the same one as Hughes' *Port Quin 11-04-07*) Arnott adopts a structure of a single take or integral sequence of JPEGs taken at five-second intervals over a duration of roughly nine and a half hours (actually compiled from two sessions on consecutive days, and with some editing to a slow mid section) that parallels Hughes' compositing of multiple, long exposures.

Arnott uses a consistent exposure time, lens, aperture and focus throughout. Hughes' approach asserts contiguity of space, Arnott's, continuity of time. Where Hughes' camera is guided by details to colour and surface of parts of the cave, Arnott's camera is guided by the forces of tide and passing sunlight. One looks to cause, the other to effect. Sealed in a waterproof bag and left freestanding some distance inside the cave, the camera initially frames the entrance in silhouette at low tide, to be presently thrown violently about the cave on the rising tide, radically fragmenting its record of walls or ceiling, although fleetingly matching details of the photographs. With the receding tide, calm is restored and camera resumes its initial framing, with discreet help from the unseen photographer.

The elegant symmetry to events and framing is accompanied by a surprising awareness of colour and distance to the exterior in the final framing. The sunlight has now moved from facing the mouth of the cave and bleaching out exterior detail – effectively rendering the film in black and white - to an early evening reversal, sunlight directed now upon the view opposite the cave, rendering green hillsides and an opposing cave. The event thus takes on a sense of development or progression to a literally deeper, fuller perception that has no obvious parallel in the photographs. However, as noted, where Hughes' works apply closer scrutiny of rocks, there is a palpable sense of enclosure, at times, disintegration, and pictorially, of abstraction. If these represent the extreme of his series,

then eventual retreat and greater orientation arise in tacit counterpoint. It is just a matter of timing. The riches of the caves are thus only to be enjoyed on a tide, their benefits soon carried away, felt elsewhere. Arnott's movie underlines the cycle; grants the necessary distance. Hughes' photographs exploit tide and light to colourful interior for the moment, resist wider perspective.

The balance in approaches is carried through to expressive or symbolic meaning. As indicated, caves inherit a powerful sexual metaphor and, as the movie pointedly begins and ends, looking out of the cave mouth, the point of view, in a sense becomes that of the cave, or personifies it. Attention is directed to the approaching tide and light. Their subsequent invasion then takes on the quality of a drowning and the chaos is readily experienced as the camera tumbles through churning currents, offering brief glimpses of colourful features, but no stability or coherence. Colour is gained, details grasped, but clarity must await the retreat of the tide. In the photographs, the patient building of multiple exposures suggests quite the opposite effect. The works are reassuringly lucid, solid, unhurried. Yet the two are synchronised, sympathetic and juggle longstanding dilemmas, of staying too long, leaving too soon, going too far, clinging too close. It is, at heart, a romance. On one hand we deal with a hole, on the other, with stone. It is a very modern story, filled with classical allusions. To press the matter, one might tactfully conclude that visits are brief but regular, monitoring scrupulous, if not dilatory, ardour excessive and expectations diminished.

Finally, Arnott's film has much in common with [Structural/Materialist](#) experiments of the late 60s and early 70s. A distinctive trait is reliance upon fixed settings to camera while immersed in a situation, passive or automatic recording thereof, where it generates peculiarly abrupt and abstract passages to picture and/or soundtrack. *Film* makers (as they were, in pre-digital days) such as [Michael Snow](#) and [Chris Welsby](#), in works such as *La Region Centrale* (1971) and *Windmill III* (1974) attempt to minimise standard process and reveal the mechanics or material of film making. It is essentially a variant on the art movement of Minimalism. In particular, these examples structure the recording of landscapes around special mountings for the camera. In Welsby's case, the camera's direction is decided by a large wind vane attached to the back of the camera, in Snow's case, a robotic arm specially installed on a mountain top with a programmed set of unique movements, determines fluctuating speed and direction to the camera's continuous panning and tilting. In both examples lens, focus, aperture, and film speed remain constant while duration is essentially arbitrary. Both examples strip the event or subject to nugatory recognition and orientation to a landscape. More to the point, they demonstrate how distance, lighting and orientation modify the affects of camera movement, of subtle differences within movement and between movements.

Such work has subsequently tended to be dismissed as arid and self-referential, attractive but solipsistic. The combination of Arnott's movie with Hughes' photographs illustrates that abstraction and self-reference need not be seen in isolation or as absolutes, that they arise even in the course of strict observation and realism, and that motion pictures encounter similar formal dilemmas, in maintaining sequence or temporal integrity. Together, Hughes and Arnott apply rigorous pictures of how, when and where to profound and moving themes

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