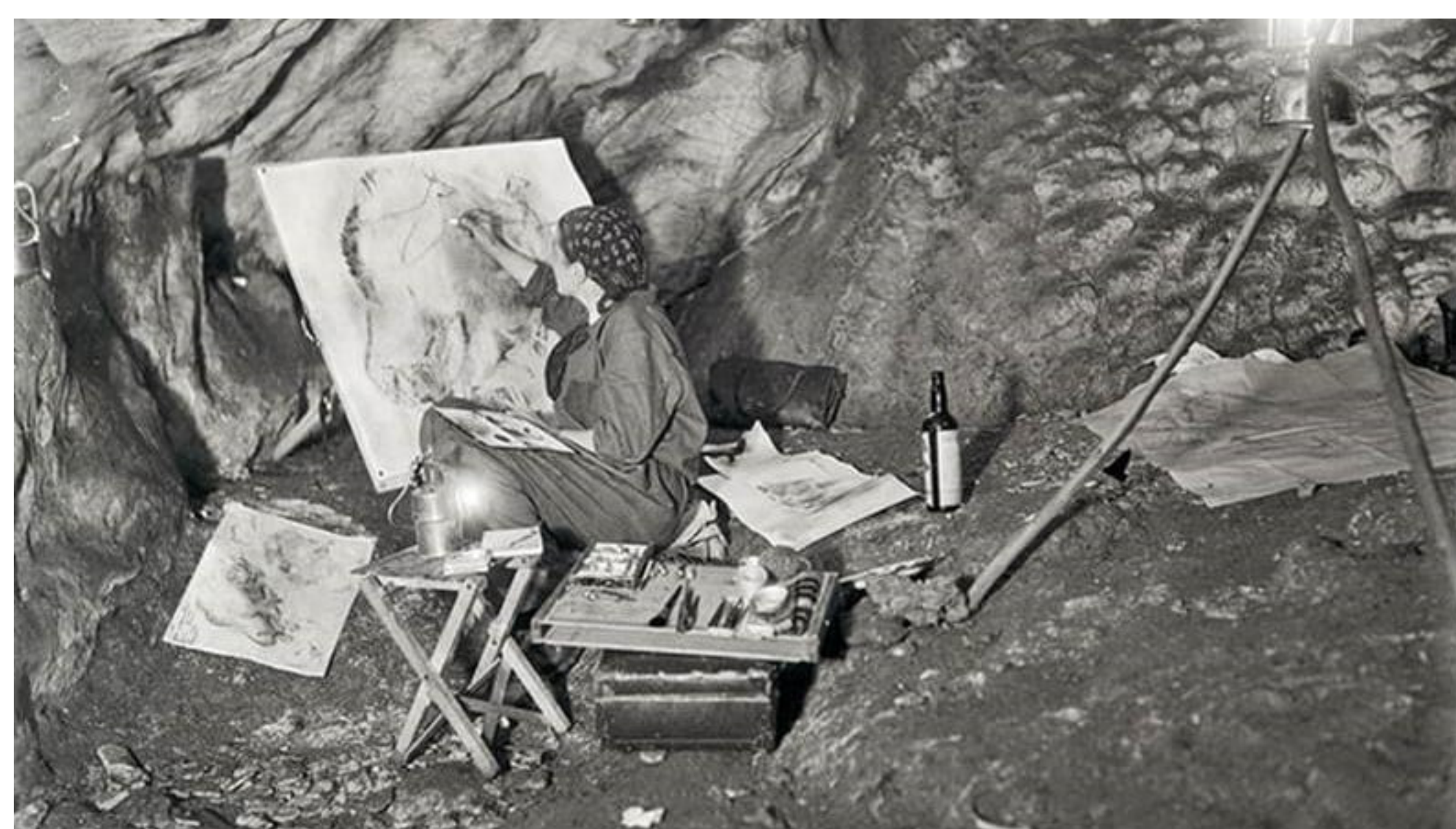


EXETER'S RAMM TO HOST HAYWARD GALLERY TOURING EXHIBITION 'HOLLOW EARTH: ART, CAVES AND THE SUBTERRANEAN IMAGINARY'

By Exeter Chamber | July 13, 2023 | Member News & Updates



Presented by Exeter City Council's Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery (RAMM), Hollow Earth opens in September 2023.

"A glorious meditation on geology, early art and shamanic visions", ★★★★★ Hettie Judah, [The Guardian](#)

"A powerful and thought-provoking new exhibition", Helen Gordon, [Apollo](#)

Elisabeth Pauli at work in Northern Spain, Unknown photographer, 1936 © Frobenius-Institut, Frankfurt am Main

Artists: **Hamed Abdalla, Lee Bontecou, Brassáí, Center for Land Use Interpretation, Steve Claydon, Matt Copson, Juan Downey, Chioma Ebinama, Mary Beth Edelson, Barry Flanagan, Ilana Halperin, Frank Heath, Ed Herring, Michael Ho, Peter Hujar, Athanasius Kircher, René Magritte, Santu Mofokeng, Henry Moore, Nadar, Lydia Ourahmane, Gordon Parks, Flora Parrott, Robert Smithson, Michelle Stuart, N.H. Stubbing, Caragh Thuring, Aubrey Williams, Joseph Wright of Derby.**

Dark, dangerous and unstable, caves are places of visions and experiences both sacred and profane. *Hollow Earth: Art, Caves and the Subterranean Imaginary* is a major thematic art exhibition bringing together a wide range of responses to the image and idea of the cave. It includes painting, photography, sculpture, and video, as well as objects from RAMM's collection, from ancient history through to modern and contemporary art.

For thousands of years these portals to the deep past have captivated artists, and as society has evolved artistic responses have also shifted. Following 19th-century discoveries of rock paintings, caves have been imagined as spaces of revelation, providing clues to the origin of our collective impulse to produce and display images. After World War II artists came to associate the cave with the primordial creative space and a refuge from the atomic era. Today, in an age of ecological breakdown, caves are portals to both the deep past and troubled futures, places where species and time intermingle. For thousands of years, these portals to the deep past have captivated artists. Some even argue that the cave was the earliest studio and the first museum.

Devon holds a unique place in history as the birthplace of cave-hunting, declared by William Pengelly, the Victorian pioneer of systemic cave research in England. The county contains some of the UK's most important prehistoric cave deposits. Objects from RAMM's collection will be on display including a selection of extinct animal bones and antiquities found in caves from around the world. Spanning works by more than 30 artists, the exhibition descends into the depths to consider questions of thresholds, darkness and prehistory.

'It is appropriate that Hollow Earth is shown here in Exeter considering the importance of Devonshire caverns to William Pengelly's ground-breaking work on systemic cave research and conservation. I'm sure RAMM's audiences will find this extensive and varied overview of the cultural significance of the underground through art both fascinating and thought-provoking.'

- Cllr Laura Wright, Exeter City Council lead for Culture and City Centre Strategy

The exhibition is divided into five sections and echoes the journey into a cave, starting at the threshold and ending in the depths. *Hollow Earth* features major works by the Victorian painter Sir Joseph Wright of Derby, famous Surrealist René Magritte, abstract artist Henry Moore, contemporary filmmaker Michael Ho, and Guyanese expressionist painter Aubrey Williams, as well as new commissions including large-scale watercolour paintings from Chioma Ebinama and a film installation by Lydia Ourahmane.

Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–97), a master of subtle chiaroscuro, or light and shadow, was one of the most significant artists of the 18th century. His works have become synonymous with the Industrial Revolution. Painted in 1780, *Grotto in the Gulf of Salerno* is one of a distinguished group of works inspired by the artist's travels in Italy. Based on a drawing he had made there in 1774, the painting depicts the interior of a cavern near Naples which was a popular stop for artists on the Grand Tour.

René Magritte (1898–1967) painted four works with the same title, *La condition humaine*, between 1933 and 1935. His surrealist paintings focus on the blurred boundary between reality and illusion, this particular version from 1935, the easel is framed by the mouth of a cave. The work's title, as well as the fire motif, draws clear links to Plato's famous 'Allegory of the Cave'. The allegory explores the difference between reality and representation, by way of the figure of prisoners in a cave, chained with their backs to a fire, watching shadows flicker across the wall.

Between 1940 and 1941, **Henry Moore** (1898–1986) made a celebrated series of drawings of people sheltering from the Blitz in the London Underground. Moore's *Cavern* illustrates what he described as his 'bias towards blackness and mysterious depths'. Inspired by the prints of Rembrandt and the drawings of Georges Seurat, it also draws on his experience of visiting the candlelit Altamira cave paintings in Spain.

The contemporary film, *Echoes from the Void*, by **Michael Ho** (b.1991) considers the cave as a kind of echo chamber. Shot at Thor's Cave in the Peak District, as well as locations in Dorset and Devon, the film draws on imagery borrowed from Chinese myth and folklore.

Ho explains that the film, 're-examines the children's game of 'Chinese whispers' within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the age of digital media. It seeks to discuss the East Asian diaspora as well as notions of cultural mismatch through the exposure of the mechanisms in which mis- and disinformation are produced, disseminated and consumed.

Aubrey Williams (1926–90) was born in British Guiana and moved to London in 1952, becoming one of the most significant painters of the post-war period. As a young man, Williams worked as an agricultural field officer in North Guyana, where he came into contact with the Warao, an indigenous Amerindian people. Williams learned their language, recorded their stories and encountered their ancient petroglyphs, or stone carvings. In the late 1950s and early 60s, Williams' earthy abstract paintings explore various 'tribal' imagery, including a motif of a bone-like claw or glyph, drawing inspiration from the ancestral petroglyphs that he closely studied. He described this as a 'strange, very tense, slightly violent shape [...] it has haunted me all my life and I don't understand it.'

Chioma Ebinama (b.1988) is a Nigerian-American artist drawing from a wide range of sources, including folklore, animism, West African cosmologies and Eastern spiritualism. For this exhibition, Ebinama was commissioned to create new watercolour works which have been inspired by the 11th-century Tibetan Buddhist poet and yogi Milarepa.

She explains: 'Milarepa was a Tibetan siddha who reached enlightenment via solitude, encountering demons while meditating in a cave. He began his path of enlightenment as a murderer; his mother was the catalyst for seeking purification from this karmic debt. Mothers are often left out of the narrative. The greatest minds of modern history were only able to explore their solitude because mothers and wives were doing the labour of daily life. If we could all meditate in a cave like Milarepa, we might be confronted with very different inner demons: an urgent need to respect the mother – and her rage – as absolutely essential.'

In early 2022, **Lydia Ourahmane** (b.1992) travelled to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Tassili n'Ajjer, a national park in the Sahara Desert. It is home to one of the most significant groupings of prehistoric rock art in the world, dating back to 12,000 BCE. Describing the transformation of life in the region over thousands of years, Ourahmane's commissioned film installation depicts otherworldly images of demons, extra- terrestrials and lost rivers. The first time Ourahmane visited, there were three water sources; now there is only one. Soon there may be none, and it will be almost impossible to travel there.

Ourahmane described this ambitious journey as 'an act of translation, an experiment of what we might unearth together'. The wordless film features an 'exquisite corpse'-style soundtrack, composed by four musicians – Felicita, Nicolas Jaar, Yawning Portal and Sega Bodega.

A programme of events at RAMM has been developed to accompany the exhibition, including:

- 12 October, 'Dreams of the underworld: Ancient Greek and Roman perspectives of the hollow earth' with classicist, TV presenter and podcaster Jasmine Elmer
- 19 October, an evening with Rosy Gray, curator of modern & contemporary art at Norwich Castle
- 10 November, RAMM Lates – after hours at the museum, inspired by Hollow Earth. More information at rammuseum.org.uk/whats-on

Hollow Earth: Art, Caves and The Subterranean Imaginary is a Hayward Gallery Touring exhibition from Southbank Centre, London, developed in partnership with Nottingham Contemporary and in collaboration with Glucksman, Cork and RAMM.

23 September 2023 – 7 January 2024, Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter. Admission is free. This is the only venue in the south of England for this major exhibition.