Post-Pleistocene

There was a cave near the house where I grew up. As teenagers we went there to smoke weed and drink. It was private, protected, and wild.

Inside the cave there were names and dates everywhere on the walls – some 100 years old. My older brother's friends' names were there. Daryll Walker found his father's name in there – dated 1965; four years before Daryll was born. We scratched our names on the wall too.

The inside of a cave feels like the subconscious. Darkness and silence diminish the senses; fear and fascination are intensified. There is no horizon, sometimes not even a ground to speak of. A unique awareness of the body and the self emerges. Cave spaces are often huge, anonymous and primordially private. Something rooted in evolutionary memory triggers an urge to make marks, signify; to commemorate existence.

The cave I explored as a teen, and all the caves I photographed have been mined for saltpeter, found in the nitrate-saturated earth. Mining was widespread during the Civil War when demand was high for saltpeter, the main ingredient of gunpowder. During this period, caves became sites of local lore and fascination, and people began exploring them extensively.

There has remained a steady local interest in cave exploration, creating an expansive record of markings, signatures, drawings, and messages. Some caves have been so heavily visited, the markings are several layers deep. In one of my photographs, scratched tally-marks made by slaves counting bags of saltpeter they hauled out of the cave in 1865 lies beneath smoke written signatures from the 1930's, and is overlaid by day-glo orange spray paint proclaiming, "Star from MySpace.com Rocks."

The 160 years of graffiti on the walls of these caves in Tennessee and Alabama are commemorations of the ritual of exploration. When the work on these cave walls is compared to Pleistocene era art making, like that in the caves of Lascaux, one can imagine the course of human evolution – from frank expressions of nature, to layered, expressive gestures that reflect a culture fascinated with identity.

I photographed these caves from the vantage point of an artist, explorer, evolutionist, and native son. These catacombs elicit and archive the drawn voices of wild adolescents, homegrown explorers, criminals, scientists, and enslaved people. Their names, messages, and drawings together with the entropic, bodily forms of the cave walls tell a complicated story where human culture and the changing earth intertwine.

– JW