

## Exhibition Essay by John Hughes:

New World stories. New World drawings.

### The Garden of Sorrows

John Hughes

An Exhibition of Eighty Etchings by Marco Luccio

Created for the book, *The Garden of Sorrows*, by author John Hughes published by UWAP

Imagine the caves at Lascaux or Chauvet. The paintings of horses, mammoths, lions, bears, bison, aurochs. The sensitivity of perception they reveal. Now imagine if, rather than being painted *on* the surface, these apparitions come *through* the rock to be seen. The rock opened for them, lending a bulge to the horse's flank, a hollow to the lion's neck, a deep scratch on the mammoth's long curved tusk. When such apparitions came to an artist, John Berger suggests, they came almost invisibly and he found them and traced where they nudged the surface on which they would now stay visible even after they had withdrawn back into the rock.

Rock appears lifeless, but these first artists knew that it is not. If they had memories inside them that came out of the stuff of which they were made, why couldn't rock? There are fossils too in the wall. A fish as big as a hand with a nose like a hook. Its bones are small and thin and tight. There must have been an exact moment when stone turned into plants and animals, when the inanimate came to life. But how did that happen? And what in rock requires that it be seen? Why does what starts in rock end in consciousness, if consciousness is not necessary to this end; if rock did not need something by which it might bear witness to itself? Turtles can live on land and in water. So can frogs. And when fish die and fall through the water to the bottom of the sea they are born again as stone. The whole world, the whole of time and life in endless metamorphosis.

The artists of those caves knew that we are made from the same stuff as everything else: water, rock and air. They knew how earth and flesh connect, how bodies grow like rock, limned from slow weather. That our sense of the world, instinctive, unconscious, primeval, has its own underground: the secret spaces which mirror our insides; the world beneath the skin. That the roots of consciousness lie beneath the ground, with the minerals and the dead. From dust we are born and to dust we return. Children of stone.

Now imagine those caves at Lascaux and Chauvet themselves transformed, turned inside out, so that all that internal drama is now visible on their skin, and that skin were paper instead of rock. A wondrous metamorphosis from whose dark cocoon a world emerges: the *Garden of Sorrows*. Look at the images now on the walls. It's not through stone this time but through time itself these creatures have come. They came to the artist, almost invisibly once again, and he found them and traced where they nudged against the paper on which they would now stay visible even after they had withdrawn. How far through time each creature travelled is impossible to say, but what is certain is that in impressing themselves they impressed also the stories of their passage to the page. They came, that is, fully-formed: visual fables, their stories told in lines and traces, not words, in light and dark, or better yet, the border between the two, where one becomes the other and life and death remain unsplit. A topsy-turvy world where a thylacine can fall in love with the sun, a kangaroo go to war with fire, a turtle cry out for death yet death will not come, an albatross find permanence only in transience, and where skeletons resemble souls. And what skeletons! The artist has drawn each bone with love and pity as if it were a face. They become the centre of their own stories with special powers of narration: they tell of what precedes life and what remains. The garden is full of them, and what stories they have to tell. Epic stories without words, violent and eloquent in their silence.

And then there is the light, which because it too comes from the cave is like darkness turned inside out. We see each story through this light, like air washed clean by rain, beestings of divinity and magic time, new light, fresh as the day of creation, and still as that first day, before commanded to move, to rub and wear against the coming into existence of everything it touched, its passing through each new-minted eye, wear like a pebble in water, and age, opaque and saggy, all blemish, like old skin. But here in these etchings now, a travelling back, this miraculous dusk, back to the moment of its birth, all motionless and hovering. And in this ancient light we see what we have never seen: the closeness inside distance and the distance in what is close, where every look is a looking through, but there is only surface. The darkness from which everything comes – light included – and to which it must return. That crocodile devouring its own eggs, all joy, and the tiny plover, dead.

And what of the artist, this new-old inscriber of paper and stone? The style of the hand is as the voice which holds the song, as singular and unbiddable as the lace of a fingerprint. And yet these etchings ask us to allow the existence of a song without a

voice. Or rather, Babel in one voice. Because the artist who made these etchings had a hundred hands, each attached to a different mind, the mind of each new creature, and it is that mind that speaks through his hand. The creatures don't quite draw themselves – that would be impossible? – but in their nudging from behind the page they leave the imprint of their forms, skeletal traces of their passing. And the genius of the artist here is that he makes it seem as if there is no eyesight colouring the hand. The etchings *feel* as if the creatures have drawn themselves, are telling their own stories, as if the artist is their medium rather than their translator. The distinction is crucial. Because the creatures speak only because the artist has found a way to shed his own voice, to give up, not only his style, but his very self. For the creatures exist before him, and it is his response to the stories in which they first come into existence that gives them visual life – it is, strictly speaking, his *reading* that speaks. He does not give himself up in advance, he does not and cannot empty himself by a conscious act of will, it is the process of reading that frees him and allows these creatures, if only for a moment, to become the self that is freed. In that instant when the two worlds touch, each for a moment becomes the other. We cannot speak of collaboration here, for how can invisible beings collaborate? We must speak only of pressure, of touch. Of drawing that knows nothing of limit.

The stories these etchings tell are really fables, oldest of literary forms (as old as painting on cave walls), created at a time when man was much closer to animals than he is now, when animals could speak to him in voices he could understand. Animals were with man at the centre of his world and in his consciousness indistinguishable from his fellow men. The fable emerged from the rich soil of this proximity. Animals first entered the imagination as messengers, John Berger writes in his beautiful essay 'Why Look at Animals?' Animals had magical functions, sometimes oracular, sometimes sacrificial. They are born, are sentient and are mortal. In these things they resemble man. When man is seen by an animal he is seen as his surroundings are seen by him. Such an unspeaking companionship may well have led to the conviction that it was man who lacked the capacity to speak with them – and so the stories and legends of exceptional beings, like Orpheus, who could talk with animals in their own tongue.

What were the secrets of the animal's likeness with, and unlikeness from, man? The secrets whose existence man recognised as soon as he returned an animal's look? All the secrets were about animals as an *interruption* between man and his origin, Berger suggests. Darwin's evolutionary theory belongs to a tradition almost as old as man himself. Animals came from over the horizon. They belonged *there* and *here*. The first subject matter for painting was animal and the first paint was probably animal blood. It's

not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor too was animal – because the essential relation between man and animal is metaphoric. Everywhere animals offered explanations, lent their name or character to a quality. The first symbols were animals. Anthropomorphism, then, was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity. Anthropomorphism was the residue of the continuous use of animal metaphor. In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live largely without them. And in this new solitude (the solitude of man as a species), anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy.

And so to write - to paint! - fables today a violence must be done. We must give ourselves a shock. To give back to ourselves the power and wonder of these original stories, to put ourselves back in contact with the origins of metaphor and language itself, the wellsprings of our being, rather than break a man up into his animals (the natural origin not only of metaphor, but of the fable itself), a new kind of fable is necessary where the original impulse is reversed, in which each animal is broken up into its human qualities, the human it might become. Reverse fables, that is – entirely suited to the antipodean context of their composition - that cast us back to the flux and metamorphosis at the beginning of things (when man and animal were indistinguishable), inchoate nature, the world in a state of formation; Australia: the garden and the inferno.

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**Note:** The references to John Berger come from his essays ‘The Chauvet Cave’ (*The Shape of a Pocket*, 2001), and ‘Why Look at Animals?’ (*About Looking*, 1980).