

In December 1994, three explorers set out along the banks of the Ardèche river in the south of France. The explorers were looking for small drafts of air emanating from the ground, ones which might point to the existence of caves. They located a subtle gust and, clearing away rocks and debris, they discovered a narrow shaft that forged deep into the cliff face. They forced their way in, crawling and scrabbling, and slowly descending into the unknown.

The cave was pristine, perfectly sealed for tens of thousands of years. Deep inside, Eliette Brunel-Deschamps, Christian Hillaire and Jean-Marie Chauvet passed their torches across one of the greatest discoveries of modern human history. The explorers had found humanity's first surviving artwork – hundreds of ghostly pictures of animals drawn with charcoal, and by fire light. The paintings are an estimated 32,000 years old, indicates radiocarbon dating; the oldest paintings ever discovered, more than twice as old as any other.

Horses gallop alongside bison, lions and bears stalk in caves. Woolly mammoths are depicted rising above everything around them. Dotted amongst the wildlife, there are representations of the human female form in the midst of sexual congress with animals. The Chauvet Cave, named after the leading explorer, is a “prehistoric Sistine Chapel”. Never opened to the public, the caves are only accessible to a small number of scientists – among them palaeontologists, archaeologists and geologists – and, very recently, a select number of artists. One of the latter invited to the caves was the celebrated French conceptual photographer Raphaël Dallaporta. After applying to France's Ministry of Culture, Dallaporta was granted access to the caves on three separate occasions, each time for just two hours. He took two months to prepare each visit, and planned every minute of his time in there. Inspired by the architect Richard Buckminster Fuller, Dallaporta wanted to render with ink and paper a 360-degree view of the subterranean masterpiece, an imagined, immersive visual approach “as if we were physically entering the cave”.

At the cave entrance is a huge metal door, like one used in a bank vault. You are locked in, so the cave can be preserved. “There are 36 steps down to the floor of the cave, and every step, you go back a thousand years. After three steps, it's almost impossible to imagine what humanity would have been like in that age,” says Dallaporta.

Once in the cave, the photographer had to focus on what he had planned, for he feared being overawed. “I realised that if I didn't respect the moment, and if I wasn't able to get in sync with the rhythm of the cave, then I would miss something in the photography,” he says. What was it like to look upon them with his own eyes? “These drawings were made 30,000 years ago, but they look like they have just been drawn,” he says. “They're the oldest trace of humanity, but they have absolutely not lost their power. It's the first time humans, as far as we're aware, rose above the animal condition. This the first evidence of that: the ability to make abstract, and conceptualise, the world we are living in.”

The photographs, taken with a robotic camera with a 360-degree swivel-head, have been published in a Japanese-bound photobook, by French publisher Éditions Xavier Barral. *Chauvet – Pont-d'Arc, L'inappropriable* shows the caves in fragmented panoramas, presenting a chronological sequence of photographs from the ground to the roof. “Reading the landscapes of the cave, thanks to Raphaël Dallaporta's photographs, allows us to feel its various temporalities, from its genesis to the calcite crystals formed just now by a water drop, as well as the traces and works of prehistorical men,” writes Jean-Jacques Delannoy in the book. “The power we feel during the exploration of the cave is due to the visual strength of its different stories, so far from one another in time, and yet so intimately linked in the landscape.”

The caves are under the jurisdiction of the French government, and are a designated Unesco World Heritage site. Although closed to the public, they are nonetheless a tourist destination, with an exhibition centre nearby. The cave drawings' protection lies in the hands of many interlocking interests, all forced to work together to protect something that is beyond remarkable, more than priceless. “Faced with the first cultural testimonies of mankind, the men and women of this project have been able to overcome their differences to share their knowledge and work together,” says Pascal Terrasse, president of the Mixed Syndicate of the Pont-d'Arc Cavern. “Beyond sensitivities, beyond the different modes of thought existing between scientists, administrators, artists, architects, engineers, workers, industrialists, political leaders – everyone has agreed to contribute to this ideal. Raphaël Dallaporta's photography contributes to this process, bringing to light the first images, the first cultural and artistic expression of humanity.” **BJP**

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[Opposite and over] Images from *Chauvet – Pont-d'Arc, L'inappropriable*, published by Éditions Xavier Barral.

Images © Raphaël Dallaporta, courtesy Éditions Xavier Barral.

RAPHAËL DALLAPORTA STEPS BACK 30 MILLENNIA TO CAPTURE AN IMMERSIVE VIEW OF A PREHISTORIC MASTERPIECE IN FRANCE