

The Fontainebleau forest on the outskirts of the French capital is one of the most popular destinations for Parisians looking to escape the urban grind for a few hours. Yet even for those that know the area well, Emmanuel Breteau's latest book, *Mémoire Rupestre*, which documents the cave art dotted in and around the rocks and trees, will come as a revelation. Breteau first began photographing cave art around 15 years ago. Based in the French Alps for the past 30 years, it was through his interest in the pastoral life of the region that he first came across its rock art. One of the shepherds that Breteau had photographed told him about a series of carvings made in the 19th century by shepherds in the Valley of Marvels in the Mercantour National Park in southern France. So, after having discovered these fairly recent inscriptions, Breteau decided to undertake a more ambitious photographic panorama of cave art throughout the Alps, a project which took over 10 years.

In 2015, Breteau presented this work to the Musée Départemental de Préhistoire d'Île-de-France for a potential exhibition. "They were interested," he recalls, "but rather than presenting this existing work, they asked if I would accept a commission to photograph the cave art of Fontainebleau. I was delighted because I had wanted to do that very project for a long time – having grown up in the town of Corbeil-Essonnes, right next to the forest of Fontainebleau – but I had never had the time or funding." With the help of the museum, Breteau had the guidance of an archaeologist and an organisation that has been responsible for cataloguing the historic craft of the Fontainebleau area for several decades. In the winter of 2015, he completed the *Mémoire Rupestre* series – the first major photographic investigation of Fontainebleau's cave art. "These carvings are believed to date from the Mesolithic period, so they could be 10,000 years old," Breteau explains.

Cave art is generally associated with figurative scenes depicting men engaged in combat or hunting, placed so that it is visible to passers-by. But in Fontainebleau, most of the art is in small cavities a few metres beneath a boulder, which makes the carvings difficult to access. The design is also of a more primitive nature; while stick figures and animals do appear, the most common features in these caves are furrows in the surface of the rock arranged in grid-like patterns.

Photographing the cave art was a time-consuming process. The caves are confined spaces no more than a few metres long, meaning it can be difficult to find the correct vantage point. Furthermore, the carvings demand a raking light in order to be photographed, so Breteau worked alongside an assistant, freeing himself up to operate the camera. "Because the art is primarily made up of furrows and grids, I was concerned this could become repetitive in the context of an exhibition or a book. For this reason, I decided to photograph not only the art itself but to provide some context by shooting the whole cave or, where possible, to show the carvings within the surrounding landscape."

Breteau made almost 3000 photographs over the course of that winter, before beginning work on an exhibition and associated book with the director of the museum, Anne-Sophie Leclerc. "Once the shoot was finished, she asked me if there was a publisher I had in mind. I wanted the book to be more than a catalogue and I had seen the book *D'Après Nature* that Xavier Barral had done with Jean Gaumy, which treated natural landscapes in an almost abstract way. I thought it would be perfect to work with him on this project." *Mémoire Rupestre*, the result of their collaboration, was published in November 2016 in conjunction with the opening of his exhibition, which will run until November 2017 at Musée de Préhistoire d'Île-de-France.

The book makes equal use of close-ups and wider angle perspectives to give a sense of rhythm and draw the viewer into the details. Breteau explains: "I didn't want to take a scientific approach with these photographs so I allowed myself to play with scale, sometimes blowing up a carving that is only a few centimetres long to an image many times that size." The close-ups, in rich black-and-white, accentuate the texture of the sandstone rock, which Breteau describes as "almost sensual", in a style reminiscent of Brassai's series *Graffiti*, which documents the carvings and etchings scratched onto Parisian stone walls between the 1930s and 1950s. "Looking at the carvings, you wonder what brought people to carve these patterns so deeply into the rock," says Breteau. "I'm not religious or a mystic of any kind, but taking these photographs you can't help but feel a sense of connection with the people that left these traces thousands of years ago." **BJP**

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[Opposite] Tridactyl character in Mont Aiveu cave, Fontainebleau.

[Over] Sarrazin cave in Villeneuve-sur-Auvers, Fontainebleau.

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EMMANUEL BRETEAU SPENT
ALMOST A DECADE DOCUMENTING
THE PREHISTORIC ART HIDDEN
IN PARISIAN CAVES. NOW, HE
REVEALS THEIR SECRETS