



Jeff Whetstone's photograph *Johnny*, 2007, one of his photographs updating the cave art of Lascaux.

Jeff Whetstone is an anthropologist and an artist. Having studied zoology as an undergraduate, he now takes photographs of men—often southern hunters, fishermen, and livestock traders—in their natural habitats, locales just off the beaten path of civilization.

The gorgeous black-and-white prints in his “New Wilderness” series, which could almost be mistaken for Depression-era documentary photographs, won him a Guggenheim fellowship in 2007. But his new body of work, “Post-Pleistocene,” expresses his view of humanity as just a step away from precivilization. In color-saturated Cibachromes, he captures the interiors of caves located in the Cumberland Plateau of Tennessee and Alabama. Deep inside these slippery caverns, he discovered brilliant, bold, spray-painted graffiti against black walls. He immediately dubbed the imagery “contemporary cave art,” in an update of the 50,000-year-old cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira.

“Our evolutionary roots and our primal urges are just below the surface of our modernity,” Whetstone says. “The cave is such an iconic symbol of our culture, since Saint John wrote Revelations in a cave, and Plato’s allegory of a cave, and Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer found the wilderness he was seeking in a cave.” These particular caves in the rural South have a long history. They served as hiding places for fugitive slaves along the Underground Railroad, and during the Civil War they were mined for saltpeter to be used for gunpowder. But today they mostly provide refuge for rebellious teenagers who come in and scrawl obscenities and tags all over the walls.



Whetstone, who teaches photography at the University of North Carolina, grew up in Ooltewah, Tennessee, where as a child he first encountered caving. He began the “Post-Pleistocene” project in a cave near his family’s home. “I hadn’t been inside it in 25 years, not since I studied art,” says the photographer, who earned his M.F.A. at Yale in 2001. Given the graffiti’s similarity to both prehistoric cave paintings and the work of artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, he immediately recognized the potential of this undertaking.

For Whetstone, this series provides a commentary on both art making throughout history and man’s encounter with his natural environment. The work was featured in his solo show at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina, and he has had recent ones at the Julie Saul Gallery in New York and the Karyn Lovegrove Gallery in Los Angeles, as well as at the Gibbes Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, through July 19. —*Barbara Pollack*

*Barbara Pollack is a contributing editor of ARTnews.*

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