Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

L'origine del mondo

Published on Il Giornale dell'Arte on September 2026

https://www.ilgiornaledellarte.com/Articolo/Lorigine-del-mondo-La-Art-Gallery-a-cielo-aperto-che-ci-saluta-dal-tempo-profondo

Last June I travelled to Kooramindanjie, in Queensland, in northern Australia, with the artist D Harding. Through his mother's family this is his Country; through his father it is also the country of British cattle farmers who settled there. We camped near the national park and, in the morning, began an eleven-kilometre walk upstream through one of Australia's oldest forests. Towering eucalyptus alternated with cycads, palms and tree ferns. The walk itself transformed the body before we arrived. Only after passing through a narrow cleft between two immense fallen boulders did the sandstone cliff suddenly appear.

The Queensland Parks service calls this place the "Art Gallery". The name seems curiously inadequate. It belongs to the vocabulary of museums, where objects are separated from life and arranged for contemplation. Here one arrives not at a gallery but at a sacred performative communal space. The images are only one component of a place where bodies, stone, water, memory and time converge.

The first wall is covered with negative stencils of hands, forearms, boomerangs, woven basket forms and even the footprints of an emu. A hand or forearm was pressed against the sandstone while another person blew red pigment around it, leaving the negative space of a body that had touched the rock. The red and ochre pigments came from elsewhere within the same Country. Every stencil therefore records not only the presence of a body but also a journey.

The stenciled boomerangs resemble birds gliding with their wings fully extended. I believe Aboriginal people may have invented the boomerang by observing birds in flight, translating the intelligence of their wings into one of humanity's most elegant aerodynamic inventions.

One image stayed with me more than any other. Four forearms intersect to form a strange cross. Two left hands, two right hands. It seems impossible that one individual could have made it. Two people must have embraced each other while pressing their four forearms against the sandstone, as a third person blew red pigment around them. The image records neither an individual nor a portrait but a relationship, an embrace, a collective action. It is the memory of bodies acting together.

Walking with D Harding, I realised that the difficulty of writing about Kooramindanjie is not simply that certain stories are reserved. The question is deeper than secrecy. Throughout human history there have always been forms of knowledge that cease to exist when detached from the bodies that carry them. Today we believe everything can become information: photographed, archived, digitised, absorbed by artificial intelligence. Yet some forms of knowing cannot pass through photographs, books or large language models because they exist only through bodies inhabiting a place.

I now know more than I shall write here. Not because knowledge should be hoarded, but because embodied knowledge ceases to be itself when reduced to information.

The stenciled hands touch the wall. Yet what are they touching beyond its visible surface? What lies inside the cliff? The sandstone is not simply the support for images. It is a threshold. Bodies come from openings in the rock and, in time, return. The cliff contains men's business and women's business, birthing and dying, memory and origin.

Beyond a projecting corner, another long wall is covered with hundreds of engraved vulva forms. They echo the natural openings in the lower sandstone where rivulets and springs emerge. Standing there, I found myself thinking of Courbet's L'Origine du monde. Not because these engravings depict the same thing, but because, as a European shaped by a particular history of images, I recognised another meditation on where bodies come from. Here, however, the landscape itself becomes the body.

The Elders say these images have been here since the beginning of everyone and everything. Some archaeologists propose another chronology measured in thousands of years. But the drawings have been renewed over generations, while older pigment is slowly digested by insects and weathered by deep time. The two statements do not necessarily contradict one another. They simply speak different languages of time. Forty thousand years? Four thousand years? Yesterday? Four hundred million years?

The engravings continue almost until a visitor incised the date "1894" into the sandstone. Beyond that point they become sparse, almost disappearing. Whether coincidence or not, the proximity is impossible to ignore. The rock itself seems to register, in silence, the colonial encounter. It stands not as a monument to a civilisation interrupted by "first contact", but as witness to the interruption of one of the world's oldest continuous ways of inhabiting a specific place on Earth, a way that nevertheless continues today.

Walking back through the forest, I realised that what remained with me was not simply the beauty of the images but the recognition that not every truth wishes to become visible. Some knowledge exists only through walking, touching, waiting, remembering and remaining silent. That, perhaps, is the deepest lesson Kooramindanjie offers to our new century, where technical opacity is cloaked in transparency.