

In *The First Humans* exhibition, there are signs of early human habitation. Coming in from the wintry surroundings of Battersea Park, visitors encounter prehistoric-looking artefacts and new-formed geological features. But far from being ancient, everything has been made very recently by artists.

Since humans arrived in Britain about 800,000 years ago, the climate has fluctuated between tropical and glacial. In 18,000 BC, where Pump House Gallery is now, we would have been surrounded by frozen bogland, with woolly rhinoceroses, mammoths and reindeer.

Many artworks in *The First Humans* are tongue-in-cheek, and several morph prehistory into the present day and also sci-fi. 'That Thing Inside The Thing Outside of The Thing Inside of This Thing', a hand-made boulder by Jack Strange, has set into it screens on which videos play. We see him dressed up as an ape, a caveman and an alien - and in each case, the artist is juggling. He

describes juggling as an activity that "you can't do when you think about it". Is he hinting that, looking far into the past and far into the future, we have our dumbest attributes in common?

In 'What Do You Want More Of?' a small tribe or family is suggested through child- and adult-sized rectangles of cardboard, with added gemstone 'eyes'. It's telling that the artist has chosen Ikea-age packaging material and new-age talismans (which, in the artist's words, "serve to solidify our need or want"). Is he proposing here that humans amount to little more than the drive to consume and the habit of disposal?

Vidya Gastaldon's drawings suggest all kinds of dawnings, spawnings and supernatural events. In 'Ulephant', a landscape is multiplying, dividing like a cell; spores and growths rise and fall; a human breast and an elephant are caught in swirling matter. In 'Être Assis' ('Be Seated'), a plume of gas rises up from underground; from it dangles a bloody, bodily mass; at the 'head' is an all-seeing eye and also some rather comical cheeks and ears. These drawings seem to pitch us into the age-old quest to understand the world's origins - that contest between science, religion and folk imagination. Is our genesis conjectured here as - somehow - having involved all of this at once? On the first floor is Caroline Achaintre's 'Zibra', a large wall hanging. Its markings seem to trigger a

primitive response deep in our nervous systems, tugging at an instinct for hunting, perhaps. Are humankind's origins in Africa being set in play? Also, 'Zibra' has the look of something ceremonial: shield-shaped, chevroned, tasselled, it might adorn a tribal leader, or could be used to ornament a cave. But then again, and teasingly, what we are looking at has been made using a humble, tufted-rug, hobby-craft process – its stray ends make it casually unfinished-looking, even.

Salvatore Arancio's 'ah ah' resembles a newly laid-down sedimentary rock-form that in turn looks like a human appendage, of the kind that was worshipped by certain stone-age societies. It also bears a similarity to coprolite (or fossilised poo), highly prized and closely studied by archaeologists. At the same time, the sculpture has a metallic glamour; it is outlandish and sci-fi. In another work, 'Les Andes', this time on paper, the artist has inserted some impossibly elegant, tapering peaks in the famous South American mountain range. Is the suggestion that long ago, before time blunted its edges, the world was fantastical, sexy, psychedelic?

Up on the next floor, Ben Rivers' film, 'The Creation As We Saw It', is a portrait of villagers from one of the longest established populations on earth, on a South Pacific Island. We learn about their creation myths: how men and women came

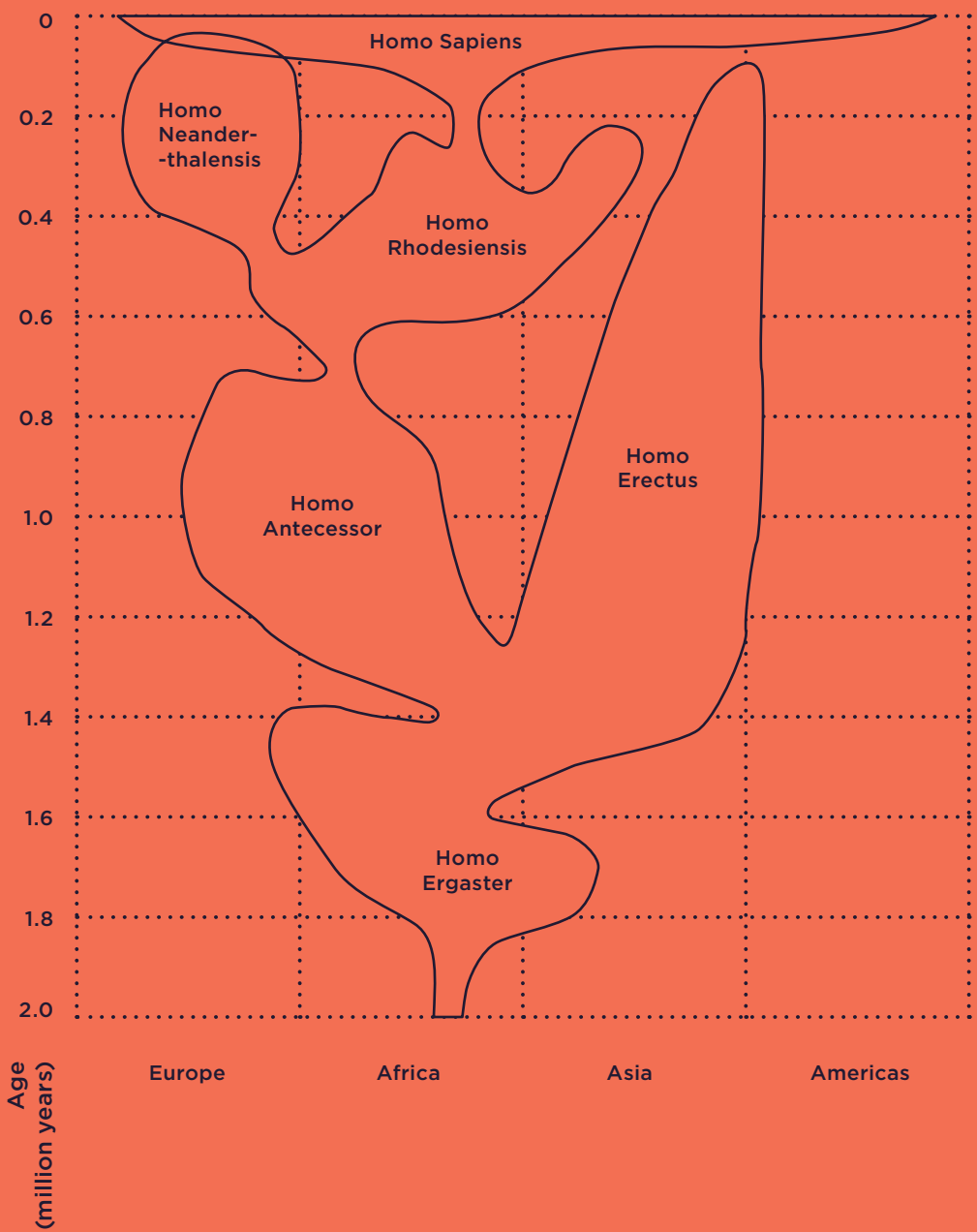
into being; the invention of fire; the origination of the order of animals. We also hear tales of a great flood, and about a migrating volcano. What is striking is that the villagers live under this volcano, exactly where their creation stories took place – in many ways just as in ancient times, in straw huts, alongside their pigs. And yet they also live in a world of newspapers, mobile phones and sports shirts. The villagers' cosmos – their inner and outer life – is one of astonishing magnitude and reach.

Above this is Andy Harper's installation 'The Threefold Law'. This complex, symmetrical, two-dimensional form is brilliantly coloured and ferociously patterned. It is tribal in feel: a mighty power or deity given material form, perhaps? The title of this artwork was taken from a 1960s Californian cult combining witchcraft with karmic wisdom and homespun truths. In the stairwell, Andy Harper's series of mask-like mono-prints, called 'Priests and Butchers', conjure with face paint, feathered headdresses and other forms of disguise and display.

Are you fortified? Do you feel more yourself, somehow? Ready now to face the freezing Wandsworth bogland outside once more? (A.K.)

For information about prehistoric Wandsworth:

http://www.wandsworth.gov.uk/info/200064/local_history_and_heritage/123/story_of_wandsworth/2



Earth is more than 4.5 billion years old. About 2 million years ago, the first true humans, Homo erectus, emerged in Africa. Our own species, Homo sapiens, appeared on the same continent only about 100,000 years ago.

For much of the time, Britain was connected to the rest of Europe by a wide strip of land. This allowed migrations of humans and animals from Africa to Britain on foot. The earliest known human presence in Britain was about 800,000 years ago, with the arrival of the Neanderthals. Homo sapiens followed somewhere around 35,000 years ago — and it is thought that we differ very little from those people in many of our attitudes and impulses.

These human populations came and went, however, driven south or wiped out by successive ice ages — Neanderthals becoming extinct about 40,000 years ago. Homo sapiens achieved a permanent foothold in Britain only as recently as 12,000 years ago.

Much of this information is very new to us. Excavations of recently discovered sites and re-examinations of others have revealed fossils, ancient tools and cave drawings, and prehistoric geological strata and terrains. In addition to this, archaeologists have had the use of twenty-first century technologies such as computer modelling of DNA.

In the past few years and months, quite a number of artists – with no obvious connection to each other – have been making prehistoric-looking objects and primeval-looking landscapes. Why this tendency?

Has the new surge of archaeological information, conveyed in blockbuster museum exhibitions, and in numerous books, newspaper articles and TV programmes, captured artists' imaginations?

Is conceptual art on the wane, and an excitement about raw materials on the rise? Does getting stuck into making things again seem primitive, enlivening?

Does the knowledge that our brains are fundamentally the same create a buzz between today's artists and artists of prehistory? Is there an unchanging sense of enjoyment in the moment when clay, or rock, or paint, is transformed by the human hand? Does engraving a cave wall 14,000 years ago equate with pushing paint around in a studio in 2015?

Or is the more significant link that pre-history and art are (for different reasons) essentially unknowable?

On the other hand, is a crisis of confidence with our society making us curious about other ways of inhabiting the world? Are issues such as climate change and population growth changing the time-span of what we need to know about and connect with?

Do these artists who make 'contemporary prehistoric' art express at some level the fantasy of starting over again? And in this vein, could they be venting the apocalyptic sense we have of ourselves as destructive and tragic, as very possibly the last humans?

But finally, if these artists seem to prompt those bigger social and environmental questions, can they provide answers? Does art do this?