

The image features three fossilized rock specimens arranged vertically. The top specimen is a dark, angular rock with a small, segmented fossil. The middle specimen is a larger, lighter-colored rock with a prominent, elongated fossil. The bottom specimen is a dark, angular rock with a small, segmented fossil. The title 'Aetas Praehistorica' is overlaid in large, bold, black sans-serif font.

Aetas Praehistorica

Jan Dotřel

Aetas Praehistorica

The Origins of the Earth / The Creation of Life / The Beginnings of Humanity

Jan Dotřel

with special guests:

Oldřich Th. Uttendorfský Collection

Qubus Design studio (Jakub Berdych Karpelis and Josef Tomšej)

Eva Eisler

Vladimír Škoda

Milan Houser

Tomáš Medek

Adam Kašpar

Štěpánka Sigmundová

& Zdeněk Burian

Jan Dotřel's exhibition *Aetas Praehistorica* is a result of his long-term research. After projects dedicated to astronomy, he turns to the Earth's past – specifically, geology and palaeontology. The exhibition is divided following three geological periods: Hadean – the creation of the Earth; Archeozoic – the birth of life; and Cenozoic – the beginnings of humankind. For this ambitious and thematically broad project, Jan decided to make use of both of his professions – artist and curator. The exhibition therefore includes his photographs along with works by invited guests, frequent collaborators of Kvalitář. Most of these artists have created works specifically for the *Aetas Praehistorica* exhibition, or else they make work that is closely tied to the natural sciences.

As I suggested above, Jan's interest in science is long-standing, aiding him in his search for complex, thematically composed exhibition series. He uses science as if it were his interlocutor in a Platonic dialogue, deeply respectful of its findings and extending its language and visuality. At the same time, he is fascinated by areas in which science finds no satisfactory answers. With every new discovery, science does not in fact fill in the gaps; rather, it opens up new fields in the domain of unknowing. Before the study of geology, we had no concept of the abysses of terrestrial time. With our knowledge of the age of the Earth and geological time, we suddenly find ourselves faced with the fragmentary nature of the discoveries and a vague sketch of what the Earth could have looked like. This picture, however, will never be complete, and with every new discovery we find out that we had no idea how much we do not know. Jan is fascinated by this

tension; for him, science is a means to goad his imagination and speculate on the ultimate questions.

Jan Dotřel's photography focuses on representations of the landscape. In *Aetas Praehistorica*, however, he also explores microscopic and studio photography. An object that keeps reappearing in Jan's work is the sphere. In the artist's universe, the sphere is the elementary unit of all matter and the universe, representing the most perfect of forms, possessing a cosmological dimension. While on earlier photographs (such as those of the *Deeply Ordered Chaos* exhibition, which took place at Holešovická Šachta in 2018), the spheres were arranged to form Platonic solids, or else symbolically represented planets seen from space (*Other Worlds*, Ateliér Josefa Sudka, 2020), the current exhibition sees them connected into crystalline and molecular structures. Their similarity to chemical models is not hidden; quite the contrary, it is put to work in several photographs.

Landscape plays a specific role in Jan's photographs. He meticulously selects subjects in respect to the theme he is working on. His use of denatured landscapes, such as quarries and deserts, alludes to the conditions that existed on Earth before the development of life, as well as to the period in which life began transforming the planet. In this respect, his method can be described as pertaining to speculative realism, or, in the words of philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, an empirically explored reality we have no access to and can only speculate on. Jan's exploration of the themes of deep time and of making these phenomena present thus follows a fascination with science, which legitimises and underpins the themes of his photographs.

The specific visuality Jan Dotřel works with approaches a laboratory or museum aesthetic. Studio representations of objects, including exclusive collection specimens, meteorites, rocks, and fossils of ancient natural materials, are created against the background of a three-dimensional Cartesian grid. This is one form of the view of universalism, which places all phenomena and things into a single unit system. Their anchoring in physical reality, however, often creates a mysterious tension that topples this exactitude.

The *Aetas Praehistorica* exhibition is a probe into the past of Planet Earth, as well as a probe into the thinking of Jan Dotřel, who brings together his ideas as both photographer and curator, all against the background of science, with which he sets in motion an artistic polemic.

Jozef Mrva ml.