







One of the two toolkits excavated at Blombos. Image courtesy of Grethe Moëll Pedersen & Christopher S. Henshilwood 2011

Images on the intro and outro pages are stills from the animation *Perlemoen*. Macro photographs by Petro Keene 2020

In South Africa, the marine snail with this hypnotically beautiful shell is called perlemoen, after the Dutch name *paarlemoer* meaning ‘mother of pearl.’ Its binomial name is *Haliotis midae*, and as one of five native South African abalone or sea ear species, perlemoen is chosen as the country’s national shell. Two *Haliotis midae* shell toolkits were found in the Blombos Cave.

# LIGHT—DARKNESS—LIGHT

Geir Harald Samuelsen

The animated artwork *Perlemoen* represents a unique encounter between contemporary art and archaeology—across time, space and continents. The working process between Elin Tanding Sørensen (Norway) and Petro Cecilia Keene (South Africa), has been one-of-a-kind: Elin, who at that moment was deeply buried in completing her doctoral thesis, discovers the haunting history and aesthetic qualities of the marine snail abalone (Haliotidae), and comes up with an idea for a video: an artwork being difficult to realize without having the opportunity to interact with the shell in its natural habitat along South Africa’s rocky shore. Archaeologist, Petro, sitting in her house in Cape Town close to Smitswinkel Bay, was likewise deeply engaged in the writing of a paper on Anthropomorphism. Both were confined to their homes due to the Corona pandemic. Both were taking part in the artistic research project *Matter, Gesture and Soul*. Elin contacted Petro, and over a period of a few months, they developed *Perlemoen*, a video of intertwined and hypnotic images of abalone shells, accompanied by a textual reflection on the shell’s significance both spiritually, artistically and ecologically, as described by archaeologists studying early human relationship to nature and the development of a material culture.

“Abalone shells connect us emotionally to our ancient distant past”

The opening sentence of their joint text *Perlemoen*, sets the tone for the work’s expressive ambition and perspective. The creative process is significant and becomes metaphorical: Petro’s photographs of the shell’s lustrous interior travel through the digital darkness, from the beach in Smitswinkel Bay to Elin’s laptop at Nesodden. Much like the remarkable find of ancient abalone shells—excavated at Blombos Cave in South Africa—have been travelling from the hands of our ancestors, who used them as containers for ochreous pigment compounds, to the researcher’s examining gaze under a microscope. A journey of 100,000 years through several layers of soil all the way to the museum’s illuminated display cabinets and the researcher’s laboratories. This is a movement from light via buried earthly darkness and back to light again.

Presumably, our ancestors were captivated by the suggestive radiance and beauty of the shells and their mysterious aura. Perhaps they looked into the future, towards our reality? When we study the shell today, we are transported back in time towards an obscured existence: as if the past can be glimpsed through a fog arising from the play of iridescent colors, which in themselves form abstract landscapes and worlds. No wonder, the shells have played a role as regalia in rituals through time. So, if we metaphorically turn our gaze 180 degrees, maybe we too can grasp our future selves in the shell’s shiny mother of pearl—through yet another time travel like the imaginative journey our ancestors made 100,000 years ago. Their way of life and thinking will forever remain hidden. Nevertheless, perhaps the mesmerizing shells can be perceived as carriers of signals, like a loudspeaker membrane, converting weak signals from a future that resonate with our souls.

Examining a lustrous abalone shell, or sitting in front of abstract engravings made by early humans, like the ones in the Fontainebleau forest, is both mind-expanding and a profound experience—as the artwork *Perlemoen* reflects. Going forward, we will keep searching for new meeting points: new encounters within art and history, between people, matter and culture. Hopefully we may learn more about the art of capturing ancient signals that might lead us towards a better future. Strengthening our presence in an effort to approach and convey their meaning and bringing them to life—possibly incorporating this wisdom from the past into our contemporary life and sensibilities.