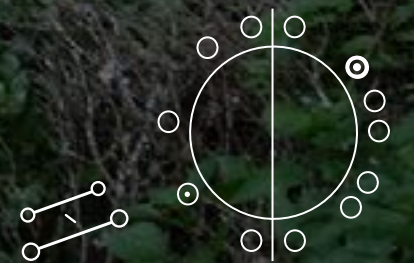


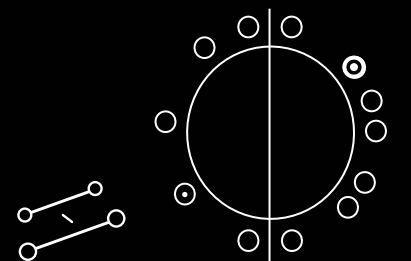
TWELVE EARTHS \ ABRIGO DO LAGAR VELHO  
NOVEMBER 14 2023



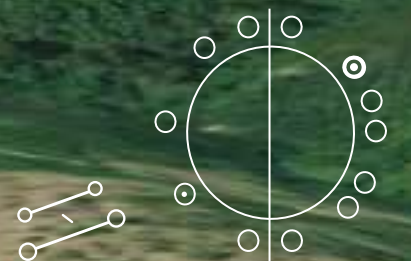
Fathomers is excited to announce Abrigo do Lagar Velho as the second site in artist Michael Jones McKean's long-form planetary sculpture *Twelve Earths*. This rock shelter, visited and occupied by humans for tens of thousands of years in the Lapedo Valley of Portugal's District of Leiria, contains one of the most significant archaeological findings of the past century: the 29,000-year-old remains of a ceremoniously buried four-year-old child whose discovery helped change our perceptions of what it means to be human.



The announcement also marks the beginning of McKean's tenure as Artist-in-Residence at the Museu de Leiria and at the Centro de Interpretação do Abrigo do Lagar Velho, where he will be working to develop an artwork and a series of activations and programs related to Abrigo do Lagar Velho over the years ahead.

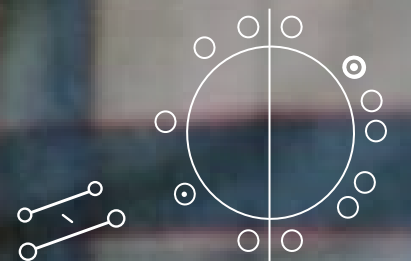


McKean's *Twelve Earths* [c. 2017-2029] is an unprecedented multidisciplinary endeavor exploring radical interconnectivity along a 25,000-mile circular path, linking 12 diverse locations around the planet. Together, these locations propose an emerging commons to practice creative intimacy, empathy, connection, and communion with Earth.



In the summer of 2022, McKean and Fathomers announced the project's first site: a cluster of powerful astronomical observatories nested in Chile's arid Andean mountains, including the new Vera C. Rubin Observatory where McKean is now Artist-in-Residence, as well.

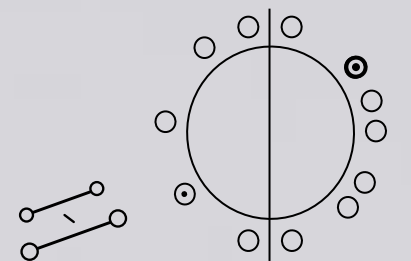
"The first two sites of *Twelve Earths* beautifully encapsulate our species' search for who we are and where we came from," says Stacy Switzer, Curator and Executive Director of Fathomers. "A telescope, an ancient burial site—each wrestles with our place in the universe, each is suffused by uncertainty, hope, and a longing for comprehension."



Discovered in 1998 at what is known now as Abrigo do Lagar Velho, the nearly intact skeleton—known colloquially as the Lapedo Child—provides a crucial physical link that advances and complicates our understanding of human evolution. Before genomic testing existed, the child's mosaic-like skeletal morphology already questioned the widely accepted theory that Neanderthals and modern humans could not have interbred. The child's combination of traits—now accepted as evidence of interbreeding—underscores the complexities of the cultural and biological processes involved in the emergence of modern humankind.



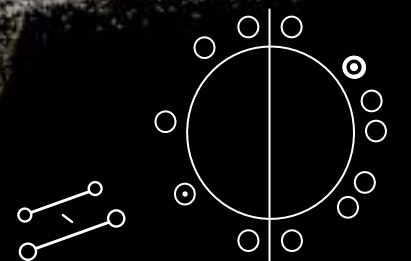
The excavation of the grave site also revealed an elaborate, ritualized burial. The child, wrapped in a shroud painted with red ochre pigment, was laid to rest on charred branches of pine. The child wore a necklace with two shell pendants and a headdress made from animal teeth perforated carefully by hand. A young rabbit was placed on the child's body. Although the nature of the child's death may remain forever unknown, the burial and its mysteries encode a clarion, out-of-time message of care, mourning, symbol, and ceremony, emplacing the child in a continuum of birth, life, and death.





About this continuum, McKean says:

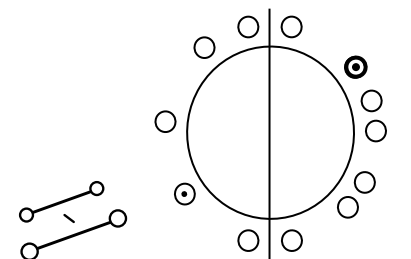
“There are moments when we realize that our lives, in all their fine detail, are connected to a commons of human experience—that life itself is more universally experienced than we might ever imagine. This site preserves this idea, encapsulating it as a message: a beautiful reminder of connection to each other across time, customs, language, and space.”





Vânia Carvalho, the Coordinator of the Museu de Leiria, says:

“The Lapedo Child tells us about affection and protection, about love and loss, death and life—about us as humankind. We are excited that Michael and his project *Twelve Earths* will help create a bridge to people unfamiliar with the stories of Abrigo do Lagar Velho and see to it that this special location is kept alive in our minds.”

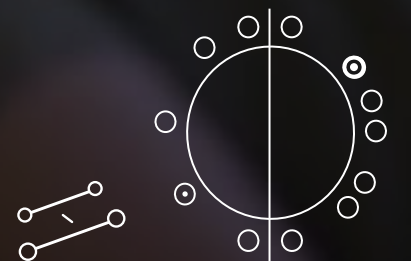


*Twelve Earths'* long-form, discursive processes are a form of art-making itself, one aimed at generating new models of knowing, new durations of artistic and social engagement across both hyper-local and planetary scales. Speaking of this in relation to Abrigo do Lagar Velho, McKean says:

“Visiting Abrigo do Lagar Velho over years, a simple but profound story emerges: here, at a small plot of earth not much bigger than a living room, for at least 1000 generations, people return. We know this by the things we have found. By the things they left behind. In the case of the child—the most precious thing imaginable.”

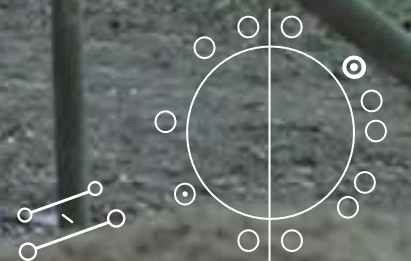


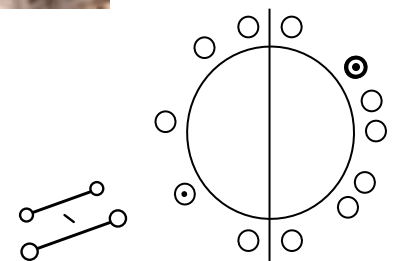
For the last three years, McKean has done fieldwork at the site, shadowing the ongoing archaeological work there. Over the next six years, McKean's work will continue to evolve through deep sharing and collaboration with the people cast as stewards of the site. "The archaeologists returning here for 25 years are poets of the ground, caretakers of its mysteries," McKean says. "Uncovering, preserving, measuring, cataloging, remembering: a care practice of deep seeing, of recovery."



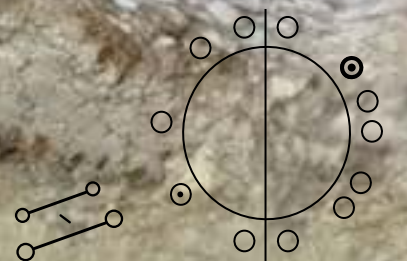
Ana Maria Costa, an archaeologist who began working at Abrigo do Lagar Velho in 2012, says:

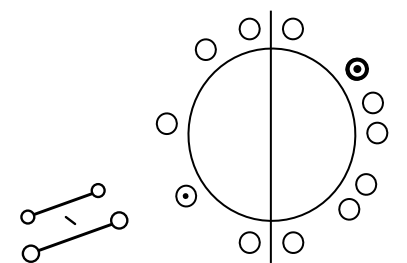
“After years of online conversation, in 2021, Michael began visiting us full of curiosity, eager to learn more about the secrets still to be unraveled and the multidisciplinary work being done. Michael quickly became part of the team, bringing new ideas to Lagar Velho, adding to our scientific perspectives his artistic point of view.”





Since the discovery of the child—now a designated National Treasure of Portugal—Abrigo do Lagar Velho has continued to be studied, yielding rich archaeological discoveries. In the coming months and years, in parallel with the development of other *Twelve Earths* sites, McKean will be collaborating with archaeologists, museologists, municipal stakeholders, and more at Abrigo do Lagar Velho to create a sculptural activation addressing questions of time, ceremony, and kinship over 1,000 generations, while helping to preserve the site into the future.

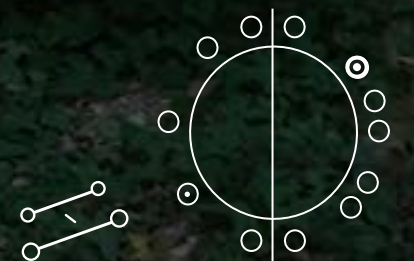






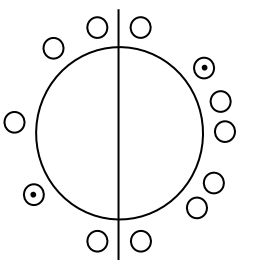
In parallel with this announcement, *Twelve Earths'* website [TWELVEEARTHS.COM](https://TWELVEEARTHS.COM) has been refined and expanded, including a dedicated site page for Abrigo do Lagar Velho, in collaboration with A Lot of Moving Parts, a design studio based in New York City.

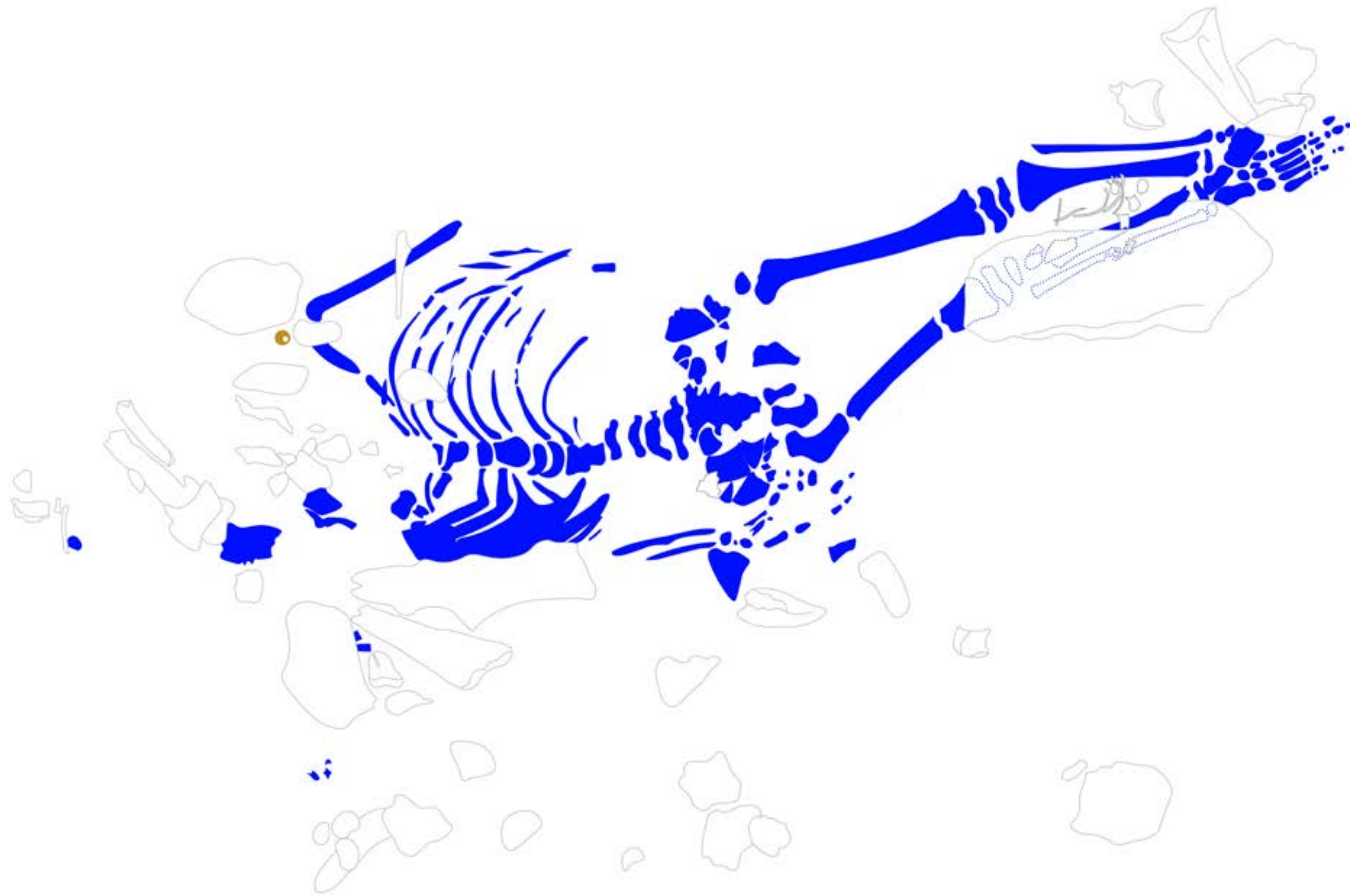
In 2024, McKean and Fathomers will announce *Twelve Earths'* third site, continuing a chain of announcements over the long arc of the project.



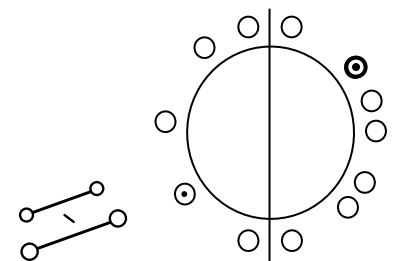
**FAQ: What is *Twelve Earths*?** *Twelve Earths* [c. 2017–2029] is a planetary sculpture exploring radical interconnectivity along a 25,000-mile circular path, linking 12 diverse locations around the planet. Together, these locations form an emergent commons to practice creative intimacy, empathy, and communion with Earth—its matter, histories, temporalities, and life in all its manifold expressions interweaving us all. **Who is making *Twelve Earths*?** The project is led by artist Michael Jones McKean with critical, long-term support by Fathomers, a creative research institute based in Los Angeles, California in the United States. Working alongside McKean are a number of international thinkers and practitioners from the sciences, arts, philosophy, government, history, business, technology, philanthropy, and more. **Who is the project for?** *Twelve Earths* is an artwork that operates at a planetary scale, forging hyper-local connections with partners and individuals at each of the 12 sites, while also building a decentralized audience—people interested in art, ecology, the sciences, geopoetics, and more—who might not be geographically near the ring. A central value of *Twelve Earths* is to hold connections across disciplines, backgrounds, and borders, centering relationship-building as an organic process. As such, these connections might coalesce in myriad forms and scales: from a simple conversation after an event, a group visiting a site, or a volunteer effort to remediate a grass plain. The project attempts to dissolve the theatrical distinction of ‘actor’ and ‘audience,’ enfolding them as one. **Is *Twelve Earths* a sculpture?** Yes. Early on in the project’s development, McKean, a sculptor by training, imagined Earth as a natural human threshold—a common plane of shared material existence that we ourselves are composed of, and also bound within. This materiality, in all its recombinant potential,

forms an alchemic foundry of Earthly possibility, acknowledging that all matter exists in a state of ‘becoming.’ The project imagines sculpture as an expanded creative tool, one of deep learning tied to emphatic rituals with people, matter, making, and transformation. **Why 12 sites?** *Twelve Earths* lives in communion with mythic, folkloric, and spiritual traditions that celebrate interconnectivity. Accordingly, the number 12 has held significance in cultures around the world, showing up in everything from timekeeping systems to musical notes, astrological houses, counting systems, magic symbolism, and much more. **How were the locations determined?** Determining 12 sites, each linked formally along a continuous path around the globe, required 3 years of research. The process began with the development of a coordinate database hosting thousands of global locations that each relayed different chapters of Earth’s larger story. An algorithm was then developed to sift through the database spatially, drawing millions of paths, or rings, around the Earth. Out of 67 million potential routes, a handful of rings emerged that, against geographic odds, connected a few locations in our database. These few dozen rings were studied by hand over many months to reveal 4 rings—each remarkable, strange, mysterious, and tonally idiosyncratic—that were then studied in more granular detail. Through this thorough research, supported by conversations with partners around the world, *Twelve Earths*’ ring path gradually and gracefully emerged. **When is it happening?** Currently. Initially developed in 2017, *Twelve Earths* will continue to ‘unfold’ across 12 years until 2029. At this point, the project will then ‘enfold’ over an additional 12 years, reaching its full articulation by September Equinox of 2040. By design, the work exists in different forms indefinitely, continuing to pose questions along deeper timelines in the future.





LINE DRAWING OF THE EXCAVATION INCLUDING FAUNAL BONES AND SHELL PENDANT



**Why take so long to finish an artwork?** *Twelve Earths* takes cues from the natural speed of the planet. As a team, we are prioritizing building slow, respectful dialogue with local stakeholders at each site. Relationship building takes precedence over predetermined outcomes, allowing true conversations—and friendships—to blossom. We think of slowness not as an obstacle to surmount, but as a care practice that deepens engagement and helps us to be in right relationship with each other and the Earth.

**When will the sites be revealed?** Though all twelve sites were determined in 2019, their announcements to the public will be staggered with locations being revealed in the years leading up to 2029. Two sites have been announced so far. The first location, announced on the equinox of September 22, 2022, is Cerros Pachón and Tololo. Located in the Coquimbo region of Chile's Andes Mountains, this site houses a cluster of powerful telescopes destined to capture the most complete map of the universe ever created. The second site, announced one year later on the equinox of September 23, 2023, is Abrigo do Lagar Velho. This rock shelter, located in the Lapedo Valley of Portugal's District of Leiria, contains the 29,000-year-old remains of a four-year-old child that questions our perceptions of what it means to be human. The third location announcement is forthcoming in March 2024.

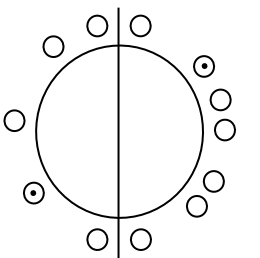
**How do I experience *Twelve Earths*?** *Twelve Earths* exists as 12 physical locations whose connections are being articulated sculpturally and poetically. While it is certainly possible—and would be rewarding—to visit each *Twelve Earths* location, the artwork can be experienced without any travel at all. Local and regional programming will be developed over the longer arc of the project. Participation, however one may define it, may encompass events hosted by affiliated institutions or virtual opportunities for engagement wherever you and your devices may be. While *Twelve Earths* is deeply rooted in specific, singular places, it also exists through ideas, which allows it to be experienced from

numerous vantage points. *Twelve Earths* by and large is a cognitive antenna that helps modulate concrete aspects of the Earth into signals—stories—that help re-mythologize place, re-worlding our conception of Earth.

**Is there an archive?** Yes. The project's physical archive is currently housed at McKean's studio and will be relocated to the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art after the project's completion. The archive acts as a crumb trail to the project's origins, its methodologies, early and ongoing conversations, source materials, and library, as well as location research, history, geology, current events, and more. A curated archive will also exist and continue to be updated on the *Twelve Earths* website. At each site, a number of artworks are being developed, some with an eye toward long durations, in effect serving as an in situ planetary archive.

**How is *Twelve Earths* being funded?** *Twelve Earths* has maintained critical support from Fathomers since 2017. The project has also received early generous support from a number of organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts, Sable Systems, WeTransfer, Blueprint Pictures, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. *Twelve Earths*' unusual form, both as a large-scale artwork wedded to a planetary body, and as one temporally stretched out over non-traditional time horizons, creates funding challenges still to be solved.

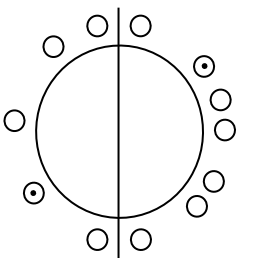
**How can I become involved?** In many cases, the best way to experience *Twelve Earths* is through deep and active involvement. An artwork at this scale and complexity requires the uplift and support of many voices and skill sets: engineering, material sciences, bio-sciences, geology, wayfinding, philanthropy, and so much more. If this sounds like you and you'd wish to learn more about ways to contribute to the work itself, or if you'd like to simply receive occasional updates and advance notice of public events and announcements, please be in touch at [office@twelveearth.com](mailto:office@twelveearth.com). If you wish to explore ways to help lift the project through financial support, we are also eager to speak with you.



**MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN** (b. Micronesia, lives/works in the US and France) is a sculptor whose work explores the nature of objects in relation to folklore, technology, anthropology, and geography. McKean has received numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Nancy Graves Foundation Award, and has lectured and shown his work extensively around the world. He is currently an Associate Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Sculpture + Extended Media Department; a Contributing Editor for Art Papers; and the Artist-in-Residence of the Vera C. Rubin Observatory, the Museu de Leiria, and the Centro de Interpretação do Abrigo do Lagar Velho.

**FATHOMERS** founded in 2016, is a creative research institute based in Los Angeles, California dedicated to producing sites and encounters that challenge us to live and act differently in the world. They nurture the ideas of die-hard dreamers, cultivate projects whose horizons span decades, and enlist expansive thinkers across disciplines. In all their work, they aspire to enlarge the limits of scale, scope and support for artist-led projects.

**ABRIGO DO LAGAR VELHO** is a famed archeological site located in the Lapedo Valley in central Portugal. Most notably, ritually buried remains of an Upper Paleolithic child—The Lapedo Child—were discovered within a limestone rock shelter in 1998. The child, showing a mixture of both Neanderthal and modern human traits, helped open new portals toward understanding human evolution, as well as ancient care practice unfolding for a thousand generations. For the last 25 years, the site has continued to reveal important clues about humankind.



TWELVE EARTHS

Doce Tierras

十二地球

Ip-ki Te-ki Nok-in Au

Tekau Ma Rua Nga Whenua

Doze Terras

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Двенадцать Земеля

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дванаццаць зямель

Mëbêngôkre kabĕn

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For more information about *Twelve Earths*, McKean's work at Abrigo do Lagar Velho or how to become involved in the project, please visit [TWELVEEARTHS.COM](http://TWELVEEARTHS.COM), or reach out to [YES@FATHOMERS.ORG](mailto:YES@FATHOMERS.ORG).

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