



# MYTHOLOGIES

*Charles Avery's entire practice is built on the creation of a new world, an island place where cults and gulls and islanders all play their part. Anthony Spira explores its boundaries*



Previous page: Untitled (View of Onomatopoeia from Sea), detail, 2008, ink jet print, pencil and gouache on paper  
 Above: Untitled (Herd of Alephs), 2008, pencil, ink and gouache on paper



Above: 'King in Exile', 2008, taxidermy and mixed media in perspex on plinth

Charles Avery has harnessed a fertile imagination to a realist style of drawing since his earliest exhibitions. He has created, for example, the genealogy of 'the Haselswon dynasty, a very dear family who never existed'. The numerous drawings that make up 'The Life and Lineage of Nancy Haselswon', 1999, evoke family holiday snaps, with slender, angular figures engaged in games, walks, discussions and a range of habitual group activities.

These figures are rendered in what has perhaps become Avery's trademark style, alternating thin, effortless lines with dense, vertical strokes sparingly smattered with bold, usually, primary colours. Although bristling with character and energy, Avery's anachronistic style of drawing lends a detached if not doleful air to this family portrait, mixing nostalgia and irony in a send-up of a stereotypically 'happy family'.

In his next major project, the 'Art Atom', 2003, he goes further, drawing on science and philosophy to create a treatise on infinity and the illusory nature of space and time. He concocts a fable around the tetrahedron, 'the first member of the order of Euclidean solids' and 'the simplest that could,

hypothetically speaking, exist', as the artist explains in the preface of *The Islanders: An Introduction*, (Parasol Unit/Koenig Books, 2008).

This project depicts 'a cast of people living in a world that upholds the rules of curvilinear two-dimensionality in which Euclidean geometry is sacrilege'. Emerging through the drawings, a tale of intrigue and deception is carried out by a group of monkish clerks whose slender elegance is delineated by long, wispy tunics covering their feet. Clothes and objects are portrayed with a translucent quality that provides a sense of energy and transience despite the figures' detailed hands and mannered facial expressions, in sharp contrast to the impossible object of their contemplation: an impenetrable, brightly coloured and weighty tetrahedron.

Charles Avery's latest project *The Islanders*, set in motion in 2004 and the subject of an exhibition at Parasol Unit in London, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, is devised around the accumulation of an ever increasing number of relics, specimens, maps, drawings and testimonies that amount to a fictional universe. The exhibition is like an ethnographer's chamber or a cabinet of curiosities, with all the

hallmarks of a serious anthropological study, from artists' impressions and taxidermied examples of improbable species down to sealed formaldehyde jars and descriptive, brass labels tacked onto picture frames. The precision and clarity of line in the grid-like cabinets that structure the room in the large drawing, 'Avatars', is offset by dense, intricate and textured pencil work depicting woven baskets, wooden furniture and the waistcoat of a hunched, central figure, a taxidermist, vet or perhaps artist, who appears at the centre of this enterprise.

In the context of the exhibition, this is a chamber within a chamber, part store, part laboratory and part artist's studio. Familiar species such as squirrels, turtles and armadillos, for example, are kept on the left of the drawing while we are introduced to some of the many 'Beings' that populate the island on the right. These include 'Gob-S-Hites', 'the lowest of all the castes... whose bodies are like plucked chickens, with withered arms, and faces like old men...'; 'Silverbobs', like slender cats with a nasty, grey, matted pelt, who 'have not the slightest respect for Humanity'; the fluttering 'Dehedra' whose 'wings are so thin that they only have one side'; as well as writhing, living, serpentine grass. All of these

'Beings' have a particular character and function within the island so that the word 'Avatars' implies that these creatures are the embodiment of a certain principle or concept.

These personifications are expounded in a long textual account of this fictional universe that accompanies the drawings and objects in the show. It is here we meet our inquisitive and vulnerable narrator, tentatively named Only McFew, who leads us through the island, from the beach to the pub via the market in Onomatopoeia, the main town and beyond the Plane of the Gods.

Not content with being a simple tour guide, Only McFew is also a hunter who appears in many drawings as a languorous and androgenous figure, often depicted in loose, watery brushstrokes and accompanied here by a restless, waspish dog. A hunter, we are told, is 'a circumspect loner, an eternally hopeful and eternally hopeless individual' who belongs to 'that close order of individuals who uphold the existence of an elusive beast called the Noumenon, even if they believe it cannot be caught.' Hundreds of hunters on the island have been obsessed with catching this Noumenon (a much debated philosophical notion of something

that cannot be perceived by the senses) even though they doubt its very existence despite the artist's impression in the exhibition, of two, faceless, 3-legged Noumena hobbling into the sunset.

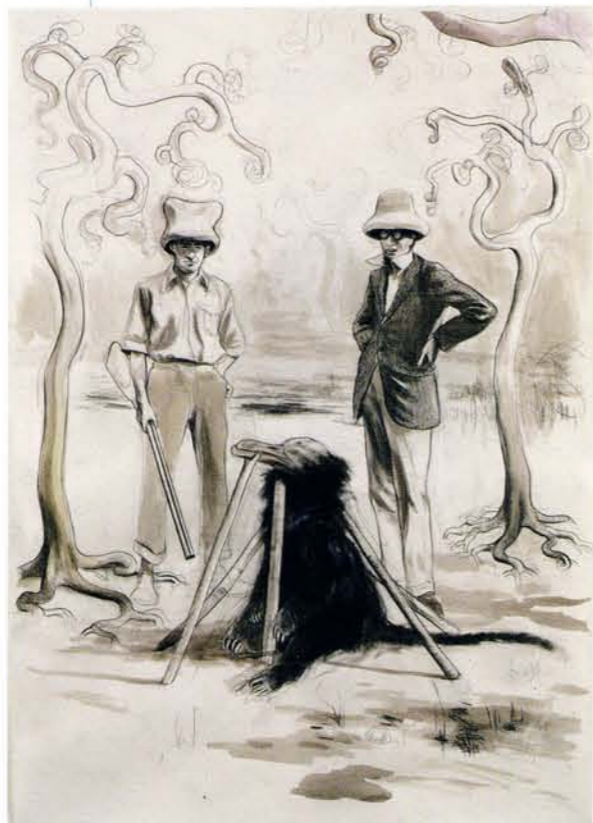
Avery's text describes the two main creeds on the island, promoted by the Positivists who consider the Hunters as heroes and the Rationalists who deride them. 'Although they represent a polarity of opinion, two things they have in common are that they are actively lazy and utterly intellectual. They would rather prove the (non-) existence of the Noumenon through the dialectic than try to find it.'

A portrait of a shady character called Knot Faah hangs in the exhibition alongside a strange necklace and some small dot paintings. Knot Faah, the text reveals, actually claims to have fought with the Noumenon. As well as bearing the scars to prove it, the precious trophy worn round his neck is none other than 'the toenail of the beast I believe to be the Noumenon that all men seek'. As he explains, 'Any time I see a loud-mouthed Rationalist in a bar I go up to him, rip open my shirt and show him the toenail and the scar on my side and that shuts him up.' After his ordeal, Knot Faah apparently retired from exploration to become a painter of dots, his story neatly encapsulating an artists' compulsion to demonstrate principles or prove a position with material objects.

Other characters or features who recur throughout the narrative include; the seductive but platonic Miss Miss who remains oblivious to the narrator's advances, the repulsive and nagging Coscienza, 'the epitome of agony and invoker of guilt' who hobbles around with unknown baggage slung over her shoulder and is often represented in a woodcut print; a speaking seagull named Minuso who triggers another fable; and the Stone Mice that look remarkably like ordinary stones but who are 'part animal, part mineral' and 'whose hearts beat only once every thousand years'.

These embodiments of various principles and propositions that tease out the laws of nature take us to the Plane of the Gods, the residing place of the 'innumerable' deities that compose Avery's humorous and complex mythology. Among them is the elephantine Aleph Nul, the eldest of the Gods who is apparently popular with drug fiends; the August Snakes who stand erect to show off their beards; the insufferable Mr Impossible who was elevated to the Plane of the Gods by three philosophers, arguing about the nature of possibility; the identical twin cousins Theodora and Dorothea, who are the exact opposite of one another; Tobias, a benevolent, seven-foot stoner who is resolved not to get a proper job; and finally, The Darkness That Conceals Only Itself, an abyss, unfathomable nothingness and the ultimate of all the Gods.

The exhibition ends in the 'Eternal Forest', a wall-sized, black and white cartoon-like drawing of a wintry, desolate landscape with broken tree trunks and branches littering the ground. The central panel of the image is proportionately identical to the whole, creating an endless perspective or *mise-en-abime*. Unlike the nearby Eternity Chamber, an austere monochrome cabinet containing a dazzling hall of mirrors, that remains inaccessible at all times



Above left: Untitled (Two Dilletantes), 2008, pencil on paper

so that it can be spied but not physically entered, we are led by the Hunter into the Eternal Forest, north of Descartes' Axiom, from beyond where 'it is not possible to return.' Once entered, this 'forest which repeats its design into eternity in whichever direction one looks... may never be escaped'.

Conventional notions of time and space are consistently questioned throughout Avery's project. Even Aleph Nul, whose name is derived from forms of measuring infinity, almost enacts the Droste effect of an infinitely recurring image with his head replicated in a smaller version on the tip of his trunk and references to the windless Boroboros in Avery's text and Quoro-Quoros on the maps, (evoking the orouboros, an ancient symbol of infinity), a doldrum of stagnant wetland and rotting kelp which separates the Objective from the Subjective. Like the futile quest for the Noumenon, Avery's universe within a universe traps its visitors in a web of visual and philosophical conundrums densely populated with a dazzling cast, where we are caught wandering in limbo, staring into the abyss and flying through The Darkness That Conceals Only Itself.

The Hunter, our unreliable guide through this philosophical labyrinth or allegorical tableau, enacts the ambivalent role of Everyman, somewhere between that of visitor, witness, protagonist, narrator and author. He is also the artist who shaped this journey. As the elaborate text explains, the hunters, on their travels, discover 'many other extraordinary creatures', which they bring back to the real world in order to sell and to 'fund their next expedition', a process that is familiar to artists like Avery whose new creations serve to subsidise further research and production. Peppering his narrative with forensic details this storyteller could also be the central figure



Above: Untitled (Ridable with Red Eye), 2008, pencil and gouache on paper

in the 'Avatars' drawing, that other *mise-en-abime* or chamber within a chamber. The letters on the back of the door to the right of the drawing bear the name 'C Avery', at once shattering an illusion by introducing the real artist and raconteur. This could be the artist's studio, where real and imaginary beings co-exist. Here, caught red-handed, the artist magically infuses life into the extraordinary beings on the right, resuscitating dead animals on the left. He performs, not just as an alchemist, but also as a miracle surgeon breathing life into his fabulous creations.

For the most part, Avery's drawings remain unfinished. They are evocative and atmospheric, but, despite his evident technical facility, they betray the artist's basic distrust of the potential of illusion. Blatant crop lines are abundant in numerous drawings,

sculptures are placed on makeshift tables, and the mountains, for example, are symbolised by coloured tetrahedra, rather than naturalistic impressions.

Nevertheless, these objects are no less 'real' because of it. Although the text announces that on its return to the real world and 'Subjected to the harsh light of Reality the grass withers and dries and the Stone-mouse becomes merely a stone that looks like a mouse,' we are also reminded not to distinguish between the physical and the imaginary, because 'everything,' in the wise words of the inscrutable Miss Miss, 'is real'.

Anthony Spira is curator at Whitechapel Gallery  
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