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# CHARLES AVERY

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In Charles Avery's unsettling and frequently hilarious philosophical allegories, a certain air of Edwardian reserve prevails, and by extension the possibility of its falling away, leaving his etiolated characters flummoxed by the strangeness of the world thus revealed. In a series of drawings such as *The Art-Atom* (2003), eccentric geometries invade the bourgeois salon and are tentatively probed by priggish young men. Neurasthenic women and geriatric grotesques look on, flushed with excitement. It is as if the brittle comic schema of Saki or P. G. Wodehouse had brushed against the abstractions of set theory and particle physics—Avery's universe is a fragile, poised intricacy of competing narrative and conceptual planes.

The metaphysically fanciful mood and milieu of the Scottish-born, London-based artist's earlier work is both circumscribed and ramified in his current, elaborately fictive, project. In 2004, Avery invented an island and began to populate it with gods and monsters, myths and rumors, downtrodden natives and opportunistic invaders. "The



disgusting and ruinously addictive. The island, it transpires, is already a colonial outpost: its natives, the If'en, have been relegated to a subcaste while the government of the kingdom remains thus far occluded.

Depicted in drawings, sculptures and fictional found objects, the natural history and material culture of the island incarnate a dizzying perplex of philosophical problems. Fluttering colored diagrams, the Dihedra, are "beings of infinite finesse. Their wings are so thin that they have only one side." The Noumenon, legendary beasts of Kantian heritage, are tracked by hunters who have never seen one head-on: in Avery's renderings, they slope away furtively on three legs. The island's gods, modeled on a gleaming metal plain, include a circular void, *The Darkness That Conceals Only Itself*, which turns out, according to the hunter, to be only a few feet deep and full of peanut shells. The towering deity *Theodora/Dorothea* is one woman when seen on one's right and another—her "twin cousin"—when seen on the left. *The August Snakes* (cobras with Fu Manchu mustaches) declare themselves tentacular emanations of a single supersnake. Truth, on the island, is a mise en abyme of metaphysical recursions.

As ever with Avery, the literary provenance of "The Islanders" is alternately subtle and blatant. The imaginary kingdom, complete with deathless pachydermic Alephs, immediately conjures the Borges of "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and the temporal vortex of Adolfo Bioy Casares's 1964 novel *The Invention of Morel*. The floating island from *Gulliver's Travels* also famously transports philosophers who are hopelessly immured in absurd conjectures. But Avery's fiction seems closer to more crankishly British precursors such as Edwin A. Abbott's geometrical fiction *Flatland* (1884) or H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896). It is a sly take too on the historical tendency of Anglo-American analytic philosophy to rely (despite its faith in logical purity) on fables or thought experiments to advance its arguments. What gets lost in such stories, though not in Avery's, is the implication of the author in his own invented world.

In the end—and this is really only the beginning, a first foray onto Avery's abstract promontory—"The Islanders" is neither reducible to metafictional capers nor to analytic paradox. The works that insist most here are the ones the visitor reaches last and which don't yet seem to slot easily into the hunter's world picture. A series of drawings, and a single photograph, concerning the islanders' relationship with seagulls seems still airy and unresolved, while the last, startling, sculptural creature—a mammalian *Ridable* with a llama's body, canine muzzle, and scaly avian legs—somehow exceeds its place in the island taxonomy and looks mysteriously self-involved and tragic. —BRIAN DILLON



ABOVE: Charles Avery, *Untitled (Alephs)*, 2008. Pencil, ink, and gouache on paper, 49 x 65½ in.

TOP RIGHT: *Untitled (Installation view of "Duculi")*, 2006, jesmonite and paint. Installation view, Parasol Unit Foundation for Contemporary Art, London, 2008.

Islanders," for which his Parasol Unit show proposed a tentative (if expansive) cartography, will eventually comprise a multivolume encyclopedic guide to this notional territory and the spiral archipelago of which it is part. In 40 drawings of disparate dimensions (most accompanied by deviously deadpan, framed wall texts) and a dozen enigmatic sculptures, Avery has set himself a decadelong challenge: to map an impossible world where paradox is the only orienting principle.

Thrust upon the shore, the artist's narrating avatar is a hunter who hopes to have discovered the island, but is swiftly disabused of his tabula rasa dreams. According to the initial texts, a willowy young woman whom the hunter misnames Miss Miss—in Avery's drawings she is a doleful streak of Virginia Woolfish aspect—rescues him from troubling sounds in the undergrowth and installs him at her apartment, where he is nuzzled by her pets: a trio of doglike creatures with cobra's hoods and handlebar mustaches. Thence he explores the island's only settlement, the town of Onomatopoeia, with its bustling marketplace selling "real pictures of nude women," "stone-mice" that are part animal, part mineral, and Henderson's Eggs: a pickled delicacy both