Wael Shawky
Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo, Fig. 4, 2012. Ink jet print on paper, 24½ x 16½ in.

At the same time, Shawky's use of marionettes and music creates a make-believe, pantomime atmosphere, a sense of contrivance. Figures jerk and bob, their wooden limbs clacking, their strings catching the light, even as they perform historically accurate speeches by popes and counts or indulge in well-attested episodes of cannibalism. Battles, especially, are reduced to absurd, spastic dances, which is probably why the artist instead tends to depict the gruesome aftermath, panning slowly across piles of limp and dismembered corpses—the puppets, ironically, never seeming more lifelike than when portraying dead people.

The point, perhaps, is that actors in history are precisely that: "merely players," to quote Shakespeare, puppets controlled by forces beyond their ken. As such, it's not only history that concerns Shawky but also historiography, for the films' ultimate message is that historical truth is, indeed, unknowable and unstable; that history is more a matter of competing stories and representations, of shifting perspectives in the present as much as the past.

Which is why it's slightly disappointing, then, to see the actual puppets from *The Path to Cairo* exhibited in a large vitrine. Not that their caricatured forms aren't superbly crafted, Shawky having worked with specialist ceramists in France. But displayed as objects, they seem rather too pat, too safe and reified—unlike in the films, where figures take on multiple roles, to the extent that animal puppets even stand in for human characters, and where the feeling is of history being continually reshaped and repurposed.

Fortunately, Shawky's newest film, *Al Araba Al Madfuna II*, 2013, returns to this atmosphere of flux. Part of a series incorporating the magical, medieval-flavored fables of Egyptian writer Mohamed Mustagab, it once again eschews any sort of fixed, accurate representation—in this case, by casting children in the role of grown-up storytellers, complete with comical fake mustaches and gravelly, adult vocal dubs. And the stories they tell, for all their enchanted proceedings, are about storytelling itself—descriptions of other tales being fabricated or moments when the narrative cyclically repeats. Eventually, the sense is of stories becoming untethered, eerily taking over—not so much being spoken as somehow speaking themselves into existence, ceaselessly creating themselves anew. **—Gabriel Coxhead**

LONDON

Charles Avery and Tom Morton

Pilar Corrias // November 20, 2013–January 12, 2014

Charles Avery
Untitled (It Means It Means; Bourgeois, Friedrich, LeWitt, Lichtenstein, Malevich, Morris, Polke, Stieglitz), 2013. Pencil, ink, acrylic, and gouache on paper, 67½ x 90 in.

SINCE 2004, AVERY has been showing explorations of "The Island," chronicling through sculptures, illustrations, and texts its imaginary topography, customs, peculiar characters, and headgear. Its economy and government less fully described, the Island lacks both the cohesive structure of a political utopia and the fantastic intensity of a visionary universe (say, Henry Darger's *In the Realms of the Unreal*). Instead, this fictional land feels like a mere pretense for Avery's creative riffs on philosophy, like the made-up endangered animal known as the Noumenon or the bird/dog demigods with the Borgesian name of Alephs.

Avery's show shares the title ("It Means It Means!") with that of a fictional exhibition devised by curator Tom Morton for the Island's Museum of Art Onomatopoeia. A catalogue provides a list of 29 "exhibited" pieces by Roy Lichtenstein, Bridget Riley, and Caspar David Friedrich, among others. Avery's large works on paper illustrate the exhibition's hang and its visitors' (often bemused) responses to it. His handling of these figures combines anonymity and elements of almost caricatured individuality, like that of a courtroom sketch.

The collaboration between Avery and Morton made for some curatorial jokes: One drawing—a reproduction of a reproduction—depicts Sturtevant's 2004 "repetition" of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's *"Untitled" (America)*, 1994; Tino Sehgal's *This Is Propaganda*, 2002, is included in the catalogue but not illustrated, as per Sehgal's refusal of visual documentation of his works. Indeed, the tone sometimes becomes cartoonish—two attendants smoke surreptitiously behind the wall of Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*, 1946–66; elsewhere, a visitor walks unaware under the stream of Charles Ray's *Ink Line*, 1987.

If the press release positions the fictive status of Morton's show as offering freedom from the practical and economic constraints of exhibition making, and therefore "a suspension of certain curatorial orthodoxies," it's that same remove from reality that also limits the resonance of these scenes. For an artist to arrange for teenagers to climb over Sol LeWitt's *Cubic Construction*, 1971, like an athletic apparatus (as one group appears about to do in one drawing) would be statement-making in a real institution; as pure fantasy, the idea offers only a pretty hollow comedy.

Avery is capable of a quieter humor: In one drawing of the museum's plaza, some of the artist's previous imaginings reappear, including a wall of his wheat-pasted posters, among them several for a mime artist called Dasein. In a show not short on wit, it was the only time I laughed out loud. **—Matthew McLean**

FROM TOP: WAEL SHAWKY AND GALERIE SFEIR-SEMLER; CHARLES AVERY AND PILAR CORRIAS