

CHARLES AVERY

These Waters

GRIMM 202 Bowery, NY
Oct 29, 17 – Jan 07, 18
Opening: Oct 29, 6–8 PM

Since 2004, the Scottish artist Charles Avery (b.1973, Oban) has dedicated himself to the invention of an imaginary island, new corners of which he continues to chart through drawings, sculptures, texts, ephemera and (more rarely) 16mm animations and live incursions into our own world. Known only as 'the Island', Avery's wave-lapped realm is not only a vividly realised fiction, teeming with sights both strange and strangely familiar, it also operates as a petri dish in which the artist tests ideas from the fields of epistemology, aesthetics, mathematics, economics, anthropology, architecture, and beyond. As Avery has said, the Island – with its fantastical flora and fauna, its eccentric cosmology and customs – is 'a place that helps me to think'.

These Waters, Avery's first major solo exhibition in the US, takes liquid as its organising principle, from the seas that surround the Island and its spiraling archipelago of islets (mapped on the dark orb of *Islanders Globe* (2017), to the draughts of liquor that lubricate philosophical debate in its numerous bars and pubs (poured, perhaps, from the bird-like neck of *Untitled (Carafe)* (2014). In a series of drawings, we see tourists from Triangland, an analogue of our own reality, bathing in the rock pools and sandy shallows that abut the Islands' shores, their toes tickled by 'ninth' – sacred, eel-like creatures that might be understood as both the embodiment of the drawn line, and of the point where pure, mono-directional will converges with destiny. These creatures reappear in the sculpture *Untitled (Pool)* (2014), where their dark, glassy forms gather around a plughole in an ornate bronze tub, the centrepiece of the Island's (determinedly inorganic) public gardens, the Jadindagadendar. Watched over by a curious egret, these primitive beings nose blindly about, trapped inside a universe-within-a-universe-within-a-universe, unable to respond to the instincts that propel them ever forward.

If the bathing tourists understand the ninth as vehicles for spiritual uplift (think swimming with dolphins), and visitors to the public gardens see them as objects of philosophical contemplation, for some poorer Islanders they are a natural resource that supports a hardscrabble economic existence.



Charles Avery | *Che Sara Sara Sara* | 2017

Across several drawings, we see fishermen gather up their catch of ninth and sell them, alongside alarmingly human-like fish named murpish, to customers on the Island's quays. We might imagine these creatures served up at Avery's *Untitled (Square Circle table 8 seater)* (2016), an example of the Island's singular taste in domestic furnishings. A collision of two contrary forms, the circle and the square, its lozenge-shaped tabletop speaks, like many of the small details of Avery's imagined world, to a perhaps irresolvable philosophical problem. Look closely, and we discover that table's contrariness also extends to its steel base. Seen in plan, this is a perfect 2 x 1 rectangle. Walk around it, however, and a fluid, circular waveform is revealed. As Edwin Abbott demonstrated in his classic satirical novella *Flatland* (1884), dimensionality – and by extension, what we understand as reality – is all a matter of perspective. We might remember this when looking at another furniture work, *Untitled (Lantern)* (2016). Beaming (or is that dripping?) from its bronze shade and clear acrylic tendrils, waves of light rarely feel this fluid, this wet.

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Charles Avery | *Untitled (Inner Circle, Onomatopoeia Zoo)* | 2016 | Pencil, acrylic, gouache, watercolour and ink on paper | 203.5 x 338 cm | 80 1/8 x 133 1/8 in

Panoramic, alive with visual incident, and peopled by a vast cast of human types, the large-scale drawing *Untitled (Inner Circle, Onomatopoeia Zoo)* (2016) feels poised between Victorian depictions of bustling urban modernity, and an epic set from some lost classic of early cinema. Here, Avery presents us with the great, tower-like aquarium that forms the centrepiece of the Island's zoo, home to a mysterious leviathan that wallows, unseen, within the building's stony, hexagonal tank. This structure is capped with an open-air swimming pool, where the zoo's high-ranking patrons may enjoy the frisson of bathing in close proximity to the sea monster below them. Avery has stated that a vertical channel connects tank and pool, narrow enough not to imperil the swimmers. Do they, then, inhabit 'the same waters' as the leviathan – a creature the Islanders both fear and revere – or does this elaborate structure merely enable a kind of existential titillation, the dipping of a toe in a deeper, darker reality?

Avery's text piece *Untitled (Che Sara Sara Sara)* (2017) translates the 16th-century Spanish heraldic motto (and 20th-century popular song title) 'Que sera sera' into Italian, and presents it as declaration of determinism: what will be, will be. If the text recalls the metaphysics of Baruch Spinoza, and the fading pink ripples the ever-lightening grounds of Roman Opalka's number paintings, then the repeated 'S' form (which resembles the mathematical symbol for infinity) suggests Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of a perennially recurring, self-same universe, the 'Eternal Return'. We should note that *Untitled (Che Sara Sara Sara)* (2017) has also appeared in a number of Avery's drawings of the Island's capital, Onomatopoeia, in the form of poster advertisements pasted to the city's walls. Philosophical entrepreneurs, the Islanders promote rival intellectual positions in much the same way they do the local snack food of choice: jars of disgusting and ruinously addictive Henderson's Pickled Eggs.

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The wallpaper that runs the length of GRIMM's New York exhibition space depicts the 'Perfect Forms', a meteorological phenomenon reported by explorers who have travelled to the Island's extreme North, a place where natural laws and even time itself begins to fray. Recalling Pre-Socratic descriptions of the 'nothing' before there was 'something', or atoms falling through the void, the 'Perfect Forms' are singular, and without size or direction – a rain that travels simultaneously upwards and downwards, on an angled trajectory. Represented here by blue circles, each individual form is identical, all that may be expressed about them is their relationship to one another. Providing a backdrop, and a deep context, to the other works in Avery's exhibition, the 'Perfect Forms' pass seamlessly from one atmospheric state to the next: from spotty rain, to hard rain, to an elegant helix, reminiscent of snowflakes falling on a windless day. These waters are both one thing and many – a squall of particles, and a liquid continuum.

Text by **Tom Morton**, 2017. Writer, curator, and contributing editor of frieze, based in Rochester (UK).

About the Artist

Charles Avery (b. 1973 in Oban, Scotland) lives and works in London and Mull. Selected solo exhibitions include: *Study #15: Charles Avery*, David Roberts Art Foundation, London (UK), 2017; *What's the matter with Idealism?*, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague (NL), 2015; *fig-2²⁵⁰ Charles Avery*, ICA Studio, London (UK), 2015; *Vitrines: Charles Avery, L'Antenne, Le Plateau*, FRAC Ile de France, Paris (FR), 2013; *Onomatopoeia, Part 1*, EX3 Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, Florence (IT); travelling to Kunstverein, Hanover (DE) and FRAC Ile-de-France, Paris (FR), 2010; *The Islanders: An Introduction*, Parasol Unit, London (UK), travelling to Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam (NL) and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (UK), 2008.

Recent selected group exhibitions include: *PLURIVERSE - 4 imaginary ethnological studies*, La Panacée, Montpellier (FR), 2017; *Art Night*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (UK), 2017; *Glasstress*, Palazzo Franchetti, Venice (IT), 2017; *Exhibition paintings*, Kunst Meran, Merano (IT), 2017; *Drawing Conclusions*, RISD Museum, Providence, RI (US), 2016; *The Improbable City*, Edinburgh Art Festival 2015, Edinburgh (UK), 2015; *Feels like Heaven*, Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv (IL), 2014; *Intenzione Manifesta*, Castello di Rivoli (curated by Beatrice Merzand Marianna Vecellio), Turin (IT), 2014; *GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland*, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh (UK), 2014. Avery represented Scotland at the *52nd Venice Biennale* in 2007, participated in the *British Art Show 7* and *Folkestone Triennial* in 2011, and was included in: *Altermodern, 4th TATE Triennial* in 2009, the *Taipei Biennial – The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene*, curated by Nicholas Bourriaud in 2014, and the *Kochi-Muziris Biennale*, Kochi Biennale Foundation, Kunnumpuram in 2016.

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