

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW



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CHARLES AVERY   REPORT FROM PAKISTAN   MARTIN BARRÉ  
VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE



# CHARLES AVERY

## BACK TO THE ISLAND

With a sprawling exhibition and a companion book that is at once an ethnographer's journal, day-tripper's guide and metaphysical treatise, the Scottish artist takes us away.

BY ED KRĆMA

THE VISITOR TO Charles Avery's exhibition "The Islanders: An Introduction" assumes the role of an outsider—curiosity seeker, tourist, anthropologist—entering an intricately conceived fictional world. Comprising maps, sculptural objects, wall-mounted texts, taxidermic specimens and dozens of large figurative drawings, the show summarizes an ongoing project that has occupied the artist since at least 2004 and has been exhibited episodically over the past few years at doggerfisher, Edinburgh (2005); Galleria Sonia Rosso, Turin (2006); and Arquebuse, Geneva (2007), among other venues. This latest installment, the most extensive to date, is accompanied by a richly illustrated book, which combines images of the works and Avery's writings, as well as containing an essay by French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud, and an interview with the artist (b. 1973) by Tom Morton, a curator at the Hayward Gallery.

The adventure begins with the discovery of the Island, Gulliver-style, by our narrator, who is and is not Avery. First assuming the place to be uninhabited, he is soon immersed in its strange variety of fantastical characters, social spaces and cultural preoccupations. The narrator becomes our guide by way of the lengthy texts, which harness the objects and drawings to an elaborate constellation of conceits. In the interview, Avery says that inventing the Island enabled him to *spatialize* certain philosophical problems which had remained stubbornly unsolvable by logical means. Elsewhere in the text he cites numerous philosophers (Descartes, Wittgenstein, Russell), as well as particular conceptual puzzles presented



Charles Avery: *Untitled (Alephs)*, 2008, pencil, ink and gouache on paper, 49 by 65 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches. All photos this article courtesy the artist and Parasol unit, London.











## WORLD VIEW

*The Island stands at the centre of a spiralling archipelago of infinite other islands, the arms of which curl out over the great oceans and conjoin at the pole. It is a medium-sized island in the middle of the world and that is all that need be said of its magnitude, for its relations are completely internal, its inhabitants content with their lives.*

## REGARDING HENDERSON'S EGGS

*Pickled eggs are available everywhere: in bars, shops, on street corners, sold by the jar, or individually. Their value is so assured by their standard that in the underworld they are used as currency.*

*The curious thing about the eggs is that they are bitterly disgusting, yet ruinously addictive. The compulsion to try another, even in this knowledge, is irresistible; eat a third and you are completely hooked. I have discovered that it is an addiction which holds only on the Island. It must be something to do with the atmosphere, for take them away from there and they petrify into inedible nuggets.*

All excerpts from Charles Avery's *The Islanders: An Introduction*, London, Parasol unit and Koenig Books, 2008.



*Untitled (Heidless Magregor's Bar), 2006, pencil and gouache on board, 41 1/8 by 56 7/8 inches. Collection Hamilton Corporate Finance Limited.*

*Right, Henderson's Eggs Jar 8, 2007, glass, water, lithograph, acrylic, rabbit skin glue, approx. 7 by 4 inches.*





## STONE-MICE

*The Stone-mouse, as I described in the chapter regarding my first landing on the Island, is part rodent, part mineral.*

*Distinguishing them from actual stones is not easy; but the rewards are great, for they are a popular symbol of the Island, and can be sold to tourists for large sums . . .*

*Firstly, one must identify its central axis, being the line which runs between its two most extreme points (A and B), the distance AB being its length. This line must be occupied by the stone at all points along it (so a banana-shaped stone would not qualify).*

*Furthermore, it must be of such a size that it may be held comfortably in the hand and thrown over one's shoulder achieving a distance of at least five times the height of the thrower.*

*However, it may only truly be regarded as a Stone-mouse once it has been sold as such, and the greater the sum paid the finer an example it will be. Once the Stone-mouse has entered the market its status is forever assured.*



Above, *Untitled (Stone-mouse Expedition)*, 2008, ink and pencil on paper, 33 by 25 inches.

Left, *Untitled (Stone-mouse Sellers)*, 2008, pencil, ink, gouache and acrylic on card, 37¼ by 52 inches.

Opposite, detail from the installation *Untitled (Diagram of the Plane of the Gods)*, showing Dorothea/Theodora and Mr. Impossible, 2006, Jesmonite resin and mixed mediums, 21¼ and 5½ inches tall. Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art.



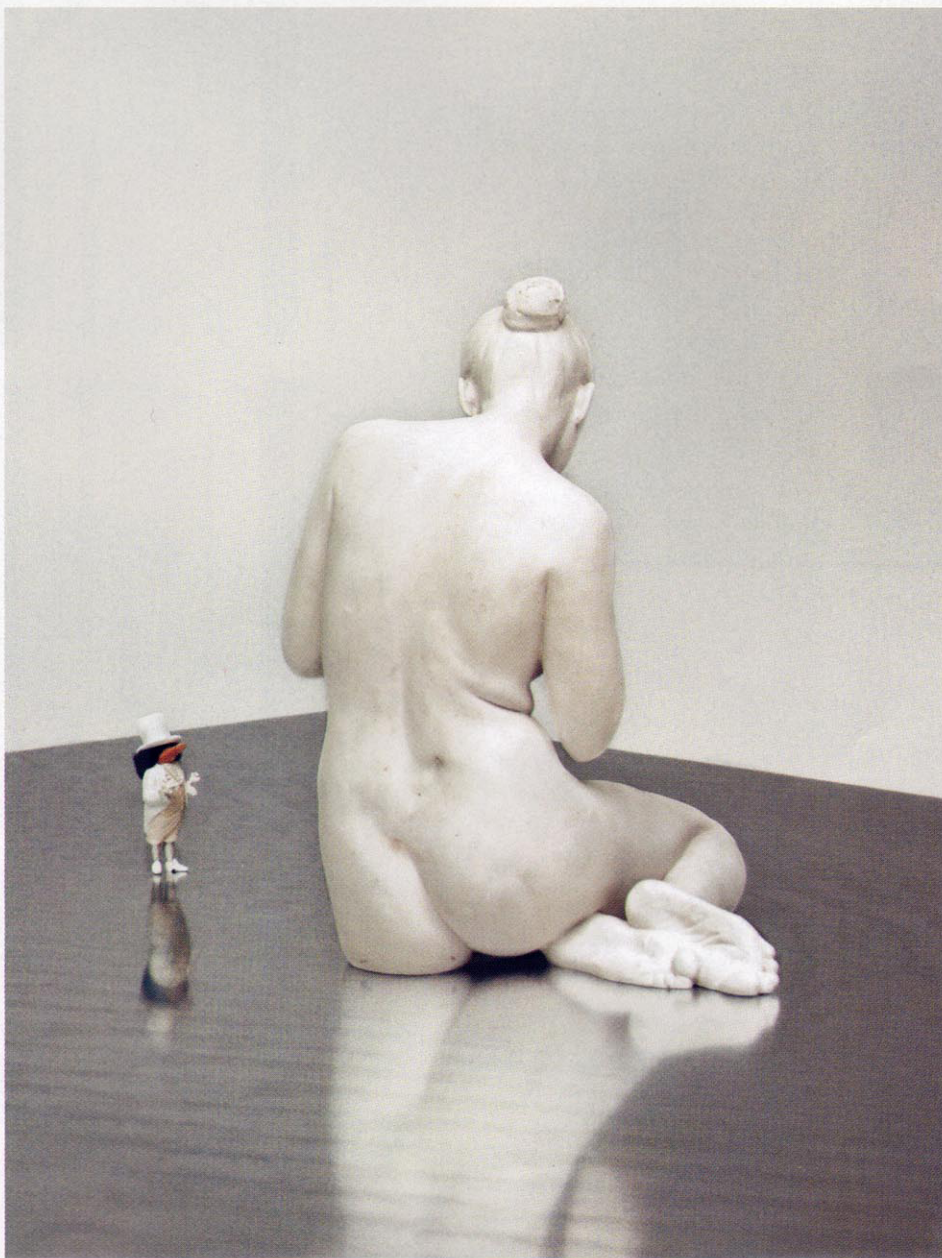
## THE PLANE OF THE GODS

*Of the Gods, it is said that they are innumerable. That is not to say that they are a multitude, indeed they are relatively few.*

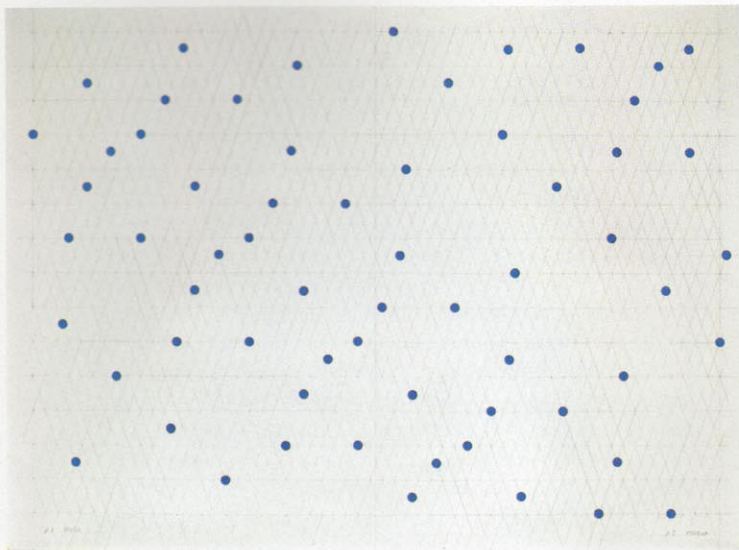
*Why then should they be so difficult to quantify? Do they fit invisibly between the tall trees and mountains that surround the dark interior of the Island? On the contrary, the Gods are positioned most ostentatiously and with great permanence on the Plane, within walking distance of town.*

by the Island (the existence or nonexistence of a beast called the Noumenon; a barber who, after hours, is found continually shaving himself). The tone is at once learned and deadpan, knowledgeable and, Avery declares, "completely free of any irony."

"The Islanders" unfolds with only a minimal narrative structure. Avery is more interested in detailing the protagonists and their environment than in telling a story, although a final episode is revealing. This is related in the Testimony of Knot Faah, the man who claims to have fought with the mythical Noumenon, and, having survived this savage encounter, finally retired from exploration to become an artist, living in a remote shack out on the Plane. The large-scale pencil drawings, predominantly monochrome but with occasional touches of painted color, demonstrate impressive facility. They evoke the charged line of Honoré Daumier's caricatures and the expressionist practice of Käthe Kollwitz, two artists firmly associated with social and







political critique. Such figurative pictorial languages were once taboo for ambitious art, though the injunction against such modes relaxed during the 1990s following the achievements of artists like William Kentridge and Paul Noble.

While Kentridge's work has dealt directly, if sometimes

poetically, with moral crises in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa, Avery's project more appropriately fits within a broader discussion of encounters with Otherness and tourism. "The Islanders" is open and playful; in this respect, Avery's efforts more

Left, *Untitled (Perfect Forms)*, 2008, Perspex box, pencil and gouache on paper, one element of a triptych, each 15½ by 20¾ inches, part of the Knot Faah installation.

Below, *Untitled (Eternal Forest)*, 2008, gouache and pencil on card, nine panels, each 39¾ by 59 inches.

## THE TESTIMONY OF KNOT FAAH

*A man who claims to have gone nearer The Distance than any other person, who claims to have entered the estate of The Eternal Forest and escaped it, is Knot Faah. He even bears scars around his waist, which he claims as evidence of a struggle with none other than the Noumenon.*

*After this alleged experience, Knot Faah retired from exploration and became a painter. He lives in a remote shack somewhere on the Plane, painting dots in an effort to 'express the feeling of weightless, timeless, directionless, yet utterly meaningful being,' as his press release states.*

## EPILOGUE

*Since I first came to the Island I have traveled the extent of it, from Descartes' Axiom across the cold northern Plane, through the alleyways of Onomatopoeia.*

*I have the trust of the Riders of the Invisible Reigns, as I do the junkies and pushers who stalk the tourists.*

*I have recorded what I have seen in drawings and what I have heard-say in writings. I have exported many specimens and artefacts in order to evince the substance of this place.*

*I cannot tell you how this world really is—I have no idea—I can state only the facts as I perceive them.*

*You must be satisfied with this or you must travel there yourself sometime, and see these beings in their natural environment, for the place is utterly subjective.*





closely resemble the ingenious fictions of Jorge Luis Borges, and certainly some of the bizarre composite creatures he has invented as the Island's fauna would be suitable additions to the Argentine writer's *Book of Imaginary Beings*.

The relationship between Avery's texts and objects is relatively straightforward. For example, the Islanders' ruinous addiction to "Henderson's Eggs," foul products pickled in gin, is detailed in our narrator's account. The exhibition helpfully presents a sample jar, with its commercial label, and a drawing documenting the ravaging impact of these dubious intoxicants as expressed in the stooped, grimacing features of three figures shown in the act of ingestion. The complexity inheres in the dynamic handling of the drawings and in the philosophical riddles posed by the narrator's writings.

While individual objects and drawings are not always compelling on their own, the ensemble offers up a rich and intriguing network of associations. "The Islanders" constructs a world that would certainly appeal to an intrepid day-tripper, but it will also reward a longer sojourn and a more sustained, enquiring engagement. ○

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"The Islanders: An Introduction," curated by Ziba de Weck Ardan, was on view at Parasol unit, London [Sept. 10-Nov. 8, 2008]. It can currently be seen at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, through Feb. 15, and will travel to the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam [Feb. 28-May 24].

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