

The Weight of the World

In Paul Auster's novel *Sunset Park* the character Ellen Brice is an artist who finds a release secretively making detailed pornographic drawings in her bedroom. More than anything, she sees her drawings as a means by which to convey 'the miraculous strangeness of being alive'.

Albeit less explicit than those produced by Auster's character, David Austen sometimes makes drawings and watercolours of a sexual nature that also communicate a sense of amazement at the physical experience of being in, and being acted upon by, the world. His naked performers variously leap and dangle, alternately relishing and denying gravity, the effects of which are exaggerated by their elongated bodies. The trembling strokes of paint that describe these languid human forms suggest mutability, as if like mercury they might return a primordial state.

Dreams and nostalgic reverie are the enduring themes in Austen's multifaceted practice. Literature, particularly Classical mythology, frequently provides or informs his narratives and the characters that populate the artist's work. His lonesome figures are often monsters that we come to pity, because their burden of existing in a cruel world is doubled.

In Austen's latest short film *The Gorgon's Dream*, a feeling for the weight of the decapitated Gorgon's head, and the gravitational pull it is subject to, is demonstrated through the taunted and straining arm that holds it. The Gorgon's downcast eyes, whose lids flutter gently, reinforce this effect, as does her mouth, which hangs slightly open.

At the moment when her head begins to rotate towards the viewer it suddenly appears to be floating, that, rather than being held, it is supporting and leading the hand. As experienced when taking off and becoming airborne in an aircraft, a sensation of heaviness momentarily turns to one of lightness. This shift in relationship to gravity – escaping the weight of the world – makes us aware of our vulnerability and mortality, and highlights the absurdity of existence. Inward reflection, and the removal of context, deems the most mundane and familiar object suddenly preposterous and alien.

The Gorgon's Dream embodies these opposing notions of lightness and heaviness, the transformation from one material state to the other, and reminds us that all matter is formed of invisible floating atoms. Dreams, drink, literature, religion, and art all provide a means of temporary escape from this disappointing and alarming reality. In the last moments of the film, the Gorgon's eyes flick wide open. Her expression conveys astonishment, wonder, and perhaps finally, comprehension of this ineffable truth.