

davidAVERY

Abstracting the Quintessence

Sarratt Gallery through April 1

by Cat Acree

People frequently approach San Francisco printmaker David Avery to ask if he has ever illustrated a children's book. For anyone who's ever looked very, very closely at Avery's finely wrought miniature etchings, this might seem a strange question. His black-and-white prints often depict nightmarish, creepy dreamscapes in excessive detail, with layered symbols like *memento mori* skeletons, disembodied hands, and possibly sexual serpents and flowers. This imagery feels familiar, like the weird metamorphosis and mystery that we drift into when we aren't policing our thoughts, in sleep.

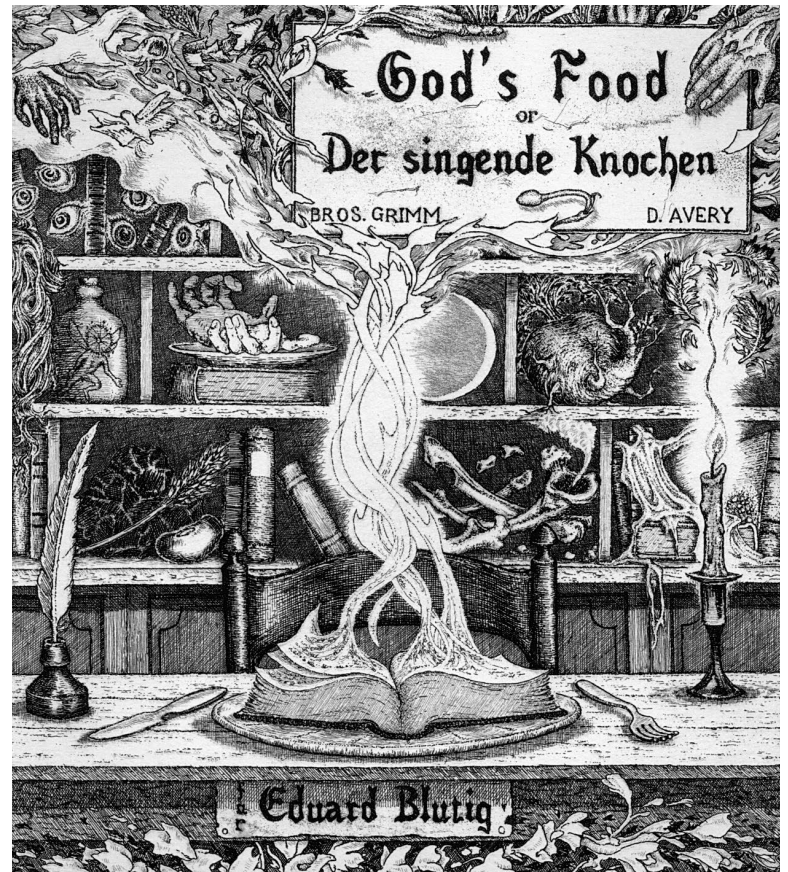
But in these compact visual feasts, traditional symbols don't insist on traditional interpretations. Ask Avery what it all means, and you'll get nothing back—not out of stubbornness, but because he doesn't have the answer. He doesn't even know how these images come from his own mind, but rather finds himself inspired by literature, art, anything that could be "laden with possible meaning." He says, "All these little components just kind of pour out of me. Where does that stuff come from? I have no idea. It's all out there, waiting to be found."

Avery's solo show at the Sarratt Gallery will exhibit his 2004 series *God's Food or Der singende Knochen*, a portfolio of eight beguiling etchings inspired by titles from Brothers Grimm stories. Each evocative title was selected by a friend, and, without knowing the story behind the title, Avery conjured his own imaginative visual fairy tale.

Avery will also exhibit his new work *Abstracting the Quintessence*, a title swiped from Rabelais, referring to someone who has extracted from ordinary matter the heavenly "fifth element" or *aether*, which surpasses Aristotle's four earthly elements (fire, earth, air, water). *Abstracting* could mean reveal or obscure—either will work. In Avery's mind, it's what every good artist should aspire to. "It's trying to create some way of connecting people with something that is not so easy to see."

The artist considers this an "odd" piece, even for him. It depicts a guardian angel suspended by wires or pulleys, wielding a tinsel-wrapped wooden sword to protect our shaky paradise of so-called "reality." What are we being protected from? What is the outside threat?

"We're surrounded every day by advertisements, media," Avery says. "People are bombarded by images and words,



and I actually think images have taken over from words and are being used in ways that are not exactly for communication." The unassuming intimacy of Avery's miniature etchings disrupts that bombardment. With so many layers, interpreting Avery's work is something akin to alchemy, and it's a power not limited to the artist but belonging to the viewer as well. ■

David Avery's exhibition *Abstracting the Quintessence* will be on view at Sarratt Gallery through April 1. For more information, visit www.vanderbilt.edu/sarrattart. To see more of Avery's work, visit www.davidavery.net.