

A mysterious art

Born in London in 1904, of Irish parents, the Egyptologist Dorothy Eady's childhood was marred by the bankruptcy of her father's tailoring business. Aged eight, she sought refuge from these family difficulties, by reading books on ancient history and spending much time in the British Museum. Eady began to have hallucinations in which she believed she was a reincarnated priestess of Isis from ancient Egypt. She wasn't alone in holding such ideas. The poet George Russell "Æ" was convinced of the existence of other worlds, and other times, existing side by side. He could recall sailing in galleys over ancient oceans, and living in tents and palaces. W. B. Yeats, Edith Somerville, and many others sought to make contact with the deceased, and with worlds that existed beyond everyday reality. In Matthew Shiel's 1901 novel *The Purple Cloud*—a story narrated by a woman in a trance—past and future coalesce in the present, but yet remain, to most people, invisible.

In Martin Healy's video *A moment twice lived*, filmed in the Victorian library of the Crawford Art Gallery, a woman talks about dreaming: "Immediately on waking, before you even open your eyes, you set yourself to remember the vanishing dream." She reflects on things that she recognized from a previous or parallel life: "I was eight or nine years old the first time I had the sensation of having seen something before." She gives instructions on how to remember dreams.

The notion that dreams can reveal alternative realities and times is an old one, going back to the dawn of mankind. Before the advent of technology, the idea that the origin of man was in some sort of dreamtime was common. In the late nineteenth century, in an era of reaction against technological progress, belief in reincarnation became common, particularly in industrialized countries. Einstein's 1905 scientific paper *On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies* established that time is relative, and is not the same for all people at all points. H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, published a decade earlier, and based on stories he had written, *The Chronic Argonauts*, described in detail a dystopian future for mankind. Much of Healy's inspiration comes from early science fiction. Works such as Paul Scheerbart's 1910 *The Perpetual Motion Machine* inspired Healy's *Aether*, while the utopian novel *Looking Backward*, written by Edward Bellamy in 1886, is one of the sources for *Fugue*. The narrative in *A moment twice lived* has its roots in J. W. Dunne's 1927 novel *An Experiment with Time*.

Healy's œuvre extends from video and sculpture to photography. His large photographs of ferns, taken in the Botanic Gardens, have a hypnotic quality. Printed in black and white, they are intense visual records of plants that survive from the Jurassic era. The photographs invite the viewer into a world of darkness, of lush plants in a sub-tropical forest that could be from the present, or equally could be from millions of years ago. The woman in *A moment twice lived* recalls, "My dreams were like a second life. Sometimes I took no notice of them, as if they were background music... quite suddenly an image would come vividly into my mind, like the developed photograph of a dream negative."

In Frederic Wood's 1935 *After Thirty Centuries*, a schoolteacher named Ivy Carter Beaumont recounted her experiences as Vola, a temple dancer from the time of Amenhotep III. Beaumont apparently could speak Egyptian even though she had never learned it—a skill known as xenoglossy; not to be confused with glossolalia, or

speaking in tongues. Published two years later, Joan Grant's *Winged Pharaoh* was well received as an historical novel, but the author claimed it was true and autobiographical. Grant said she could "see" the past by holding an object, such as a scarab brooch. Her story concerned Sakeeta, a Pharaoh's daughter who took a Minoan sculptor named Dio as her lover, their son eventually becoming a Pharaoh himself. Dorothy Eady, who was given the name Omm Sety, spent many years in Cairo. In later years she lived in a village near Abydos, working as a tour guide. Up to her death in 1981 she remained convinced of her identity as a reincarnated priestess of Isis.

Healy's sculpture *the long afternoon of eternity*, a park bench, seems at first an innocuous everyday object. Beside it is a photograph of a meteorite. A fragment of rock from outer space, the meteorite was smelted into the cast iron from which the bench is made. The ordinary bench thus becomes something remarkable. Through sculptures, video and photography, Healy takes ordinary things and makes them extraordinary. He explores the possibility of parallel worlds and of different times co-existing side by side, not in a credulous way, but with respect for the power of the imagination.

Today, dreams occupy an uncertain position in people's lives. Once held to have a power beyond normal understanding of the world, they were examined in detail, mulled over for insights into problems and resolutions, and held to be an authentic communication both with past times and future events. Working within a contemporary idiom, Healy reinvests dreaming with some of this ancient power, through artworks that have both a mystery and the ebb and flow of eternity about them.

Peter Murray

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