

## Did We Dream This Together?

An interview with Alexis Gideon by Ethan Swan (archived from January 2013)



**Ethan Swan:** How did you first encounter the works of Lord Dunsany? How quickly did his work reveal itself as material for *Video Musics*?

**Alexis Gideon:** I had originally wanted *Video Musics III: Floating Oceans* to be based on Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*. I soon realized that I was not going to be able to get permission to do this. Instead of seeing this as a dead end I decided to make it part of the process. It made me think of Derrida's deconstructionism—every text being at once a rewriting of a past text and a text waiting to be rewritten by a future text. I looked into what influenced O'Brien. What past texts were rewritten as *The Third Policeman*? That is how I came upon Lord Dunsany. Dunsany's mystical and expansive imagery, as well as his cautionary tales of the dangers of loss of spirituality and wonder, made his stories the perfect fit for *Video Musics III*.

**ES:** How did you first encounter the works of William Kentridge? What lessons did you take away from this encounter?

**AG:** The first time I encountered William Kentridge's work was in 2001 in the New Museum's previous location. I had come to the museum one afternoon with no idea as to what the current exhibit was. I remember looking at large charcoal drawings—some of which also had blue paint. I liked them a great deal but when I found my way past the black curtains and realized that they were all single frames from an animation, I was totally floored. Upon viewing his films, I instantly fell in love with Kentridge's universe. The sense of abstract narrative and the ghostly trails left by the charcoal haunting each frame made a huge impact on me.

**ES:** Your past musical language, on your solo records and with Princess, has always been boundary-less, effortlessly skipping from hip hop to indie rock to delicate electronic. Does the polyglot sound of the *Video Musics* series represent an expansion of this language, reflecting the music you might be making anyway? Or does the narrative of each *Video Music* guide the genre and sounds heard in the performance?

**AG:** The narrative elements set the tone for the music. The music is still investigating the absurdity of genre, but in a subtler way. The point of the music isn't the contrast, but the contrast has become an inherent part of it. It would be hard to listen to Princess and not notice the blatant shifts in genres. The music of the *Video Musics* series on the other hand, is much less interested in pointing out the juxtapositions. They are just there embedded in an organic way.

**ES:** I've been thinking a lot about the status of animation, its presence in both contemporary art and pop culture dialogues. On the one hand, there's the Quay Brothers retrospective taking place at MoMA right now, and on the other hand, via Pixar and Tim Burton, animated movies remain among the most successful Hollywood productions in a way that posits them as "children's entertainment." What are your thoughts about working in this medium? Do you find yourself drawn to one or the other of these poles? Or is there something beneficial about working at this point of tension?

**AG:** There are several things that draw me strongly to animation. One is that it can be completely DIY. Although the Pixar films are made by many people, you can make a simple line drawing animation with a pad of tracing paper, a pen, and a camera. I have always been attracted to methods that are immediate (recording my first albums at 11 or 12 on a four-track).

Another element of animation I'm drawn to is that it is a medium that can lean towards the surreal and magical very quickly. This is seen in both the Pixar/Laika model and in the Quay Brothers. Much of my work is about transcendent moments.

I am also interested in working at the point of tension you describe. I love the handmade beauty, texture and depth of the Quay universe. I am interested in mixing these elements with some of the joy and accessibility of the more commercial animation.

**ES:** In relation to the question above, I recently came across a quote from William Kentridge about his reliance on images from his own childhood in the animations and drawing. He makes a very interesting point about childhood and wonder: "There is a sense of the clarity of impulse we get as a child, seeing something new... so part of going back to images and objects from my childhood is not so much an interest necessarily in those objects, but trying to use them as a talisman, to get back to a clarity of sensation that one would have as a child." Does this resonate at all with your creative decisions in the *Video Musics* series?

**AG:** Definitely. I often try to create a narrative environment that takes us back to a child's sense of wonder and understanding; a small child listening to a story. Understanding in fragments and images. The action is not always clear, but it is clear that something is happening and it resonates somewhere deep inside us.

**ES:** I noticed a couple of motifs that recur in the *Video Musics* series—the first being shorelines/horizons, and the second being gatherings of people around tables—is this recurrence intentional? Can you talk about the power these two types of image have for you? Are there other threads that can be traced through all three works?

**AG:** Interesting. I haven't thought about the shorelines and people around tables before. They definitely run throughout. I think the most unifying themes for me in the *Video Musics* series are connections to the mystical and spiritual universe. *Video Musics I* is based on Hungarian mythology and folk tales. *Video Musics II: Sun Wu-Kong* is based on the classic Chinese novel *The Journey to the West* which is drenched in the mythology of the Monkey King. *Video Musics III: Floating Oceans* is based on Lord Dunsany's short works which examine the world of dreams and the loss of ancient gods. In all three, the otherworldly is paramount. They all exist in a time and space where gods and mythical beasts interact with us daily.

**ES:** Can you talk about the different contexts where *Video Musics III: Floating Oceans* will be presented? Is there any specific significance for the New York premiere at the New Museum?

**AG:** *Video Musics III: Floating Oceans* will be performed in a variety of contexts. Museums, galleries, historic movie theaters, DIY art spaces, etc... The idea of the traveling storyteller is at the heart of the *Video Musics* series. The New Museum performance has a very special significance to me. I grew up in Manhattan and have loved the New Museum for a long time. In addition, I saw William Kentridge's work there for the first time, and it has had a huge influence on my own work. To be able to perform *Video Musics III: Floating Oceans* at the New Museum in a program alongside Kentridge's work feels like a very monumental moment in my career.