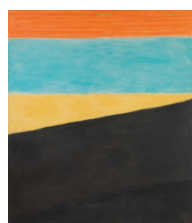


## Milton Avery

15 – 18 June

Victoria Miro · Art Basel · Stand R7



*Boathouse by the Sea*, 1959  
Oil on canvas  
182.9 x 152.4 cm  
72 x 60 in

An insight into Avery's working practice is revealed in rarely-seen pairings of his canvases and their associated works on paper in watercolour, gouache and oil crayon, such as *Boathouse by the Sea* and *Sail Loft and Orange Sky* (below). From the beginning of his career, Avery's method of working – from sketches to watercolours to paintings on canvas – involved him drawing upon and reassessing recollections of experiences or places. He challenged himself to “try to capture and translate the excitement and emotion aroused in me by the impact with the original idea,” and it is in succinct juxtapositions of two, or sometimes three, related works that we experience his feeling for and orchestration of the tensions between emotive power, formal dynamics and fidelity to his subject matter, and the methods by which he was able to harness the immediacy of a place and the emotion of a moment.



*Sail Loft and Orange Sky*, 1959  
Mixed media on paper  
58.4 x 45.1 cm  
23 x 17 3/4 in

Rather than think, as ordinarily we might, of study and completed work, Avery appears to ask us to consider his works on paper and in oils on equal terms – to think of each as aspiring to the optimum degrees of luminosity, weight, emotive power that their medium allows and his vision demands. The mixed media on paper *Sail Loft and Orange Sky* and the oil on canvas *Boathouse by the Sea* – in which horizontals and diagonals suggesting sea, sky, sand and the deep shadow of a building in the foreground are pushed towards near-abstract zones of lambent colour – illustrate this compulsion as he worked across ever larger supports.



*Blue Sea, Red Sky*, 1958  
Oil on canvas  
106.7 x 127 cm  
42 x 50 in

The trio of works *Blue Sea, Red Sky*, 1958, *Red Sky, Blue Sea*, 1958 and *Sand, Sea and Sky*, 1953, offer an unparalleled record of Avery's process, culminating in one of the iconic paintings of his later years. These and other works on display were completed during a period in which Avery, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb summered together in Provincetown, on Cape Cod. Friends since the 1930s, when they spent numerous summers working in each other's company, the artists rekindled their association during fruitful summers at the popular artists' colony between 1957 and 1961. A degree of reciprocity between Avery and the Abstract Expressionists, who found such a potent example in his work, is strikingly apparent in these works. Avery started to paint on an ever larger scale, further refining his visual vocabulary towards a new pictorial realm, in which abstraction and representation are not immediately distinguishable from one other.



*Red Sky, Blue Sea*, 1958  
Mixed media on paper  
45.7 x 61 cm  
18 x 24 in

Composed of triads depicting beach, sea and sky, *Blue Sea, Red Sky* (above) and the related, fully-developed painting on paper, *Red Sky, Blue Sea*, both painted in 1958 and derived from a small, much earlier (1953) oil crayon drawing, *Sand, Sea & Sky* (below), show Avery's vision fully realised at each phase and in each medium.



*Sand, Sea and Sky*, 1953  
Oil crayon on paper  
21.6 x 27.9 cm  
8 1/2 x 11 in

The composition of *Blue Sea, Red Sky* and the related, fully-developed painting on paper, *Red Sky, Blue Sea*, both painted in 1958, are seen as have a particularly close relationship to the work of Mark Rothko. While it is true that rarely had Avery worked so abstractly as during his Provincetown period between 1957 and 1961, it is interesting to note that the composition was conceived in a small, much earlier (1953) oil crayon drawing, *Sand, Sea & Sky*.



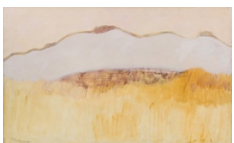
*Ten Pound Island (Sea and Rocks)*, 1956  
Oil on Canvas  
96.5 x 152.4 cm  
38 x 60 in

Avery spent numerous summers in Gloucester on Cape Ann between 1920 and 1945 and, during the early 1930s, was there along with Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman. In 1924, he also met his future wife, fellow artist Sally Michel, there. In later interviews Sally recalled that she and Avery had rented neighbouring sail lofts, where they were living and working that summer. Recalling their early Gloucester summers, she said, “He used to go out in the morning. At that time, he did all of his painting out of doors... directly from the scene. And he would strap his easel and his canvas on his back and he’d walk out on to the rocky shore of Gloucester and paint two pictures in the morning, then he’d come home and have his lunch and after lunch, he’d do the same thing... So he would usually paint... three or four pictures every day.” *Ten Pound Island* marks the entrance to Gloucester’s Inner Harbor, and was the site of a lighthouse, where Winslow Homer stayed and painted in 1880. The Island and many other Cape Ann motifs appear repeatedly in Avery’s work from the period, although *Ten Pound Island (Sea and Rocks)* was painted in 1956, a decade or so after he stopped summering on Cape Ann.



*Yacht Race in Fog*, 1959  
Oil on canvas  
127 x 182.9 cm  
50 x 72 in

The Averys began summering in Provincetown in 1957, and went back each year, until October, 1960. During these summers, Avery began working on a larger scale, and also completed major oils during the summer months, rather than waiting to paint them in his New York studio from summer sketches and watercolours. During those summers, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb also vacationed in Provincetown, and there was a significant coda, during that period, to their reciprocal artistic dialogue of the 1930s. Sally Avery later reflected that the scaling-up of her husband’s canvases may have been due to the example of Rothko, in particular. Avery’s increasing forays to the “edge of abstraction”, as Clement Greenberg put it, also took place during this period, as seen in *Yacht Race in Fog*, which depicts sailboats emerging from a field of candescent colour as through a dense haze.



*Yellow Grasses, Gray Dune*, 1962  
Oil on canvas  
76.2 x 127 cm  
30 x 50 in

In 1962, Avery painted several works with Cape Cod motifs, over a year after his last days in Provincetown – among them *Yellow Grasses, Gray Dune; Sea and Dunes*; and *Dune Grasses and Quiet Sea*. These late canvases portray their motifs as something remembered with tenderness. Visually, they are softened, the landscape seen through a subtle haziness. Yet, despite their elegiac quality, the armature of compositional mastery in Avery’s late canvases never falters. In 1952, Avery was quoted in an article by Chris Ritter, one of very few occasions when he commented about his work: “Today I design a canvas very carefully before I begin to paint it. The two-dimensional design is important, but not so important as the design in depth. I do not use linear perspective, but achieve depth by colour – the function of one colour with another. I strip the design to essentials; the facts do not interest me as much as the essence of nature.”



*Blue Gray Nude*, 1956  
Oil on canvas  
66 x 101.6 cm  
26 x 40 in

*Blue Gray Nude* is derived from a much earlier pencil sketch, from 1936, and reveals radical distortion of form softened by the subtle harmonies of Avery's palette. While such radical distortion and abstraction are frequently found in Avery's drawings, in his oil paintings they are infrequently seen in quite the same degree as they are in *Blue Gray Nude*. Avery consistently sketched directly from the human figure throughout his career. Beginning in the 1930s, he, his wife Sally Michel, and a group of their New York artist-peers met informally in each other's homes and studios to draw from the nude. Artists in the sketch group, over the years, included Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb. Avery sometimes drew and painted the sketch group itself – at work sketching a model.



*White Pitcher*, 1946  
Oil on canvas  
81.3 x 68.6 cm  
32 x 27 in

Still life was an important part of Avery's work from the 1920s onwards and he frequently used similar titles for paintings as he returned to re-examine motifs over the course of his career. In 1928 and 1929, Avery had painted two major canvases titled *White Pitcher*. This later painting is a highly refined image in which the artist, paring back on both detail and colour, creates a sense of simplicity and harmony. Here, as in other works on display, it might be tempting to see a trajectory in Avery's art edging ever closer towards abstraction. However, while seeking to express an idea in its simplest form, Avery never sought pure abstraction for himself. Above all, he is an artist who resists categorisation. "I never have any rules to follow," he stated in 1952, "I follow myself."



*Grazing Brahmins*, 1952  
Oil on canvas  
111.8 x 137.2 cm  
44 x 54 in

Cows are a constant throughout Avery's *oeuvre*, all the way back to 1930, when he and his wife, Sally, spent the summer in rural Collinsville, Connecticut, following and sketching herds of pasturing cows. One of his great canvases of 1930, *Bucolic Landscape*, is a frieze of five cows. And *Landscape*, the 12-foot post office mural he created during his time as a WPA artist, depicts a landscape with cows. Cows are emblematic, as well, in the work of his Vermont summers, but we find major canvases depicting cows in all the decades of his career. For Avery, they seem the embodiment of serenity – often of collective harmony. *Grazing Brahmins* is in fact a Florida motif, inspired by Avery's winters as a fellow at the Research Studio in Maitland. While it is infrequent in his work, in *Grazing Brahmins* Avery used a particular compositional device: a flattened verdant pastureland that encloses an abstract form denoting a turquoise lake, from which some of the cows drink. Avery used a similar device, much simplified, in his paintings *Seven White Cows* of 1953 and *Goat Island*, 1958.



*Morning Sky*, 1962  
Oil on canvas  
81.3 x 121.9 cm  
32 x 48 in

After his first major heart attack in 1949, Avery was invited to winter in Florida, as a Bok Fellow at the Research Studio for paintings and writers (now known as the Maitland Art Center). The Averys wintered there in 1949-50 and returned the following year. The artist's stay in Maitland inspired a number of oil paintings with Florida motifs. Although some examples have hotter palettes, *Palms* is nonetheless distinctly Floridian in its range of subtly sun-washed greens, greys and earth colours.



*Evening Palms*, 1951  
Monotype on paper  
44.5 x 59.1 cm  
17 1/2 x 23 1/4 in

Because of his weakened physical state, in Maitland Avery began experimenting with creating smaller-scale work in monotype. He made over two hundred works in that medium, most during that two-year period. *Evening Palms* and *Palms* (above) are rare examples of Avery approaching the same composition in both mediums. It is interesting that *Palms* is in fact a mirror image of this monotype.



*Goat Island*, 1958  
Oil on canvas  
76.2 x 111.8 cm  
30 x 44 in

*Goat Island* is based on a 1957 drawing, *White Goats*. The goats are set within an abstract, biomorphic form – the ‘island’ of the title. Avery’s work abounds with all manner of fauna, and goats feature in a number of his paintings, including *Goats*, and *Black Goat*, *White Goat*, both of 1951 – with their goats, opposing one another in both colour and pose. Avery sometimes appears to fix on the nature of the goat, to make it a poignant metaphor for our essential solitude, as in *Forest Goat*, also painted in 1957, and *Lone Goat*, of 1960. On *Goat Island*, each goat exists in its own space – three distinct white-grey forms within fields of gently glowing blues and mauves.



*Breaking Sea*, 1960  
Mixed media on paper  
58.4 x 88.9 cm  
23 x 35 in

*Breaking Sea* was painted during Avery’s last summer on Cape Cod, a year after the oil painting, *Breaking Wave*, to which it is related in both motif and palette. The work on paper is filled with the passionate turbulence of a stormy sea, yet, as with all Avery’s seascapes, a monumental stillness is conveyed, as well. And the horizonlessness of the composition invites us to ponder a kind of visual ambiguity of sea and sky.



*Wavy Yellow Sea*, 1958  
Watercolour on paper  
55.9 x 76.2 cm  
22 x 30 in

This painterly Cape Cod watercolour, made during the height of Avery’s Provincetown period, was composed the same summer as the great classical canvases, *Dunes and Sea I* (Carnegie Museum of Art), *Dune Bushes* (Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth), *Sea Grasses and Blue Sea* (The Museum of Modern Art), and *Yellow Sky* (Tate). Avery cleansed his palate, so to speak, with this radically free and abstracted composition, depicting dancing light on water, in which waves break upon a foreground shore of unpainted paper.



*Wavy Dunes*, 1958  
Pastel on paper  
22.9 x 61 cm  
9 x 24 in

This gentle yet monumental rolling frieze of dunes is set near Provincetown, Wellfleet and Truro, on Cape Cod, where Avery spent the summer of 1958. It may depict the dune-cliffs near Highland Light on the North Truro shore. Oil crayon holds an important place in Avery’s work, especially during the 1950s and 60s. The medium had a spontaneity, and also a soft, scumbled texture, which conveyed a muted effect, quite different from his watercolours.



*Untitled (Blue Tree)*, 1953  
Watercolour on paper  
61 x 29.2 cm  
24 x 11 1/2 in

As with *Mountain and Trees* (below), *Untitled (Blue Tree)* reveals the enduring influence of the New Hampshire countryside in Avery’s art of this period. He was a Fellow at the MacDowell Colony in 1953, 1954 and 1956, and the Averys also spent the Summer of 1955 in residence at Yaddo. *Untitled (Blue Tree)* is painted in watercolour, on the paper Avery used for his monotypes. It has much of the freedom and spontaneity of the monotypes, and the vibrant shimmer of its blues is enhanced by the texture of the paper itself.



*Mountain and Trees*, 1954  
Watercolour and oil crayon on paper  
55.9 x 76.2 cm  
22 x 30 in

The New Hampshire countryside, in particular, inspired Avery, and works produced in this period are replete with his explorations of its trees and wooded landscapes. *Mountains and Trees* and a related 1955 oil painting of the same title are composed of textured horizontal bands. In the foreground are frieze-like arrangements of tree forms. Avery’s art often hovered at the verges of abstraction, yet he never entirely departed from the direct inspiration of nature.