

in conversation

The tales and evolution of Baby Yellow: Ryan Arenson in conversation with Tracy Murinik

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Introduction

outoftheCUBE's inaugural exhibition shows new work by Johannesburg-based artist, Ryan Arenson.

Well-known for his intensely detailed and meticulously rendered line drawings and etchings, Arenson, in his most recent work, appears to have changed direction substantially.

His most recent project, *The 9 Books of Baby Yellow* – comprising a series of nine paper and eBooks, digital animations and a series of digital drawings and prints – has gestated over a period of roughly two years. This gestation has eventualised not only in the birth of the alter-ego/ evolved being/ avatar of sorts that Baby Yellow is, but also in an entirely fresh, compelling and innovative mode of working that involves traditional artmaking in conjunction with current available technology.

Yet, far from abandoning his fastidious drawing practice, Arenson continues in these new works to bring exquisite detail to his application of line, even in the digital space. This has extended to include an equally considered and evolved colour palette, an excitingly experimental play of line and mark, and the use of technological devices, in the form of an iPad tablet and a home colour printer. Most remarkably in his use of these digital means, and perhaps even in spite of them, the imagery and physical art objects that Arenson has produced are nevertheless deeply personalised, tactile and highly evocative.

The series of *The 9 Books of Baby Yellow* tracks a type of personal evolution and journey of self-knowledge and discovery through the character of Baby Yellow and those that surround the space of his being, his desire, his musings, his imaginings and dreams. At once autobiographical, fantastical and eloquently philosophical around the nature of gender, self-acceptance and longing – of mind, thought and body – Baby Yellow makes his way through the world with a visual, sensual and emotional eloquence that is courageous as much as it is beautiful.

Of the nine books of *The 9 Books of Baby Yellow* that Arenson has produced, his book, *Story of Baby Yellow*, is the first to be launched, here on this site. In it Baby Yellow is seen starting to evolve; metamorphosing in his cloud cocoon; readying himself to be seen.

Tracy Murinik

RA - For the last six years I have been drawing and printmaking; working with line – first with the engraved mark, which I then took into a drawn mark.

I have always [self-consciously] appropriated other artists' imagery in my work (I have quoted [15th Century German painter, engraver, printmaker, mathematician, and theorist Albrecht] Dürer in every one of my shows up till now). It's not an interest in pop culture or the act of appropriating an image to make it relevant for now that inspires me ... But the love and respect I feel for the line I use of these artists' work is so absolute that my desire to use that line and incorporate it, and to work out what it is that I love and why it is that it works is what stimulates me to work with that line. But a couple of years back somebody challenged me to draw my own image. And I got into quite a rage at the thought of doing that. Drawing, for me, is vulnerable – as it has been for a lot of artists.

The desire in me to express the inside externally is the only way that I live. The expectations of what I want from my work have had to be reassessed continuously, and all I am compelled to do as an artist is to externalise my internal world. It is the only thing I am committed to doing. When Oscar Wilde spoke about art being more real than life ... I completely agree. [For if I do not externalise my inner reality] I don't know how to connect, to experience the world. And I don't know how the world has an experience of me – of the messiness or the confusion, or the lagging behind on my own mountain that I'm climbing internally, while externally everything in our environment is about efficiency, the latest technology, the latest efficiency app ... That's my external world, and I start to feel like I'm not coping.

I have needed to find a way to make art that is accessible to people who can't afford massive sums of money to buy art, and I have to find a way to make art that for me is sustainable in twenty years' time, because that's what I do. [Being an artist] is what I'm committed to. And artists have to keep exploring.

I once said to a psychoanalyst: "I feel like I'm 6 years old when I draw".

So he said: "Why don't you draw like a 6-year-old?"

At that stage I'd just gotten the iPad. My codename for the iPad was ryantechnophobe.com. That's what I was at the time. But then I started to research what apps were available on the tablet for drawing, and I found the programme Brushes. Brushes is a finger drawing app designed by an engineer, Steve Sprang. (David Hockney has used this app too.) What I like about the app is that it's not trying to be or look like a painting. It works only with pixels. It's not a vector base, so you can't cut and paste anything. What it allows you to do though is to enlarge [enabling very fine detail], and it allows you a video playback facility of each step [of the drawing process].

Just before I started this though, I was working with the colour baby yellow. I was obsessed with baby yellow ... I wanted to drink the colour baby yellow, and find a way to use it!

TM - Was the colour soothing to you?

RA - Completely. I've always loved baby yellow. When I was trying to paint and mix the colour, I was buying objects with baby yellow in them – an ashtray or an old saucer, or a piece of linen I would find with the right feeling of baby yellow. But the baby yellow colour was happening very separately to the drawing line that was happening on the iPad in the beginning.

Drawing on the iPad with my finger and not needing a pencil felt liberating. The shape of the tablet felt more like a chalkboard ... It was safe. I didn't have to show anyone. It was my own exploration – finding out what this funny device does. And that process of just starting to have a little bit of fun and the curiosity of it was already a different experience for me. At the time I didn't know exactly what that was. Two years later this has become iconic for me.

TM - When Baby Yellow is clothed and rendered completely in pale yellow, is that a very calm, self-representational moment? Is Baby Yellow in himself when he's completely saturated with the colour? Is that also an expression of what baby yellow feels like for you?

RA - In my book, *Baby Yellow Tai Chi*, it says if you could smell, touch and eat baby yellow, you would live forever.

Baby Yellow does love baby blue. They can never touch because they'll become baby green! But they can quite happily live side by side.

TM - Are they yin and yang?

RA - Yes, they are.

I have now made [Baby Yellow's] outfit, which I wear while I'm presenting him [or as part of *Baby Yellow* performances]. The project began with small drawings of karate figures that I started to make, which finally developed into a series of 150 drawings! While in New York [on an Ampersand Foundation residency], these drawings started to become more intense, more sexual, more provocative ... I had been to an exhibition of [17th Century Japanese erotica] Shunga prints in New York. It was an exhibition of and about books. And being very interested in artist books myself (I had been doing a book binding course with Peter Carstens), I just fell in love. I thought this was the most sensual, beautiful work – the water-based woodblock, the colours, the kimono, the shades going down into the finest detail of skin and hair. My [personal] relationships were complex at the time ... and there was a lot being expressed and coming out more and more on that funny iPad. It was the only thing that I really had that was with me all the time through which to communicate ... At that stage the iPad didn't have a camera, so I stood for eight hours in the queue when the iPad 2

was launched to get one ... meeting the most extraordinary, underground avant-garde kids, who just rig and fix up the tablet to do anything they want it to do. I discovered a whole underground culture, and thought the possibilities seemed interesting. Bookshops were increasingly closing in New York; and more and more people were reading iPads and Kindles on the tubes.

I thought that I could maybe write a book myself: my discourse of my own journey.

I continued to just draw. Initially the drawings were exploratory. It's only now that I see where they've come to that I see and have begun to understand their meaning, and the possibilities for how I'm able to represent them, with a certain respect.

I started to think that the technique of rubbing out, of erasure on the tablet, became a bit like a woodblock in the way that it emulated the process to some degree, which interested me too. But always at the back of my mind was the thought of how I was going to be able to get these things off the device. I started to experiment with printing them myself on a home printer on different types of paper.

TM - There's an amazing tentativeness of some of the lines, and a surprising subtlety of colour that you manage to achieve through the process – they're not just digital solids. Also the nature of paging through the eBook is incredibly tactile ...

RA - You can't flip through eBooks – it's very deliberate and you've got to continue paging through an eBook page by page.

I initially struggled with how to create the colours I wanted and had to discover what the programme could do [in this regard]. But even coming from my art background, it [the process and the outcome] didn't feel fake. While I was doing it, I didn't feel like I wasn't doing what I generally do. I felt it was a sincere exploration in terms of what I do. There was a commitment to it. It's interesting to me that with this application, being digital, it nevertheless leaves a very real trace of the hand, as opposed to it being synthetic. I came to grips with a lot of my own bias about what I thought digital was and what it allowed me.

At [the beginning of this project] I was very self-conscious about what I was doing, of why I was expressing what I was. A whole story started to happen; things that I realised ... There was a lot of imagery for me to explore, for me to understand. It was bringing up a lot in me.

But I have a commitment to what I do. I won't stop myself. I have to understand why I'm doing things. It's a vulnerable body of work to show.