

## **Peter Winterhalter Aspell**

Daniel Baird

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In the back room of Lehmann & Leskiw in Toronto are two large oil paintings by Vancouver artist Peter Winterhalter Aspell, who died last December at the age of 86. In *Flesh and Steel*, 2002, a woman is in flattened profile like a hieroglyph. Her body is half flesh and half goofy, a cobbled-together machine, her viscera a knot of tubes and cones, her arms long pincers, with an electric cord coiling from her side to the steeply tilted floor. The background is a lush, swarming, fleshy pink. The figure in *The Bride*, 2003, actually wears the severely glamorous headdress of an Egyptian queen, and her body is a jumbled assemblage of flesh, bones, light bulbs and random machine parts, set against a smouldering and tactile sunset orange. Aspell's paintings wear the influence of their Modernist ancestors unabashedly on their sleeve: Max Beckmann, Jean Dubuffet, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, and many others besides, are all clearly present as tutelary spirits. Yet Aspell's sensibility is wholly his own. Machine paintings like *Flesh and Steel* and *The Bride* are not really about the mechanization of the body in modern society. They are the paintings of an old man who can see and feel the horizon of his life swiftly approaching, and they are about the disintegration of the body into a desperate, makeshift scrap heap of prostheses and spare parts. They are also mocking, and they brim with joy and sensuality.

The beautiful exhibit of Peter Winterhalter Aspell's drawings in pen, ink, and wash on paper, accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Gary Michael Dault, is aptly titled "beginnings: 26 drawings," for it is clear that despite the sumptuous painterliness of their backgrounds, drawing is the central and generative impetus behind Aspell's art. The work in "beginnings: 26 drawings," all but one of which are dated 2003 and 2004, has a lightness of touch, a fluid emotional range, a playful freedom and an intimacy rarely achieved in painting. While retaining the paintings' aching sensuality, the ink wash in these drawings powerfully evokes the sea, and night, and, of course, death.

In *The Tyrant*, 2003, a man who looks like he might be the homicidal dictator of some third-world regime, or the sinister trickster Papa Legba of Voudon mythology, leers out at the viewer, smiling. He is dressed in full uniform, covered with medals. In one hand he holds a club and with the other hand he points downward, as though commanding the viewer to kneel. Behind him, spectral shadows swarm like ghosts. *The Evil Puppeteer*, 2004, shows a priest with lopsided, spiralled eyes and a gaping, feral, buck-toothed mouth lowering a bound, naked woman into water on marionette strings. Both these drawings are satirical grotesques in a style similar to that of Francisco Goya, George Grosz and even Otto Dix, all masters of biting caricature. Yet Aspell cannot resist introducing an element of nocturnal lushness into the puddle and flow of ink, whereas artists like Dix or Grosz would never allow pleasure or unencumbered beauty to dilute their bitter laughter.

Aspell was fascinated by the way x-rays make the flesh transparent, vital organs clots of dark, white bones eerily glowing through, and a number of drawings in the exhibit reflect this. *Dancing Pierrot in x-Ray*, 2003, for instance, is a gay cacophony of slatted bonework, blobby, disconnected organs and diamond-shaped bits of cloth to which have been appended a pair of crude robotic arms executing flamboyant gestures. *Stick Man*,

2004, is an awkward, wonky figure with black shoes. His Frankenstein head is drawn with protruding ears and zombie eyes, his hand creepily waving to the viewer. And in *Manchine p52x3, 2004*, a skull in profile is set atop a prong of a neck, mouth agape and phosphorescent eyes glowering, its body a wide amalgam of bones and plates with diminutive stick arms. Aspell's x-ray drawings suggest the brittleness and vulnerability of the body, the flesh now a foggy and borderless flux of black and grey, yet the figures' postures, their demeanour, have a fierce, prideful defiance that both confronts and resists the depredations of time.

A number of the drawings in "beginnings" have a startling eroticism that is by turns mythic and intimate. In *Woman Waiving to a Sea Goddess, 2004*, a pared-down, reclining woman reaches with an elongated arm toward another figure splayed afloat in rising water, the moon shining behind them. *Night Sea Goddess, 2004*, is a spangled, iconic form, her face dissolving into the mobile dark, rising up over a dock beneath which a fish is swimming. The disjointed, entwined figures in the lovely *Soul Mates ii, 2004*, almost resemble the ravenous, lust-filled monsters of Picasso's synthetic Cubist period, except that here the carnal embrace is both urgent and tender. Aspell was clearly compelled by the natural and spiritual forces invoked by archaic cave art, Egyptian tomb painting and the work of West Coast First Nations peoples, yet his relationship to them is never sentimental. For Aspell, the eroticized flesh, "the body electric," to use Walt Whitman's phrase, is associated with both the feminine and the sea, and is always contingent and ephemeral—like pleasure, like the span of human life.

"Beginnings" also includes several more elaborate, allegorical sketches. In *Ozymandias, 2004*, with its reference both to the Egyptian monolith and the great poem by Percy B. Shelley, a shrill skeleton hovers over frightened, truncated, statue-like figures among palm trees and crosses. And in the earlier *Ship of Fools, 1998*, a man sits beneath a hot-air balloon, another is in the process of being crucified, and a woman swoons, all in a ship with a cruciform mast that looks as though it is already sinking. *Ship of Fools* is characteristic of the morbidity, lyricism and humour of Aspell's late drawings. It also evokes the great poem by D.H. Lawrence—another connoisseur of archaic art—of a closely related title, "Ship of Death," written while he was dying of tuberculosis in Vence, France: "There is no port, there is nowhere to go / only the deepening black darkening still / blacker upon the soundless, ungurgling flood / darkness at one with darkness, up and down / and sideways utterly dark so there is no direction any more."

Yet despite the pulsing, velvety darkness that haunts the drawing in "beginnings," Aspell's art is almost entirely devoid of despair. These drawings playfully and knowingly affirm the crippled, vanishing life of the human body and soul.