

Remembering Peter Aspell: 1918-2004

by Gary Michael Dault, *Canadian Art*, Spring 2005

Who was Peter Winterhalter Aspell?

It's possible, for all I know, that I'm the only one who, until recently, couldn't answer this question. There are certainly alarming gaps in what I have come to know, no question. But the fact is the late Peter Aspell—he died last December 28, just three days after his 86th birthday—was a painter, pure and glorious. His paintings, it seems to me, are far less well known than they ought to be. This, despite the fact that they are, as they always have been, fresh and fecund, sociologically and mythologically acute and—this is of no small import—always superbly painted.

Peter Aspell lived and worked in North Saanich, B.C., in a spacious, cedar-clad house and studio he shared with his wife, the painter Joy Anson. The house is tucked away in a copse of arbutus trees, where you could never find it unless you were actively seeking it. My having to seek it out last spring would lead to one of the most deeply enjoyable experiences of my career: meeting and getting to know, albeit briefly, this remarkable man.

Although he had a solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery as early as 1958, and although his work continues to be reasonably visible and, I would say, selectively admired on the West Coast (he had yearly exhibitions at Monte Clark Gallery in Vancouver from 1994 to 1999 and has been represented since 2001 by Vancouver's Buschlen Mowatt Gallery), Peter Aspell's work has always remained, oddly, a kind of painterly terra incognita in the rest of the country.

I first came upon his paintings rather by accident, in the course of looking at art galleries for a column I write in the *Globe and Mail*. The exhibition I saw was at Toronto's Lehmann Leskiw + Schedler Fine Art (as it then was) in late 2003 and was titled "Flesh and Steel." It was a knockout.

"Flesh and Steel" was dominated by a gigantic, Guernica-sized triptych (measuring nine feet by 21 feet) called *March of the Machines*, painted in 1999 in a two-week frenzy of what Aspell told me was a kind of painterly rapture. "The painting appears to be a tragicomic epic in black-and-white and creamy yellow," I wrote in the paper in 2003, "in which stern but ultimately rather winsome robotic figures go about determinedly cleaning up culture. Assorted tyrants (are they political tyrants or merely late-capitalist yes men?) are hoisted up out of the picture like parcels, sometimes actually devoured, but always curtailed and colourfully compromised by Aspell's methodic robots. That seems to be the story."

That is the story, narratively speaking, that fuels *March of the Machines*. But *March of the Machines* is rather more than a vast techno-operatic comic book. The work is essentially a panoramic summary of Peter Aspell's lifelong interests and preoccupations as an artist (he would no doubt have objected to my calling the painting a culmination, since that would have rather prematurely end-stopped what appeared, last summer, to be his unstoppable progress as a painter).

For one thing, the painting, as with so many of Aspell's paintings, is exceedingly black—as black and silky as shoe polish. The cream-coloured figures, which look as if they're carved from antique ivory, do not just float on its black ground, but live in it, as if blackness were the atmosphere they breathed. They exist as beings who emerge from the darkness, primordially incised there (Aspell used to scratch into his pigment with the back end of a sharpened brush), as in a gigantic passage of scrimshaw. It's as if his figures were pictographic, runic utterances, phoneme-like signs generating a meaning, defined, more often than not, by their being cut from the magma of the surrounding paint and then released into the picture.

Aspell's love affair with black was a lifelong one, fuelled by his deep veneration for Goya, Velázquez and, perhaps surprisingly, for Antoni Tàpies, whom he adored. He was also, he always maintained, "a very dark person. I'm dark and joyous," he told me, rather puckishly, during our visit last spring. "Don't forget," he added, "that I was brought up a Catholic. It was both a religion I detested [the guilt, the prurience of the priests] and, at the same time, one of the best things that ever happened to me [the dusty light, the incense, the olfactory space, the bones of the saints seized up in reliquaries]." And the prodigious blacks? "Black is a colour," he reminded me, "it's not just the absence of colour. And there's never one black. All my blacks are underpainted—so I work with green blacks, blue blacks, peach blacks and so on. I often use a lot of Van Dyke Brown for my blacks," he added. "It has a certain bloom to it."

And, speaking of bloom, while Aspell was clearly a master of painted blacks, he was also, at the same time, one of this country's finest colourists. His colour, a lifelong sojourn in chromatic voluptuousness, is in thrall to a long trajectory of imagistic development that began with an abiding childhood passion for archaeology, which, in turn, led to his fervent devotion to the art and culture of Egypt (the two-dimensional flatness, the way he always painted figures as if they were splayed frogs or butterflied shrimp), to African art and Indian miniatures ("We live, by contrast, in a colourless world," he says), to the mysteries of the great cave paintings ("For me, underpainting is cave light flickering through...and you have to have that caveman brain to be free!"), to outsider art and the art of the mad and the art of children ("Paul Klee introduced me to the child in myself"), to the writings of Jung.

He wrote poetry, but not very well, he told me. But he was a poet, profoundly a poet, and his lyricism and conceptual fervour live in the stirring mythopoeic cast of his sequential bodies of work as a painter: the teeming Pond Magic paintings, the long and ongoing Single Figure series (populated by black queens, white warrior women, generals and tyrants—who come to an apocalyptic end in *March of the Machines*), his memory portraits, the Burials (a subcategory of which is filled with the brilliant *Landscapes for Women* series), the Running Man series ("Men running, all consumed by flames, men running with the dark shadows of airplanes crossing a corrugated landscape"), the Falling Man series ("Figures falling back into their tombs"), the extraordinary *Fireships* ("Burning ships coming over the ocean"), of which, alas, there are only about 15, mostly because Aspell felt they were "over-particular." The idea, he said, "just didn't have enough juice in it to keep me going." Then, in the last decade, there were the X-Ray paintings and, most recently, *The Machines*.

The X-Ray paintings, though they draw upon a long history of transparency in art, stem specifically from a visit to the doctor, and from Aspell's fascination with the large-scale

medical charts he saw on the walls there. How lovely, he remembered thinking, if all these writhing, graphically exciting entrails could be made in searingly bright colours! And, yes, why not? "I'm not a doctor," Aspell told himself, "and I don't have to be anatomically correct." So he started inventing brand new pictorial entrails, rib cages, strap-pings of musculature and architectures of bone structure, making them in "beautiful high colours against dark backgrounds." The resulting paintings are among his very finest.

"The X-Ray paintings and the Machine paintings generated from them were first derived from Picabia," Aspell told me. Maybe their machineness, their mechanismo was. But in a magnificent painting like *Nocturnal X-Ray II*, Picabia's brittle wit and wickedness have been engulfed by a deep anthropological richness that evokes and transforms the X-rayed figure into a totemic doll so sumptuously painted you always end up lost in the outrageous haptic beauty of her surfaces. ("In the great shipwreck of time," wrote André Gide, in an essay on Poussin, "it is by their skin that masterpieces float.")

The newest development within the Machine paintings is the possession, by Aspell's figures, of prosthetic limbs. *The Bride*, from 2003, older in symbolic time than Duchamp's bleakly eroticized machine-women, proud possessor of a light-bulb diadem and ratcheted joints, also sports a prosthetic right leg.

Why prosthesis? Because there is a sense in which a prosthetic limb represents an enhancement, pictorially speaking, of the body's majestic vitality, not a diminishing of it—just as a robot can be looked upon as a refinement of the human body rather than its replacement. As David Wills points out in the "experiment in critical writing" he titled *Prosthesis* (1995), a prosthetic limb incarnates the complexity of conjunction. When, in a work like *The Birth of the Fechine*, a highlight of his exhibition last May at Buschlen Mowatt Gallery in Vancouver, Aspell depicted the birth of a prostheticized baby by a goddess-like woman who, in this robustly sensuous painting, is both half X-rayed and half-roboticized by prosthetic additions, he was joyously engaged in the depiction of totality, not partialism. Prosthesis, as Wills puts it with satisfying succinctness, "is inevitably about belonging." And the work of Peter Aspell—sixty years of it—is always about belonging. To paraphrase a poem by George Seferis, "As you are painting/the pigment grows less/The sea increases."

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