

Yoshifumi Hayashi, The alchemy of the brain in lead pencil

By Xavier-Gilles Néret

"[...] it is the body which feels, which thinks, which judges, which suffers, which enjoys; and [...] all its faculties are the necessary effects of its mechanism, organisation and structure."

– D. A. F. de Sade, *Juliette*, 1797.*

Working alone

Yoshifumi Hayashi was born in Fukuoka, Japan, in 1948, and took up drawing after moving to Paris in 1974. "I started drawing at the age of twenty-five," he recalls, "after coming to France from Japan to learn oil painting. But I didn't have much money, and painting materials were too expensive. Pencils and paper were more affordable, so I started drawing. I draw for economic reasons, not artistic ones."¹ Half a century later, the art of graphite, which has made him famous amongst his fans, remains his main activity.

At the same time, for approximately thirty years, he worked as a tourist guide for groups of Japanese people who knew nothing of his unusual obsessions when he showed them the historic heritage of the Île-de-France region and its surroundings – Versailles, Chartres Cathedral, the castles of the Loire, Mont Saint-Michel... "I was just doing it to earn money, it wasn't interesting at all, I didn't like it."²

Admittedly, Hayashi doesn't appreciate human beings in general. Unlike his contemporaries, most of whom now move mechanically along paths marked out by algorithms, eyes glued to their smartphones and headphones in their ears, he cherishes solitude and considers himself to be self-taught.

"I don't know why, but ever since I was a child I've had a solitary nature, which is nothing to be sad about. I didn't like school at all. Most of the time I didn't go to lessons. I didn't want to have any friends, I preferred to be on my own, at home. After high school, I only went to university to study philosophy for a fortnight. So everything I learnt – philosophy, psychoanalysis, science – was self-taught, from books. I also learnt drawing on my own. I don't want to live with people. I don't bother anyone and I don't want anyone to bother me. The reason I work as a draughtsman is not because it's my favourite form of art, but because I can work on my own. When I was a child, I tried to play the violin and the piano. But it would have taken too long to learn the technique. And ultimately I realised that I was incapable of playing these instruments. I had to give up. On the other hand, I was sure I could learn to paint without a teacher. Yes, it was my narcissistic drive that pushed me into painting and drawing. Learning to draw took a lot of effort. It was difficult. But working on my own gave me enormous pleasure."³

The guinea pig and vibrating matter

Hayashi does not identify with any social position and does not claim the status of "artist." Not out of modesty, but because his existential quest is of a different order. He is a researcher, an experimenter of life, in which the practice of drawing is only one aspect, inseparable from his approaches to philosophy, psychoanalysis and, ultimately, science, from a radically materialist philosophical perspective.⁴

"My fundamental question since childhood has been: who am I? Or rather: what am I? I don't know what I am. To find an answer, I first studied philosophy. But when I read Heidegger, I quit philosophy, because his theory is a religion. Then I became very interested in Freud's psychoanalysis, which attaches great importance to sexual desire. But in the end, this theory is a kind of romantic literature, not science. The sexuality conceived by Freud remains all too human. I think sexuality comes from matter. So I quit psychoanalysis. I have nothing but distrust for psychoanalysts. The brain system is not a fairy tale. What interests me now is neurology, the way in which brain mechanisms evolve and function. I'm not interested in art. Forgive me, people are generally not happy when I say that and I'm sorry. I'm interested in physical science. In other words, I'm sceptical about the human mind. Man has admittedly succeeded in creating culture and civilisation. However, this creation was not due to the human mind, but to the brain, which is absolutely matter. It was matter that composed the human mind. Metaphysical substance is a product of religious illusion, an abstract idea that conceals the truth. Truth is always matter. Man does not want to admit this truth, because he believes that the spirit is sublime and superior to matter. This is a completely childish narcissistic idea. It's matter that I want to find. The most mysterious thing in this world is not the mind, it's matter. I'm a materialist. To the question: what am I? I answer: I am neither an artist nor a philosopher. I am still desperately spinning an iron cylinder while being sprayed with cold water. I am a miserable guinea pig."⁵

These recent comments shed light on the disturbing proliferation of the cerebral cortex in his drawings, whether it invades the space around the figures (*Femme aux jambes croisées*, 1992), constitutes a part of the body (*Femme aux fesses-cerveau*, 1986) or emerges from female genitalia (*Mon enfant que j'aime*, 1987). They also echo an earlier text, published in 1996, a veritable profession of materialist-sensualist faith, in which Hayashi's art is seen as the extension of a vital and sexual desire that is itself inscribed in material nature:

"I often feel like a guinea pig, a little laboratory mouse running in a wheel without knowing why. My drawings were more the result of scientific experiments than works of art, as if I were a guinea pig who had been programmed or stimulated. I had to learn to express erotic images in order to recognise and resolve my irresistible sexual desire. For me, drawing is not a search for absolute beauty but rather a method of resolving the disturbing data transmitted to the guinea pig. I thought that developing my erotic images was the best therapy for isolating my anxiety. I recently realised that what I've just said depends on the laws of nature. My creation is a biological phenomenon, it's the phenomenon of biological genesis and evolution, like the repetition of cell division that forms organs as it proliferates. The erotic aspect of my drawings is secondary in this respect. My existence is simply a reflection of the laws of nature. And so are my drawings, which are simply copies of the biological process."⁶

⁴ In the philosophical sense, materialism is a doctrine that rejects the existence of a spiritual principle and reduces all reality to matter and its modifications. This is to be distinguished from the most common current meaning of the term "materialistic," which designates a behaviour devoted to consumption, a far cry from Hayashi's lifestyle, which is almost exclusively devoted to drawing.

⁵ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

¹ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, February-March 2023. Hayashi returned to live in Japan in 2021, so these interviews were conducted by telephone and by correspondence.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Hayashi's quest implies a radical questioning of any approach, religious or philosophical, that asserts a difference in nature between human beings, considered to be spiritual, and the rest of the world, which is "only" material. As Spinoza had already argued, man is not in Nature like an empire in an empire, and we have known since Darwin that the human species, like all others, is the product of biological evolution. For Hayashi, as for Nietzsche, "God is dead": there is no longer any need to make the metaphysical hypothesis of a spiritual principle distinct from matter, transcendent, omnipotent and creative, in order to account for the genesis of observable beings. We are nothing but vain forms of matter, as Mallarmé said, and this intuition is supported by contemporary science, which conceives of matter as an energetic, vibrating reality, from which individualizations emerge that are physico-chemical (crystallisation), biological (the cell, the organism) and psycho-social (subjectivity, spirituality).⁷

"Nowadays I am more sceptical of myself, because of the emergence of the new physics, of quantum theory. I'm unable to understand it in detail, but I could say that it's a physics of balancing, oscillation and variation. There is nothing in the world that is in an absolute static state. Things are always dynamic, in a state of oscillation. If something could no longer be dynamic, that would mean death."⁸

I got rid of the head...

This break with classical humanism, which elevated the human being beyond material nature, is important for understanding Hayashi's relationship with the world and his work as a draughtsman, in which interest in the human person tends to disappear in favour of a powerful impersonal desire of the body. This is why the female bodies that obsess and fascinate him have no real faces. In his first drawings, the head was sometimes represented, but reduced to a summary doll face with a stereotypical expression. Then it virtually disappeared. "For me, the head is synonymous with spirituality. And eroticism is about matter. So I got rid of the head."⁹ Although heads still appear in some more recent drawings, the Hayashian woman is devoid of personal identity and subjectivity. As the main object of desire, she is reified, often tied up, tortured, soiled or penetrated, reduced in any case to a fantasised and fantastic body, or to a fragment of a fetishised body, with a predilection for massive buttocks and prominent legs with stiletto heels, which the artist likes to juxtapose or stack in his compositions, suggesting their interchangeable nature. "The female bottom is my favourite target. It's the fleshiest part of the body."¹⁰

In an era dominated by an ideology that hunts down all forms of sexism, this approach is certainly not "politically correct," but it would be simplistic and inaccurate to see it as misogyny. Hayashi is in fact a misanthrope, with no regard for human beings in general, regardless of sex or gender. An attitude that is "nothing to be sad about," as he has said of his great loneliness, and that does not stem from resentment, but is rather a secondary consequence of his fully affirmative love of life and material bodies.

"There are female bodies in my drawings, but they are erotic drawings. I like female eroticism, with female bodies, but I can't say that I like women. It's not the same thing. If I like women, it's materially, sexually, but, in principle, I don't like human beings that much, and from that point of view, man or woman, it's all the same. Human beings mean nothing to me. I don't think I'm a human being. I am matter. I am substance. That's also why I live on my own. I'm not married. Ever since I was a child, I wanted to buy a house far from the city and I dreamt of being able to live without having to work for the mercantile society. But I'm still a long way from that utopia these days."¹¹

⁶ Yoshifumi Hayashi, in *Popo Color*, n° 2, 1996, p. 57.

⁷ See Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (1958), Jérôme Millon, 2005.

⁸ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

⁹ Yoshifumi Hayashi, quoted by Frédéric Taddéi, "Le serial painter," in *Newlook*, n° 128, April 1994.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Sexual desire and Surrealism

Hayashi's irresistible sexual desire is essential to his life and work, which is why he became interested in psychoanalysis, only to discover that it remained "all too human." On the other hand, Surrealism, "directed by Eros," had a deeper and more lasting influence on his work, which did not prevent him, from the end of the 1970s, from developing an erotic art unlike any other.¹²

"I'm not interested in painting in general. Sometimes I've looked at Renaissance paintings in the Louvre, but that was to learn the technique. I'm not interested in religious painting or Impressionism. But I am very interested in Surrealist painting. I had an unsavoury shock when I looked at works by Salvador Dalí and Giorgio De Chirico. I became obsessed with them. For me, painting means Surrealist painting. Surrealism does not seek to produce an illusion. It seeks to construct another world, another space-time. However, this idea is a little exaggerated and childish. Basically, Surrealism is a development of the brain. The brain is always moving forward. It wants to build another world that gives it maximum pleasure, like orgasm. So Surrealism is a neurological development. This neurological development needs powerful energy to elevate the body into another dimension. What kind of energy? What kind of energy can man have? Philosophical energy? No, let's not be hypocritical. This powerful energy comes from our sexual desire. In ancient times, the Greek sages said that the mother of philosophy is Eros. Surrealism is driven by Eros. Surrealist paintings are often erotic, which makes perfect sense. What I mean is that sexual desire is not just for the libido. Sexual desire is essential for philosophising, and for advancing systems of thought. Sexual desire is not the spiritual system but the material system. I'm well aware that this is not easy to understand. Because man has a tendency to look down on matter. My conclusion is very simple. Surrealism is an unfolding of the brain that is propelled by our sexual desire."¹³

The combined influence of Salvador Dalí and Giorgio De Chirico, the latter much appreciated by the Surrealists, is particularly visible in Hayashi's early works. He readily acknowledges this, associating the artist from Cadaqués with an ever-changing pansexualism, and the inventor of so-called metaphysical painting – with its empty squares, arcades and enigmatic shadows – with the repression of desire, two opposing but, in his view, complementary orientations. Although Hayashi quickly emancipated himself from the literal influence of these artists, the tension between the development and repression of sexual desire has remained an essential aspect of his most interesting works, conveying a powerful sense of the uncanny.

The comparison with Dalí was made in 1998 by Sarane Alexandrian, a member of the Surrealist group after the Second World War. On the one hand, Hayashi retains, from this influence, a "taste for carnal structures"¹⁴; but whereas Dalí represented "soft structures" and "sagging flesh," he is concerned only with "strong structures": rounded buttocks, plump thighs, firm body contours. On the other hand, he has "an equally hallucinatory, but more direct way of celebrating sexual cannibalism."¹⁵ In many of his drawings, the bodies seem to form a fantastic array of meat, a succession of beef-phalluses, vulva-carpaccios, pyramids of breasts, giant penis heads, bouquets of erect legs, superimposed rumps... So many dishes served with various sauces and garnishes, with a more or less pronounced scatological flavour: "The 'white sweat' of these women – as if they were sweating sperm – their streams of urine and their excremental puddings are the condiments

¹¹ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.* Although Hayashi has settled in a house he bought in Japan in 2021, we must not forget that his participation in mercantile society, by entrusting his drawings to galleries, is a vital economic necessity in his case.

¹² His first published collection of drawings, *Cent dessins érotiques*, Le Club du Livre Secret, 1982, covering the period between 1978 and 1982, is clear proof of this.

¹³ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.* As Sade wrote: "They declaim against the passions without bothering to think that it is from their flame philosophy lights its torch [...]."

¹⁴ Sarane Alexandrian, "Le dessinateur de la chair de poule," in Yoshifumi Hayashi, *Le Carnaval pour Roméo et Juliette*, Pan-Exotica, 1998.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

of his meals of female flesh. Terrifying elements become stimulants for a jaded sensuality.¹⁶

The recurrence of excrement and bodily fluids in Hayashi's work – sperm, cyprine, sweat, urine, unless they are drops of dew – disrupts the “strong structures” of the bodies, making them disturbing, even frightening, especially when they are enclosed in architectures with dizzying perspectives. The aim of these drawings is certainly to give pleasure, with an intense erotic dimension, but this is inseparable from a devastating black humour with a strong potential for terror. Far from flattering a consumerist appetite, the aim is to shake the very existence of the viewer, under the joint sign of Eros and Thanatos. Hayashi is fascinated by this tension, which he seeks to convey in his drawings: “I work with oppositions and contrasts. In my head, the most beautiful and the worst things merge together. That's why buttocks fascinate me. The form is so beautiful and the function so disgusting.”¹⁷

This comparison with Dalí does not prevent Alexandrian from emphasising Hayashi's great originality, “which sets him apart from other modern erotic artists, including Hans Bellmer”: “He is the visionary of sexual hunger pushed to its extreme consequences, finding even frightening amalgams desirable and recreating the world according to his fatal impulses.”¹⁸ Hailing Hayashi as “the greatest draughtsman of goose bumps,”¹⁹ literally and in every sense of the word, Alexandrian comments on a series of works from the 1990s featuring anthropomorphised and sexualised plucked chickens, “plates of chickens to be eaten with women's thighs raised and spread, shapely legs with high heels on their feet.”²⁰ There's also a carnivalesque twist on Romeo and Juliet, transformed into “a pair of sadomasochistic lovers, a chicken-man and a chicken-woman who seem to devour each other, and who are more likely to panic the consumer than whet his appetite when he finds them on his table.”²¹ The bodies depicted appear to be “filled with shivers of combined anxiety and pleasure, and the texture of their skin is as if modified by the secret horror that animates them.”²² The same is true for the viewer, who can feel “a complex emotional shock, a mixture of desire and horror in the face of his powerful images.”²³ Such obsessions have tormented the artist since he was a child: at the age of ten, while still living in his home town of Fukuoka, “he was distressed for a long time by a dream in which he was attacked by a giant chicken. It wasn't an erotic dream, but it's clear that by making the chicken a sexual symbol at a later date, he was able to lessen the terror of this persistent vision. At the same time, he was expressing his fear of sexual excesses by suggesting that they transformed women into monstrous birds.”²⁴

On the edge of desire, pornography

While Hayashi's work contains sexual symbolism and a sublimation of the body through his astonishing mastery of the gradations of lead pencil and the treatment of shadows, he never succumbs to the simple aestheticism typical of a mawkish, standardised and massively disseminated eroticism. On the contrary, the eroticism he seeks, which I would venture to call authentic, is profoundly singular and unafraid of obscenity or so-called “bad taste,” as close as possible to a certain idea of pornography, which it is important to defend against the cohort of puritans of all kinds, be they openly reactionary or self-proclaimed progressives.

Esparbec summed this subject up, magnificently, when talking about pornographic literature, of which he was one of the masters. In his books, he sought to “describe the sexual” and banish watered-down eroticism, the

“recourse to prettiness,” to “well-written content” and to “metaphors for fear of the obscene.” “Sex is too salacious, so we embellish it, we perfume it, not just in writing, but in life itself.”²⁵ Pornography cannot be reduced to the photographic or cinematographic industry with which it is most often associated by those who want to denounce its alienating dimensions, omitting in the process the poetry it conveys.²⁶ After all, aren't we “all pornographers when we make love,”²⁷ a jubilant practice par excellence? “In fact,” writes Esparbec, “we are afraid of sex. Of course, it's all over the walls, it's all we can see; but it's a watered-down, naturalised, denatured kind of sex, a latex replacement kind of sex. Real sex, with its miseries, its terrors, its not always appetising smells, its grotesque rituals, sex as it is practised in real life and not in the videocassettes or trendy novels about “brazen” young women or gang bang girls who content themselves with verbose excesses, that is the Grail I am seeking.”²⁸

This Grail is the object of an indefinite pursuit. Sexual intercourse, however intense, is only one stage in the process, which continues in pornography. Like authentic eroticism, pornography is a matter of imagination and catharsis, through words, for the writer, or pencil strokes, for the artist. “Why pornography in life?” asks Esparbec. “Because sex is not enough. [...] Even when you've come, there's something missing, you don't want it to stop, you want to stay on the edge of desire. [...] You're always on the edge of something that could disappear at any moment. And you remain balanced on the edge of the abyss... [...] The flesh is not enough to satisfy the needs of the mind, which is why pornography was invented. [...] What I call pornography is the depiction of a form of sexuality in which fantasy plays a primordial role, a sexuality which, unlike “healthy,” “liberated,” “fulfilling” sexuality, reflects a certain malaise [...]: it's physical (erection, moistening, tumescence) but this physicality can only manifest itself in an echo of the mental, the cerebral [...] We're looking for something that's constantly escaping [...] and that something is, for me, a hole, that of the woman. A hole that is not simple, that is surrounded by strange things... The need to open up the woman, and when she's open we see that there's nothing inside but this need to open her up that we're constantly pursuing...”²⁹

This incisive statement is perfectly compatible with Hayashi's conception, if we understand that what we call “the mind” resolves itself in “the mental, the cerebral,” so ultimately in the material body, a physical organism in relation to a complex associated environment. In many of his drawings, authentic eroticism, intense and suggestive through a multiplicity of sexual symbols, is indistinguishable from an equally authentic pornography centred on “sex” in all its aspects, as long as the latter rises to the dimensions of irresistible Desire.

Sexual cannibalism

Although Hayashi's art has to do with imagination and catharsis, his “celebration of sexual cannibalism” differs from that of his acquaintance Issei Sagawa, presented as the “Japanese cannibal” by the media following the murder of a Dutch student in Paris in 1981, whose corpse he raped before eating it over a period of three days, “an expression of love,” in his own words, whilst documenting his meticulous butchering with photographs.

The two men were on friendly terms, and shared some common passions, such as contemplating the scantily-clad visitors to the Louvre on sunny days. “When Sagawa lived in Paris,” Hayashi recalled in 1994, “he often went to the Louvre. Not to admire the paintings or sculptures, but to look at the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Yoshitumi Hayashi, quoted by Frédéric Taddéi, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Sarane Alexandrian, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Esparbec, quoted by Christophe Bier, “La Pharmacienne, le Vaudeville sale d'Esparbec,” in *La Pharmacienne*, La Musardine, 2015, p. 223.

²⁶ Annie Le Brun, with her usual perceptiveness, sees the pornographic industry, however undeveloped it may be, as an “unspoiled domain,” conducive to “reverie that has not finished opening a back door to desert reality.” See *Du trop de réalité*, Stock, 2000, p. 279-281.

²⁷ Esparbec, “Quelques réflexions sur la pornographie,” afterword to *La Pharmacienne*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁹ Esparbec, quoted by Christophe Bier, *op. cit.*, p. 226-227.

female visitors. I have the same habit as him. The Louvre is a place full of women of all kinds, who you can contemplate at your leisure. Especially in summer, when it's hot and they're very lightly dressed. Absorbed in their contemplation, they don't realise that we're watching them. It's very pleasant. Sagawa and I often talked about the thousands of sensations we've had whilst watching them.³⁰ Hayashi is a self-confessed "sex maniac," and frequently associates the pleasures of the flesh with those of the table, both in his lifestyle and in his drawings. "Eating and fucking are two essential pleasures. Without them, life isn't worth living, and you don't want to think. It is sexual desire that propels philosophy. Without sexual desire, I can't work. Sexual desire is probably the most important thing in life."³¹ He prefers European women, who are generally "thicker" in his eyes than Japanese women, who, although "softer," "don't have enough flesh to be really appetising."³²

The fact remains that Hayashi differs from Sagawa in one detail: he has never killed or devoured anyone! For him, as for Esparbec, the "need to open women up" is purely imaginary. The draughtsman only "gets rid of the head" or adapts the best parts of his "women of lead,"³³ who are in no way flesh and blood beings, but fictitious, fantastic creatures, existing, in delicate pencil strokes on paper, only in the fantasies of the artist and his viewers. The challenge is to remain in the zone of tension between reality and imagination that keeps us "on the edge of desire," as one would remain on the edge of an abyss. These are fine, subtle things that are hard to hear for the big donkey-eared puritans who claim to set themselves up as censors of creative freedom, driven by a hatred of life and the carnal body, hidden behind the paternalism of a supposed defence of innocence in danger, in the name of moral or religious virtues.³⁴ As long ago as December 1978, Hayashi's exhibition entitled "Fantasminquiétantes images" at the Galerie Jacques Casanova in Paris was, according to the invitation card, "forbidden to under 25s," a humorous way of underscoring the absurdity of censorship in matters of art, and, perhaps, of warding off bad luck.

Hiroshima and the great Greek sensuality

This affirmative force, emancipated from any resentment or shame, can also be seen in the way Hayashi retrospectively interprets the text that Pierre Bourgeade devoted to him in 1998. Like Alexandrian, Bourgeade places Hayashi in the tradition of Surrealism, but he also sees him as "a child of Hiroshima,"³⁵ an artist in tune with the new world that emerged after this traumatic event, which in his view radicalised and universalised the Surrealist revolution. Surrealism had previously been the preserve of an elite, devoted to automatic writing, collage, the wildness of dreams and freedom from conventional morality. The new world, which "promises to be most interesting," "already rich in famines, wars, genocides, disasters, killings of all kinds, and no doubt the worst is yet to come,"³⁶ means, according to Bourgeade, that "the old world has been annihilated," that of the Greeks who founded Western civilisation, who believed that beauty, truth and goodness were one and the same, and that works of art had the mission of exalting religious and moral values. In short, Hayashi combines "the most extreme formal perfection with a powerful spirit of destruction," and reaffirms that "the provocation inherent in the desire for freedom knows no bounds."³⁷

³⁰ Yoshifumi Hayashi, quoted by Frédéric Taddéi, *op. cit.*

³¹ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

³² Yoshifumi Hayashi, quoted by Frédéric Taddéi, *op. cit.*

³³ *Femmes de plomb* (Women of Lead) is the title of a collection of Hayashi's drawings published in 1993.

³⁴ The same can be said of Stu Mead's Nymphs, purely pictorial creatures that have provoked outrage from the far right and various associations in recent years, culminating in legal action. See Déline Luca, *Nympha Stumeadiana*, E, 2020; Xavier-Gilles Néret, "Stu Mead, Rendre les choses plus sales," in *artpress*, n° 511, June 2023; and Christophe Bier, *Obsessions Bis*, foreword and chapter 99, Le Dilettante, 2023.

³⁵ Pierre Bourgeade, "L'art d'après Hiroshima," in Yoshifumi Hayashi, *Le Carnaval pour Roméo et Juliette*, *op. cit.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

This interpretation, however interesting and suggestive, is a somewhat caricatured projection by the author. Incidentally, Hayashi rejects it categorically. "No! My work has nothing to do with the atomic bomb or Japanese trauma. The atomic bomb had a big influence on Japanese culture, that's for sure. But not on me. When I was in Japan, before coming to France, everything I learned on my own – physics, art and music – was Western. That's why I wanted to leave Japan. Japanese culture didn't interest me. Now I like it, but I don't want to get involved in that field. It's Western culture that interests me."³⁸

While it is true, in Hayashi's view, that the mission of works of art is no longer to exalt religious and moral values, and that the "old world" of the Greeks has been profoundly renewed by modern and contemporary science, this world has not been "annihilated" in his eyes: "It is often said that Greece is the mother of the arts. Quite a few remains have been found in this day and age. And the Greeks discovered a very important law. The Greeks began to understand that natural phenomena are not directed by God, but by the laws of physics. They established a system of thinking – "philosophy" – and they ended up creating science."³⁹ Hence why the artist remains attached to "the Greek sages of ancient times" who "said that the mother of philosophy is Eros."⁴⁰ In so doing, he is following in the footsteps of Pierre Louÿs, who, in his magnificent preface to *Aphrodite* (1896), urged us to return to "the great Greek sensuality" and forget "eighteen barbaric, hypocritical and ugly centuries," "when the most sensual love, the divine love from which we were born, was untainted, unashamed and without sin." Hayashi is one of the most authentic contemporary practitioners of the capital formulas of this same preface: "Sensuality is the mysterious but necessary and creative condition of intellectual development. Those who have not felt the demands of the flesh to their limits, either to love them or to curse them, are thereby incapable of understanding the full extent of the demands of the spirit."⁴¹

Desire/delirium for the world

For Hayashi, sexual desire/delirium is not just about the female body, but also extends beyond humanity⁴² on a cosmic scale. This is reflected in the gradual evolution of his work, which began with a focus on female eroticism with bodies most often located in enclosed spaces with disturbing perspectives, before expanding, from 2013 onwards, to the dimensions of the universe, in fantastic and phantasmagorical landscapes – islands, clouds, creeks. Continuity is ensured by the subtleties of lead pencil, devoted in all cases to the erotic weight that lies at the heart of his work, whether in his microcosms – nudes, vulval and ithyphallic flowers, "still lifes" brimming with life – or his more recent landscapes, which constitute macrocosmic developments, themselves teeming with sexualised elements.

Such an evolution can also be understood as the culmination of the exercise in depersonalisation required to open up to the mysteries of the energetic matter that makes us up as much as it makes up the world. Hayashi does not reject the notion of the unconscious as such, but rather the familialist conception of Freudian psychoanalysis, narrowly confined to the human and to the Oedipal subject mired in his "dirty little secret." From a Rimbaudian as well as a Deleuzian perspective, Hayashi is no longer concerned with bringing the "ego" into being where the "id" was, but with understanding that "I is another" and that it is important to open up to the intensities that run through us, in order to feel desire/delirium not for the mediocre family triangle but for the vast world. As Deleuze writes, "Individuals find a real name for themselves, rather, only through the harshest exercise in depersonalisation, by opening themselves up to the multiplicities everywhere

³⁸ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Pierre Louÿs, Preface to *Aphrodite* (1896), in *L'Œuvre érotique*, Les Belles Lettres and Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1994, p. 5.

⁴² *Au-delà de l'humanité* (Beyond Humanity) is the title of a series of drawings produced in 2014 and *Beyond the Humanity* that of a booklet published by Innen, Zurich, in 2019. Hayashi's landscapes were first unveiled in 2016 in *Envol*, a book published in Japan by Atelier Third.

within them, to the intensities running through them."⁴³ This leads, beyond the Good and Evil of dominant morals, to a new ethics of immanence, which could be summed up as follows: "Stop thinking of yourself as an ego in order to live as a flow, a set of flows in relation with other flows, outside of oneself and within oneself."⁴⁴

Hence the importance, in Hayashi's life, of music, which he listens to every day and considers "indispensable," because it is a source of pleasure and an opportunity to open up to the experience of depersonalisation. From the age of twelve or thirteen, it was through music that he was awakened to art, and the artists who had the greatest impact on him were not painters or draughtsmen, but composers, in particular Debussy and Ravel. In fact, his love of them was the decisive reason why he settled in France rather than the United States, Germany or Italy, even though he appreciated Mahler, Scriabin and Varèse...

His approach to Debussy – a great friend of Pierre Louÿs – and Scriabin gives us a better understanding of his own conception of drawing. "Debussy's music is sensual. His symphonic poem *La Mer* is a masterpiece. The strange thing is that this music doesn't require a human being. It expresses the movement of the waves, the light, the clouds, a scene of variation and transition of time."⁴⁵ Scriabin, in his 5th and 7th piano sonatas performed by Richter, or his *Poem of Ecstasy*, "expresses incredible cosmic energy. It goes beyond human possibilities."⁴⁶ The music that transports Hayashi has no need for human beings; it provides pleasure and opens up to "cosmic energy" through its expression, in resonance with vital and sexual energy. The same is true of his drawings: both his nudes, in which the female body appears not as a human being but as a material microcosm, and his fantastical landscapes, freely inspired by the creeks of Marseille, "more impressive and interesting" to him than those in Japan, or painstakingly taken from photographs of the bay of Cala Bóquer, in Majorca, and sublimated, in all cases, by the virtuoso treatment of light and the addition of singular organic growths. "I love wide open spaces," he says. "I have antennae to feel cosmic energy. Like insects."⁴⁷

For the artist, experiencing oneself as a set of flows in relation to other flows therefore implies being caught up in becoming-animals⁴⁸: becoming-insect, becoming-guinea pig... Or becoming-dog, if we consider that the "doggies" that appear in several drawings created between 1987 and 1996, fascinated by the legs, buttocks, genitals or excrement of their gigantic mistresses, are all self-portraits, as the artist himself suggests: "Some are inspired by childhood memories, when I was a young puppy."⁴⁹

Capturing forces

Hayashi's approach consists in capturing and revealing vital and cosmic forces, the energy of vibrating matter, as Debussy did with the three movements of *La Mer*, which convey the vibrations "from dawn to noon on the sea" and those of the "play of waves" or the "dialogue between wind and sea." In this way, the artist fully embraces the "common problem" of the arts as set out by Deleuze: "In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. [...] Paul Klee's famous formula – 'Not to render the visible, but to render visible' – means nothing else. The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible. Likewise, music attempts to render sonorous forces that are not themselves sonorous."⁵⁰

Hayashi achieves this ambition through the sheer power of his body, combined with that of his pencils and the sheets of paper he carefully chooses so that they can physically withstand the multiple layers he imposes on them to achieve the deep black he seeks, whose density, by contrast, reveals all the nuances of his greys. His technique remains ancestral, without the use of machines or technological devices. "Digital, computer-generated images are interesting," he says, "but I don't like them at all. Because when I run, I want to run with my feet, with my legs, I don't want to run in a car. The car is interesting, but I want to run with my body, myself. I don't want to use machines, because I want to work on my own. That's important."⁵¹

Neither does Hayashi take drugs or performance-enhancing substances, although he is interested in studying their effects on brain mechanisms from a theoretical point of view. While drugs can be effective in developing abilities and acting as a channel for the transmission of impersonal perceptions, such a phenomenon is generally not long-lasting, unless the doses are increased, at the risk of leading to morbid dependence. So he has always been wary of them, preferring to remain, in the words of Henri Michaux, "more the water drinking type." "I've never tried drugs. I never drink alcohol, not even wine. Nor do I smoke. Tobacco and alcohol are my enemies. I want to develop my skills without doping products."⁵² Yet some of his drawings might suggest the opposite. *Endorphine* (1993), in particular, where the female figure, syringe in one hand, a smoking brain in the other, is clearly in an altered state. Her monstrous bodily deformation, with her five crossed legs, appears to be an illusion caused by the hallucinogenic substance that has just been consumed. But the title of the work suggests a different interpretation: since endorphins are secreted by the body itself, the draughtsman can produce his own without any exogenous contribution, through his own efforts and bodily pleasures alone, particularly at the moment of orgasm, and even more so when he engages in his daily, obstinate work as a draughtsman, the physical dimension of which is fundamental and effectively constitutes his main drug.

"Learning to draw took a lot of effort. It was difficult. And it still is. My technique isn't perfected yet. I'm still working and it's possible that I'm still making progress, although I'm not sure. I draw every day, for hours on end, even on Sundays and public holidays. I never take a holiday. To do a large drawing, about 40 x 50 centimetres, it takes a month and a half. For a medium-sized drawing, at least two weeks. It's not easy to draw. It's very hard. But I carry on anyway. When I finish a drawing, I feel pleasure. Otherwise, I wouldn't go on. If there's no pleasure, you can't work. But finishing a drawing is not my goal. When I've finished a drawing, I'm a bit happy, I take a look at it, then I put it away, and I do another one, right away, over and over again. What you have to do is keep working. Completion isn't interesting. What interests me is the work. Cold water pushes the guinea pig to turn his wheel. I don't like cold water at all. But it pushes me, so I have to work. I have to keep going until I die."⁵³

⁴³ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 51.

⁴⁵ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible..." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

⁴⁹ Yoshifumi Hayashi, quoted by Frédéric Taddéi, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. The Logic of Sensation*, chapter 8, "Painting Forces," London: Continuum, 2003, p. 56.

⁵¹ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Subtle gradations of lead pencil

To make the erotic and cosmic energy visible in his drawings, Hayashi employs all the subtlety of his art of gradation – chiaroscuro, greyscale, velvety shading – which he masters with such skill and sensitivity. Another analogy can be drawn with music, when the artist explains why he doesn't like Boulez's interpretation of Debussy, which "makes his ears bleed." "The reason is very simple: despite its analytical precision, it lacks harmony because Boulez has forgotten to make the gradations in the sound, something in which Karajan excelled. As a draughtsman, I know all about gradations. They are essential to good painting or a good drawing."⁵⁴ In his nudes, still lifes and landscapes, the gradations help to make the vibrant minerality of the material sensitive, echoing the lesson of quantum physics that everything is energy in motion. As Paul Klee, himself imbued with this new science, wrote, all art is first and foremost "genesis": not just music or poetry, but also painting and drawing, which are irreducible to the arts of space, because they involve time and movement, through which a point becomes a line, which generates a surface, then a volume. "The pictorial work springs from movement, it is itself fixated movement, and it is grasped in movement (eye muscles)."⁵⁵

To contemplate Hayashi's drawings is to experience their vibrations, suggested by the gradations according to changes in light or the viewer's position. This is particularly true of his landscapes and large still lifes, with their complex composition and multiple elements that give the impression of literally swarming. But also in his nudes, where the vibratory effect is sometimes reinforced by a phenomenon of optical suggestion, created by the reversibility of masculine and feminine forms in the same image, setting the viewer's gaze and mind in motion. "There's something phallic about stilettos. They're erect penises under the sole."⁵⁶ The muscles of a calf become a buttock, or, more classically, a flower appears to be made up of vulvas and penises. Hayashi likes to play with such ambiguities.

Having been lucky enough to live with one of his drawings, *Scène hermaphrodite* (1998), I can confirm this. This work shows a full-figured, typically Hayashian female pair of buttocks, supported by the body's small forearms in a yoga position, in an empty room whose moon lighting is suggested by subtle plays of shadow. I was immediately fascinated by this drawing, a calm, down-to-earth block rising from an obscure disaster. But the meaning of the title eluded me. Between the buttocks dotted with droplets of an enigmatic substance – dew, sweat, sperm, diamonds? – the visible part unambiguously shows a vulva with delicate lips, devoid of any trace of a male appendage, even a micropenis, which hermaphrodites are supposed to have. However, one fine day, I had an epiphany, which finally revealed the meaning of the title to me: the young girl's bottom metamorphosed in an instant into a giant penis head, a scene that my heterosexually conditioned gaze had initially failed to see. Since then, the magic of the work has been strengthened, the apparent stability of the composition being put in tension by the overwhelming alternative manifestation of the two sexes. A double Grail from now on, echoing Gilbert Lely's moving words: "The physical difference between man and woman, this fabulous luxury dazzles me."⁵⁷

Once again, this luxury is irreducible to human forms, since it can be found at different scales of matter. "I think," says Hayashi, "that sexuality comes from matter. It is a physical system, a law of matter. Sexuality is not just a human practice. There are other sexualities in this world, involving attractions and the differential of more and less. All forms of animal sexuality, but also, for example, electricity. And probably even gravity, which is a fundamental law of nature. As for what we call spiritual love, it's a kind of sexuality that comes from matter."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye; the notebooks of Paul Klee*, New York: G. Wittenborn, 1961, p. 78.

⁵⁶ Yoshifumi Hayashi, quoted by Frédéric Taddéi, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Gilbert Lely, handwritten phrase on copy no. VIII of the clandestine version of *Ma Civilisation*, 1942, subsequently placed as an exergue to *L'Épouse infidèle*, Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966.

⁵⁸ Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

Untimely

With all due respect to the post-Duchampian vulgate which rehashed some of the revolutionary proposals of the inventor of the ready-made in a caricatured and dogmatic way in the 1970s and 1980s, retinal art and its know-how are not necessarily outdated. Hayashi's fifty years of production, which continue to seduce onlookers who appreciate art as much as life and eroticism, are one of the most striking signs of this.

The recurrence of female bodies emerging from urinals in a series of drawings produced in 1984, including the emblematic *Éducation II*, can thus be seen as an ambivalent nod to *Fountain*, a tribute to a radical and iconoclastic work when it first appeared in 1917, but also a nose-thumbing to what it subsequently became, an icon and one of the sources of so-called "contemporary" art, which is more often than not no more than a new academicism, spectacular and domesticated, producing monumental installations destined for museums and the private collections of the great financiers of globalised capitalism.⁵⁹ Hayashi may not have been thinking of Duchamp when he created this series, seeing his own urinals as symbols of sexual desire amongst many others in his work, as he confided to me. But with his untimely drawings, both in terms of their content, which offends so-called "good taste" and conventional morality, and in terms of their meticulous craftsmanship, worthy of the masters of the Trecento,⁶⁰ we have proof that retinal art is not dead and that it remains relevant, if it can succeed in an unprecedented way in "saturating every atom,"⁶¹ capturing insensible forces and making the whole of the viewer's body – skin, brain, marrow, guts, genitals... – vibrate, intensifying the life that flows through them.

Hayashi's drawings also embody a macabre dance that sweeps everything away, like Ravel's *Bolero*, whose erotic charge moves him, a "striptease gradually leading to death."⁶² Eros, once again, reveals himself to be inseparable from Thanatos, in an irreducible and striking tension, and it is difficult to say whether one dominates the other in his work. "I don't know myself," he admits. Before adding: "But even if I don't want to admit it, we're all heading for death, unfortunately. There's no avoiding that. Ultimately, I may be matter, but I'm still a human being, and in the end, death awaits me. Especially since I'm old now, almost 75, so I think about death, about my death. It's inevitable."⁶³

All the more reason to enjoy the poetic power of Hayashi's drawings unapologetically and without delay, since they offer sumptuous opportunities to escape from the dreary world of paths marked out by algorithms, to nourish irrepressible desires and to open up the horizon, in order to "inject passion back into life."

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Translated by Juliet Powys

⁵⁹ See Laurent Cauwet, *La domestication de l'art*, La Fabrique, 2017; and Annie Le Brun, *Ce qui n'a pas de prix*, Stock, 2018.

⁶⁰ In his short preface to the collection *Cent dessins érotiques*, *op. cit.* Walerian Borowczyk emphasises Hayashi's "affinities" with "the work of the masters of the Trecento." For this preface, the gallery owner Jacques Casanova had initially approached Michel Foucault: "Sitting in the gallery, fascinated by all the works spread out at his feet on the floor... after meditating for long minutes (excessive to my enthusiasm)... [Foucault] said to me: 'No! It's fantastic! But it's not my thing.'" See the catalogue Yoshifumi Hayashi, *Dessins*, Galerie Jacques Casanova, 1988.

⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, November 28th, 1928, London: Hogarth Press, 1953, p. 139.

⁶² Yoshifumi Hayashi, interviews with the author, *op. cit.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*