

THE ARCHETYPE CAST

Peter Wächtler
"Ad Astra"

Kunsthalle Zürich
 31 August – 17 November 2019
"Up the Heavies"
 Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare
 12 October 2019 – 9 May 2020

The fringe figures populating Peter Wächtler's short stories, watercolours, sculptures, and animations are often in transit. Not only physically but existentially. I'm thinking of the ones who, having measured the distance between their aspirations and their station, find themselves in impassioned displays of self-fictionalisation: the Teddy boys, steam-punks, sartorialists, and rockabilly-types who keenly upcycle the styles and stories of eras long dead. Or the wizards, dragons, trolls, and other time-worn cultural templates that also function as conduits of emotion, often intimate levels of anxiety and shame. Both feelings are central to Wächtler's most recent solo exhibitions, "Ad Astra" at Kunsthalle Zürich, and "Up the Heavies" at Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare, Bolzano, Italy.

"Up the Heavies" reads as set of vignettes from a larger plot with something of a Rip Van Winkle vibe. Whatever "heavies" conjures (thugs, hitmen, bikers, bouncers), it may also refer to the two large bronze characters at the heart of the show: a bear sailor (*Orso*, all works 2019) and wolf sailor (*Lupo*), who, with windblown navy hats, heavy rucksacks, and Popeye pipes, are at a crossroads. As if returned from a long journey,

coming back to find everything changed. They've changed too. Both utterly beleaguered – wet fur, drool, and sagging pants intricately modelled in cold bronze. Shoelaces and belts missing, perhaps to save them from themselves, if not from their humiliation.

Their juncture is bookended by empty signifiers of domesticated nature and heavy industry. At one end of the gallery, two flower bouquets – sinuous iron stems with filigree glass blossoms – three steel cranes at the other. Between these, a variety of watercolours and photographs hang on four large blocks in awkwardly close proximity. It's a meta-fictional group show within a solo show by invented artists whose analogue means, like Wächtler's, pay little heed to the changing modes of production around them.

A series of Hasselblad photographs of castle ruins ("Ruins of Mankind. Fragments of my soul") shows off all the chiaroscuro tricks of a Sunday

painter on a site visit. Three watercolours (*The Scenery*), equally emo, are of kinked tree branches and vistas at night; two others illustrate a hippyish figure shielding a crystal ball from an intruder, first with an old sweater, then under a bed (*Hold on to Your Vision 1&2*). Off to the side and barely looking on, two haggard sailors wonder just what is going on.

Their disorientation – which would result from, say, the vacuum effects of a de-industrialised working class displaced by endless gentrification and the cultural class – should be familiar. That is, a lack of belonging, coupled with neoliberal taunts of self-actualisation despite comically distant chances. There's a similar discrepancy between the viewer (as well as the artworks) and a tall column at the far end of the gallery. It rises past a cutaway in the ceiling towards a skylight. Another bouquet of flowers sits atop it. Eye-level with the private collection on the mezzanine, it looks in with an 'any room?' sort of expression.

"Ad Astra" is pared back by comparison, but with similar exaggerations of scale and space. Near the entrance, an



View of "Peter Wächtler: Ad Astra", Kunsthalle Zürich

Photo: Lucas Ziegler



Photo: Hannes Ochsenreiter

Peter Wächtler, *Lupo*, 2019
 Bronze, 61 x 70 x 50 cm, Installation view, "Up the Heavies", Fondazione Antonio Dalle Nogare

innocuous plinth – the only grounded artwork in the exhibition – stands at the edge of the action and throws things off kilter. Deeper in the gallery, two giant mobiles, each with four oversize fountain pens dangling off them, slowly orbit the width of the room. The plinth, with skewed angles of a ladder charcoaled on its sides, conjures ascent (to the stars?) but is dwarfed by the celestial pens, whose plaster surfaces have nervous rivulets pawed into them.

Wächtler stars as a prototypical but strangely uptight vampire in his latest film, *Untitled (Vampire)*. Projected large between the two mobiles, the ten-minute silent film follows its deathless protagonist through the monotonies of castle life. Murky horizons were made by injecting coloured liquids into a water-filled fish tank – rock particles float upwards in fantastical scenes.

These shots are interspersed with a diaristic text of an almost patronising economy: "I live in the mountains" (mountain scene); "I meet my girlfriend" (vampire meets girlfriend scene); "We kiss" (kiss scene); "We are very close" (close-up kiss scene) and soon meanders into a confession of shame, loneliness, and paranoia. His greatest fear? Being laughed at for a leopard printed blanket he bought to "feel a little better". But self-care equates with shame. He feels pathologised: "I felt so vulnerable. Fragile. Like a patient. A patient of a doctor."

The vampire, like the artist, is a writer, of course. He quills letters that pile up in wax-stamped envelopes and entrusts his friend, a faceless anchorite (his projection?) to deliver them to a red-haired coachman. For whatever reason, the monk tosses them away. The addressee was never clear, or there,

anyway. Envelopes repeatedly drift off in gusts of wind. This gesture, another exhausted cultural sentiment, was probably stripped from the ruins of a Hollywood production – that industry with a similar penchant for fantasy revivalism. But it's exactly these gestures (characters, places, structures of feeling) that are capable of sincere sentimentality in the face of incoherent irony.

At the film's end, with fountain pens circling overhead, the vampire sleeps. The text describes a dream. I think he's at the beach. A sun-dried chunk of leather, like algae washes ashore. Things aren't so bad now. Here's a little thing for writing on or crafting with. Like a glowing orb or leopard blanket, it's a hapless prop for wellness, sure, but one anachronistic enough not to be jeopardised by the technologies surrounding it.

Roxanne Hunter