

SIMON EDMONDSON

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NICOLA JACOBS GALLERY

Simon Edmondson is a painter who, given a little encouragement, will lean across a cafe table and quietly recite John Clare "I long for scenes where man hath never trod", or "There is a charm in solitude that cheers". He is clearly an unabashed romantic, someone for whom Coleridge's "woman waiting for her demon-lover" remains a powerful idea, and his new paintings do nothing to alter this impression. Many of them seem to be variations of the *liebestod* theme. (It is not for nothing that a painting of 1987 is called *A Hundred Ardent Lovers Fell into Eternal Sleep*.) His tumultuous, twisting figures with their intensely expressive faces could be experiencing ecstasy or agony; they could be dreaming or dying; they seem at once to defy gravity and to be crushed by it.

Even this brief account should make it clear that we are dealing with something more than fashionable Neo-Romanticism. Much of the work that is loosely grouped under this label does little more than purvey decorative nostalgia, but Edmondson does not forget that the original romantic movement was a passionate revolt against outworn artistic conventions. Indifferent to fashion, and impatient of categories he is apt to talk of the "realism" of Delacroix and the "romanticism" of Courbet, insisting that a Courbet painting of a dead trout is as much an expression of a private drama as one of Soutine's carcasses.

Edmondson does not attempt to resuscitate a dead style so much as investigate a path not followed. The starting point of that path is quite easily located. It is the point, circa 1910, when late-romanticism with all its chromatic excess and harmonic convolution was about to make the leap into expressionism and modernity. It is a moment that looks all the way back to the Baroque, and forward to some point that has yet to be located, except that we know it lies beyond modernism. In music it is expressed in Mahler's funeral marches, fate-motifs, and songs of rapt retreat from the world. In painting it reveals itself as a crisis of symbolism, - Bocklin's *Isle of the Dead*, Klimt's bizarre allegories of sex, death and jurisprudence, or Kokoschka's *Bride of the Winds*. This last named painting with its entranced lovers suspended at the heart of a painterly maelstrom, seems especially close in mood to Edmondson's recent work.

These new paintings are both more baroque and more elemental than anything Edmondson has given us in the past. There is neither overt symbolism nor depiction of the everyday world. In some of the paintings even landscape is largely eliminated. There are no snowy alps or

stormy strands, no solitary wanderers. What we have is a tragic landscape of the imagination described in terms of the human body - landscapes *of* figures more than landscapes *with* figures. The faces and limbs in *Heart of the Glacier* are piled up vertiginously on either side of a deep blue chasm that bisects the painting vertically. The use of paint is virtuosic; the composition is enormously complex and perfectly balanced, but to describe it as a technical *tour de force* does it no justice. In the lower, left-hand corner a man appears to be bathing in a pool of drowned heads. Two supine figures reach out to gently touch his shoulder. The effect is beautiful but profoundly disturbing. If there is an element of allegory implicit in Edmondson's lush, painterly surfaces it has a lot to do with oppression and suffering.

In *Ochre Mine* the allegory is much more clearly legible. In one sense this could be said to be a fairly "realistic" representation of an ochre mine with the stratification of the ochre deposits - dark and reddish at the bottom and lighter and yellowish at the top - faithfully depicted. But the miners are naked, and the incongruity of their nudity in a place of arduous, manual labour makes them seem extraordinarily vulnerable, not just naked but stripped of everything except a basic humanity. Is their work, perhaps, a form of punishment? Their averted faces offer no clue, but it is difficult to resist interpretation, and Edmondson has admitted that the painting represents "the search for subject matter". The miners dig for the painter's raw materials, and in order to find authentic images the painter must dig down into himself and expose the bedrock of his fears and desires. This inevitability involves a considerable risk: the miners' vulnerability and exposure are also the painter's. But, of course, this is a lamentably crude translation of Edmondson's meaning. He has managed to convey all of the above and more in a single, unforgettable image entirely devoid of histrionics or portentousness.

Edmondson's approach to the ancient art of figure painting is very much his own. Eric Fischl resembles a short story writer with distinctly Victorian, moralizing tendencies, Edmondson resembles a lyric poet who is romantic in spirit but modernist (that is to say, post-Symbolist and post-Imagist) in his aesthetics. He has stated that one of the driving forces behind his work is precisely the need to find a way of using the human figure in painting without implying narrative, - not event, action or anecdote, but images that embody elusive states of being with maximum directness and ambiguity. Who are these people? What blesses or afflicts them? They seem always to be suspended between opposed but overlapping states, - dream and reality, rapture and pain, even male and female.

Edmondson's work is very much concerned with the idea of boundaries and thresholds, the point of passage from one state to another. In a number of his earlier paintings this manifests itself as the meeting of land and sea. In one, with the significant title of *Still Margins*, the solid forms of women in the foreground are dimly echoed in the other realm of misty down light and motionless water that opens behind them. The possibility of transition from one realm to another is both a promise and a threat. In more recent work the element of danger and menace seems to have increased. The psychic and aesthetic stakes are higher; the sleepers, dreamers and lovers are more closely entangled, but on the rare occasions when their eyes are open, their glances do not connect; many (as in *Double Descent* or *Divided Descent*) appear to be in a state of free fall, and their limbs are so splayed and contorted that they might be about to be torn asunder (which may be why two paintings are called *Ligature*, a work that manages to refer simultaneously to writing, music and surgery). The dividing line is no longer simply an edge of threshold, but a ravine or glacial crevice that threatens oblivion. But death, from one point of view, is only another threshold.

We can never know the exact nature of the private drama enacted in these paintings, but it is impossible not to be moved by the images it gives rise to, and this is as it should be since, in the end, we have no clearer idea of what lies behind the most powerful images of Titian or Turner. The place in painting that Edmondson has discovered has been touched on before by many painters from the Late-Renaissance to the brief era of Neo-Expressionism, but it has never - to my knowledge - been presented so completely or with such luxuriance. Any of Edmondson's paintings might serve to illustrate Clare's phrase, "the living sea of waking dreams".

John Ash

February 1990

I. Wilderness of Sleep 1990





2. Landscape's Edge 1990



3. Heart of a Glacier 1989





4. Ochre Mine 1989



5. Charm of Solitude 1990



6. Divided Descent II 1990



1. Wilderness of Sleep 1990
92 x 90 ins./233.7 x 228.6 cm.
oil on canvas
2. Landscape's Edge 1990
79 x 68 ins./200.7 x 172.7 cm.
oil on canvas
3. Heart of a Glacier 1989
106 x 99 ins./269.2 x 251.5 cm.
oil on canvas
4. Ochre Mine 1989
90 x 92 ins./228.6 x 233.7 cm.
oil on canvas
5. Charm of Solitude 1990
94 x 59 ins./238.8 x 150 cm.
oil on canvas
6. Divided Descent II 1990
92 x 90 ins./233.7 x 228.6 cm.
oil on canvas

BIOGRAPHY

1955	Born London
1973-74	City and Guilds School of Art
1974-77	Kingston Polytechnic
1977-78	Chelsea School of Art
1978-80	Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York
1978-79	Teaching Assistantship, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York

AWARDS

1978	Ford Foundation Award
1979-80	Graduate Fellowship, Syracuse University
1979	Ford Foundation Award
1984	Greater London Arts Association Award

ONE- PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1979	'Intrude', Fairbanks Gallery, Syracuse, New York
1981	'Portraits', Royal Star and Garter, Richmond, Surrey
1982	Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
1984	Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
1986	Michael Haas Gallery, Berlin
	Turske and Turske Gallery, Zurich
	Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
	Lang and O'Hara Gallery, New York
1987	Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
1989	David Beitzel Gallery, New York
1990	Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1976	'Stowells Trophy', Royal Academy, London
1977	'Northern Young Contemporaries', Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
1978	Ogle Gallery, Eastbourne
1979	Two-Man Exhibition, Fairbanks Gallery, Syracuse, New York
1980	'M.F.A. '80', Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse, New York
	'The Syracuse Show', New York State Regional Exhibition
1981	'The Figurative Exhibition', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
	'Abstract Lyricism', Cheltenham Music Festival, Cheltenham

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (continued)

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| 1982 | 'Summer Exhibition', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
'Collaboration', (by four gallery artists), Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London |
| 1983 | 'The Figurative Exhibition II', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
'Summer Exhibition', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
'Painter's Choice', Little Missenden Festival |
| 1984 | 'Gallery Artists', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
'10 Galleries: 10 Artists - Artists for the 1990's', Paton Gallery, London
'The Image as Catalyst', Ashmolean Museum, Oxford |
| 1986 | 'A Show of Hands', Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield
Reed Stremmel Gallery, San Antonio, Texas
Lang and O'Hara Gallery, New York
Kohji Ogura Gallery, Nagoya, Japan
'Heads', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London |
| 1987 | 'The Self-Portrait - A Modern View', Artsite, Bath (touring)
'Summer Exhibition', Asher Faure Gallery, Los Angeles
'Summer Exhibition', Haggerty Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |
| 1987-1988 | 'British Figurative Painting', University Art Gallery, California State University at San Bernadino; Santa Cruz County Museum of Art; University Art Gallery at Sonoma State University; Santa Barbara Museum, Santa Barbara, California |
| 1988 | 'Mother and Child', Lefevre Gallery, London
'British Art - The Literate Link', Asher Faure Gallery, Los Angeles
'Transcendent', David Beitzel Gallery, New York
'Whitechapel Open', curated by Catherine Lampert, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London |
| 1988-1990 | 'New British Painting', curated by Edward Lucie Smith, Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati; Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago; South East Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Museum of Art, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Queens Museum, New York |
| 1989 | 'Winter '89', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
'Portfolio Two, Painters in Print', Curwen Gallery, London
'Ten Years at Nicola Jacobs Gallery', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London |

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Max Wykes-Joyce, 'Galleries in London', Herald Tribune, 15-16 March, 1981
 Caroline Collier, 'Simon Edmondson, Nicola Jacobs Gallery', Arts Review, 2 July 1982
 Michael Shepherd, 'Young Ideas', Sunday Telegraph, 11 July 1982
 Waldemar Januszczak, 'The Figurative Exhibition', The Guardian, 30 March 1983

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- James Burr, 'The Figurative Exhibition II', Apollo, April 1983
Neil Arksey, 'The Figurative Exhibition II', Art Line, no. 6, April 1983
Mary Rose Beaumont, 'Summer Exhibition, Nicola Jacobs Gallery', Arts Review, 12 August 1983
John Russell Taylor, 'Bloodshot View of the World', The Times, 8 May 1984
Waldemar Januszczak: The Guardian, 23 May 1984
Oswell Blakeston: Arts Review, 25 May 1984
Mel Gooding, 'Simon Edmondson', Artscribe, July 1984
Michael Shepherd, 'Artists of the 1990's', Sunday Telegraph Magazine, 1 July 1984
Kenneth Baker: Art Forum, October 1984
G.P.: Juliet Art Magazine, October-November 1985
Marina Vaizey, 'Why our Artists Rule the Waves', Sunday Times, June 1986
Robin Dutt, 'New Brood', L.A.M., 3 June 1986
Mary Rose Beaumont, 'Simon Edmondson', Arts Review, 6 June 1986
Heather Waddell: New Art International (Paris), Summer 1986
Judith Higgins, 'Simon Edmondson; Between Two Worlds', ARTnews, March 1987
Edward Lucie-Smith, 'The Self Portrait - A Modern View', Sarema Press, 1987
Robin Dutt: The Independent, 13 October 1987
Waldemar Januszczak: The Guardian, 30 October 1987
Andrea Rose: catalogue essay for 'British Figurative Painting - A Matter of Paint', Pamela Auchincloss Gallery, Santa Barbara, California 1987
Mel Gooding: catalogue essay, Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London 1987
Edward Lucie-Smith, 'New British Painting', Phaidon Press, Oxford 1988
Kenneth Baker, 'London Painters' Unique Imprint', The San Francisco Chronicle, January 1988
Judith Higgins, 'Painted Dreams', ARTnews, February 1988
Richard Dorment, 'New Views From The East End', Daily Telegraph, September 1988
Jerry Stein, 'Tracks to The Past Clear in British Show', The Cincinnati Post, 21 November 1988
Margaret Moorman, 'Transcendent', ARTnews, December 1988
Carolyn Cohen, 'The New British Painting', Art & Design, '40 Under 40 The New Generation in Britain', Vol 5 No. 3/4-1989
John Ash, 'Simon Edmondson at David Beitzel', Art in America, November 1990
Judith Higgins, 'A Very British View', The Sunday Times, 11 February 1990
John Kemp, 'Simon Edmondson', Modern Painters, Vol. 3, No.1, Spring 1990

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arts Council of Great Britain
Contemporary Art Society
Unilever PLC
Prudential Life Inc., New York
Prudential Holborn, London