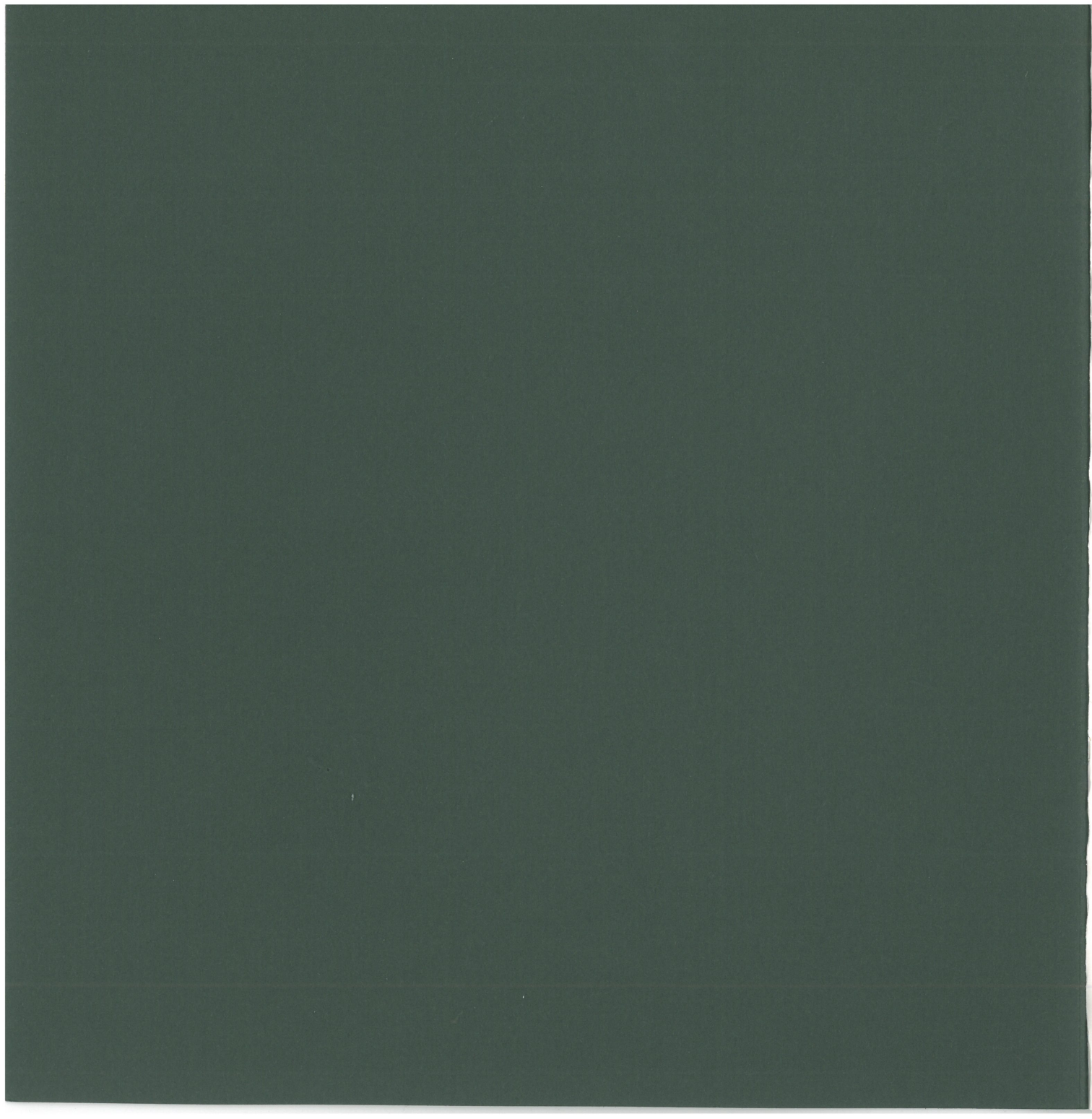


SIMON EDMONDSON



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The Poetic Image

At the foot of a cliff, between two boulders, one white and one black, stands a solitary figure, anonymous and poignant, his body leaning slightly at an angle, his head slightly turned: *Great Austerity*, the title of this extraordinary picture, gives little away, offers no anecdotal clue; its very abstractness stands in problematically ambiguous relation to the image, which is simple and concrete. In *Still Margins* the female figures in the foreground appear as entranced, their stillness at one with that of the rocks whose shapes they imitate, and into which they may be transmogrified as in a fable. The central figure, transfigured, is absorbed, but to her left a pale figure looks over her shoulder as if back into the world left behind them, the world occupied by the onlooker. The figure who dreams the landscape in *Landfall* may remind us of that awesome image in Hopkins:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.

— but neither the painting nor its title makes explicit any such connection between the outer and the inner worlds: it is a matter of our reading it *out of* the image given. And what are we to make of the woman in *After Supper* who gazes away from the action—the cluttered table, the two figures, one in stupored sleep, the other embracing him as if to lift him, at the other end of the table?—of her apartness, her lack of expression?

The paintings that contain these mysterious and compelling images repay contemplation and reflection; they address themselves to simple and elemental themes, but in a way that leaves open possibilities of meaning, invites multiplicities of interpretation. They work by a kind of indirection, as in the speech and poetry of those who distrust the over-explicit, and prefer to communicate the most profound and important things through gnomic utterance, riddle and fable, and who distrust the abstraction of language in a multitudinous world of manifest energies and palpable objects. Above all they set themselves against rhetoric, whether of the explicit kind that operates through a resort to familiar symbols and emotive subjects, or of that kind that is implicit in the violent and attention-seeking behaviour of the paint. It is not only the grand and wild land—and seascapes of the Western Isles that have had an influence upon the directions in which Simon Edmondson has been moving in these last two years, but also his study of the Gaelic modes of speech and manner that, against the odds, persist there in a gravity and simplicity lost elsewhere.

Simplicity has become the keynote of Edmondson's approach: he uses the paint in these recent pictures to catch and hold the image, to give body to the idea, and in so doing to make visible real things whose actuality of presence is essential to their mythic potency. This simplicity of which I speak is of intention and is evidence of a

grand ambition: to make images that have poetic power and mystery with the sparest iconographic means. There is nothing simple about the realisation of that intention—Edmondson is a painter of formidable gift and technical resource, and has looked with the closest and most intelligent attention at the work of his greatest predecessors. Figuration, landscape, still-life: each of these categories is incorporated with a remarkable virtuosity, as the subject demands, into the work; each is subordinated to the over-all requirement of the poetic image.

In these paintings Edmondson has won through to a new clarity of disclosure, in which objects and events present themselves to the eye with a greater directness than ever before in his work. A great deal of the excitement in the earlier work had to do with the struggle of the image to release itself from an expressive surface of paint that was thickly applied and worked with a gestural intensity that reminded me of Soutine and of Kokoschka, and which had a local colouristic complexity that might have owed something to the abstract Guston (I am thinking of paintings made between 1983 and 1985). In the new work figurative elements are more distinct, and the paint itself is less autonomously seductive, its objective aspect less immediately and exclusively inviting to the gaze. It is not that there is anything the less vital or sensuous in the painting (we are talking about gains not losses) but rather that the relation of the medium to the image has changed: it has become more of a means than an end. A sharper realisation of the image—the clearer delineation of the subject—has come to have priority over the agonistic handling that characterised the earlier work and which related to a more pronounced expressionist impulse than that which lies behind these new pictures. We are witnessing not a repudiation of an earlier manner—nor even, it seems to me, a shift in underlying preoccupations—so much as a radical re-definition of purpose, a more precise demarcation of the territory he wishes to occupy for his own.

In the first place there has been a greater emphasis upon drawing, upon the outline around things. In the earlier, expressionist, work, the painting—the disposition of the actual stuff upon the canvas—was indicative of intangible inner realities, a signifier in itself of emotional complexities impossible of *depiction*. The embeddedness of the image, its lack of a distinct identity, was significant of its location in the undifferentiated chaos that lies beyond consciousness, beyond even the clarity of dreams. In those earlier paintings the essential subject was the processes of becoming, and their busily kinetic surfaces were directly expressive of that condition in which nothing is fixed, all is in continual flux. In the new work the image is more precisely fixed. Its emergence into light has occasioned the need for a clearer realisation of the space and atmosphere which real objects must inhabit. And how marvellously Edmondson creates that space! Look at the way the sunlight is dispersed and filtered in the early morning mist of *Still Margins* and the way in which the sea fret softens and obscures the rocks in the middle ground; at the way light catches the water trapped in the shadowed rock-channel below the sleeping figure in *Dreaming of Holm*; at the

dramatically lowering sky over the rough seas of *Landfall*; at the relation between the woman's head and the jug at right-angles to it in *After Supper*, and at the clear space defined by the table's edge, and the empty glasses and gutted candle, that occupies the great triangle at the upper left of that picture. This is representational painting of a high order, in which the busy activity at the surface, continuously interesting in itself, serves at every point the demands of pictorial meaning.

It is always possible to see Edmondson's landscapes as objective correlatives for interior states; the presence of figures in sleep or apparent reverie invites these readings, as does his choice of sites—at the sea's edge, at the margin of things, with its suggestion of the state of things between consciousness and unconsciousness. And it is tempting to see in the ruined table top, with its candles and empty glasses, its teetering tower of used plates, its suggestion of an arena in which some sort of struggle has taken place, a modern *vanitas*. There is no reason why we should not trace these possibilities. They are part of the picture but not, by any means, all of it. For the disciplines involved in the clear and unambiguous rendering of external realities have brought with their exercise new freedoms. These are most dramatically realised in *A Hundred Ardent Lovers fell into Eternal Sleep*. In this image of the ghostly onlookers who crowd in the imagination around every act of love, their faces like whispers that intimate mortality, becomes that of a natural phenomenon, a darkly shadowed multi-faceted rockface, from which, released by a violent stroke of pure paint, there gushes, as from a spring, a quick torrent. It is an astonishing image, an impossible poetic *tour de force*.

Mel Gooding
August 1987

Great Austerity 1987
oil on canvas
88 x 78 ins/224 x 198 cm



Still Margins 1987
oil on canvas
73 × 82ins/186 × 208cm



Landfall 1987
oil on canvas
83 x 74 ins/211 x 188 cm



After Supper 1987
oil on canvas
66½ x 76ins/169 x 193cm



Dreaming of Holm 1987
oil on canvas
74 x 86ins/188 x 218cm



A Hundred Ardent Lovers fell
into Eternal Sleep 1987
oil on canvas
90 x 92 ins/229 x 234 cm



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

Public Collections

- Contemporary Art Society
- Arts Council of Great Britain
- Unilever PLC
- Prudential Life Inc New York

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

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

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 'Heads', Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London
1987	'The Self-Portrait—A Modern View', Artsite, Bath (touring) Pamela Auchincloss Gallery, Santa Barbara, California (touring)

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- Mary Rose Beaumont: 'Summer Exhibition, Nicola Jacobs Gallery', Arts Review, 12 August 1983
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- 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



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