

“SPREZZATURA”

THE BRITISH ARTIST RECLAIMS THE ORGANIC,
RUDIMENTARY FACET OF PAINTING IN THE ERA
OF TECHNOLOGICAL SATURATION AND THE SCREENSHOT CULTURE

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And he does so with astonishing aplomb, conversing with Velázquez and squeezing every last ounce of expressive potential from *Las Meninas*. A resident of Madrid for nearly thirty years, Simon Edmondson (London, 1955) has devoted his latest show, *Sprezzatura*, to pictorially recreating the “inner core” of this famous masterpiece. He wants to see its extraordinary painted surface stripped of the layers of ideological and conceptual content that generation after generation of historians, thinkers and artists have added, reducing its significance to the size of an emblem. If there is one thing that all these contemporary interpretations of the picture have in common, it is a distinct lack of interest in the private operations that made it possible. They forget that this masterly composition is an amazing tour de force of painting, revealing the artist’s perpetual struggle with matter and subject. Should not the first and most pressing question be about the resources its author used to produce a likeness of what stood before him?

And so Edmondson pays tribute to Velázquez, a master to whom he feels particularly indebted, by reinstating the artistic significance and mysterious quality of his most celebrated work. In his studio, Edmondson has followed the footprints of the Sevillian master, step by step, in what promises to be his freest, most personal work yet; he has come across the same obstacles Velázquez encountered in 1656 when struggling to turn that enormous blank canvas (318 x 276 cm) into an illusory space; he has moved his arm and hand in different directions until he found the right gestures for creating a sense of depth and the presence of human life... Using the most basic iconographic resources, his different reconstructions of the Velazquegian scene—whether life-size, some of which go back several years (*Cartoon for Hospital-Palace* [2008], *Hospital-Palace* [2010], *Alcázar* [2014]), or on a smaller scale—revive the idea of painting as a series of crossroads, personal decisions and intuitive artistic changes that link up and surrender themselves to chance, always with unexpected results. Even so, the outcome of the procedure performed by this contemporary artist is more than commendable. The boldness and formal sophistication of these visual reconstructions, which never tend to be rhetorical or contrived, are indicative of a painter at the peak of his career, who has always understood that an artwork can only last when it is a product of the maker’s technical diligence and unwavering persistence.

In the more than a dozen works now showing at Galería Álvaro Alcázar in Madrid, Edmondson has, by means of superb optical illusions, recreated the Cuarto Bajo del Príncipe, the same room in which Velázquez painted his composition. The layout is an exact replica of the original chamber, thanks to the surviving architectural plans of the Alcázar of Madrid before it was ravaged by fire, although the artist adopts a different point of view. However, in chronological terms, Edmondson dissociates himself entirely from his benchmark image: the human silhouettes and imaginary furniture with which he brings this room back to life are almost typical of our own time. They are part of an inn or hospice that has supplanted the functions of the former royal residence. The frailty of its occupants gives the space a forlorn waiting-room atmosphere that speaks to us of the contingency and fragility of our lives. Consequently, this group of works acts as a metaphor for the “hospitality” which painting must extend to those who are no longer among us, a reminder that every human life has a mortal flipside.

By deviating in this way from the original motif, Edmondson evokes what he believes was Velázquez's genuine or original intention in painting the picture, its noblest underpinning: to capture the profound humanism of this group of palace officials, with whom he interacted on a regular basis. Edmondson has translated these free mental speculations into the language of painting as a response to Velázquez, apropos of his most subjective work: to understand its creative excellence, the fact that the picture constantly reveals new aspects of itself, we cannot focus on ferreting out its useful purposes or concrete explanations, as this would limit its broad spectrum of meaning. For what is art if not a transposition of the creator's pure thought? As long as artists are human beings and not machines, there will always be a mind at work behind every creation, a vast, private world that escapes our grasp.

If we consider the full significance of Simon Edmondson's figurative painting, always focused on reconstructing shattered emotional spaces and alluding not to specific stories, facts or details but to the physical and mental erosion caused by the flowing course of history, it behoves us to remember that we are dealing with an untimely rather than a timeless artist. As such, he builds "retaining walls" to hold current events, for although the present is fleeting, it is and encompasses everything as the anticipation of the future. In his studio, Edmondson remains impervious to the "daily clatter" as he strives towards the completion of his artistic endeavour: to question our memory in a virtually impracticable way, by means of private visual approaches that must be imagined, constructed and forged day after day. He does not wish to abandon the past or his cultural identity, for nothing that has happened can be erased. Therefore, though it may be inopportune, he looks back and "saves" the most ineffable aspects of human beings and their social experience, before the world is emptied by the technified, impersonal "world of information". He privately resists the dominant forces, something essential to safeguarding his own creative imagination. With regard to this critical attitude, I am reminded of what Nietzsche said: "That a human being resists his whole age, stops it at the gate and demands an accounting—that must exercise an influence."

In consonance with all this, Edmondson steadily conducts a retrospective exploration of the tradition of Western painting, of which he considers himself both heir and transmitter, a position that has allowed him to ensure the continuous progress or maturing of his own artistic language. The artist delves beneath and behind the roots of modern art to provide new possibilities for today's painting, besieged by the "screenshot" culture. He constantly drinks from the wellspring of the first artists who, when painting things, gave them a new atmosphere or "skin", masters like Titian, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Goya and Manet. For only by remaining in this historical current can one acquire the courage and agility needed to elegantly transfigure reality with a brush, thereby enriching or expanding it. Baroque artists called this deliberate concealment of the effort that went into painting *sprezzatura*, an Italian term whose broader meaning was the display of studied carelessness or ease. Judging by his elegiac painting, applied with sensual beauty, Edmondson appears to have made this nonchalance his own.