Catalogue introduction. Jorge Mara Gallery Madrid 1996

Simon Edmondson

By Norbert Lynton

This is an exhibition of recent work. It is not retrospective, showing how the newest work was reached; it focuses on an arrival, an attainment, not on a development. It is interesting to ask how Simon Edmondson arrived where he is, though such questions are never entirely answerable. Describing the journey from hindsight gives it a predetermined character that allows neither for the artist's creative freedom nor for the variety of impulses from among which he chose consciously an unconsciously, whilst giving the illusion of explaining the new work.

Of the arrival we can speak with certainty. In the last twelve months Simon Edmondson has produced a series of works on canvas and on paper, ranging widely in subject but strikingly coherent in its essential character that is driven by a spirit expressing both deep human sympathies and equally deep horror at the oppressiveness of systems of government and control. The artist thus aligns himself with the may who have, in modern times, dedicated their art to protest in the name of humanity by portraying acts of aggression and of oppression or by creating symbols of tyranny and licensed cruelty. Remarkably few of these have been successful, whether they opted for immediate impact or for making a more enduring, more general statement. Images of protest can be effective in ephemeral forms as we saw on the walls of Paris in 1968 – that is, as shouts rather than elaborated music. *Guernica* has survived as art because of the vigour and originality of its pictorial construction and the enduring ambiguity of its message (and thus perhaps its incomplete relevance to the massacre of 1937). A work of art demands elements of construction and of poetic vision, whereas denunciation is best conveyed by journalism and its pictorial equivalent.

Reacting against Victorian literalness in art and art criticism, some Modernists argued that the subject counts for nothing in art. Some so-called Post-Modernists want us to believe that subject is everything; the result often is anecdotal art as slight and self-indulgent as anything the Victorians produced. Distinguishing between "subject" and "content" helps as to approach the problem more closely. The subject of *Guernica* is nominal; the content, compounded of our awareness of what the title refers to and of

Picasso's complex and indirect way of presenting it, resonates still and will continue to do so, as does the content of Rothko's best colour compositions, devoid of specifiable subjects. In every case but the most prosaic description, the artist's experience is engaged and, in turn, engages our own.

When he was eight, Simon Edmondson took a secret oath that he would be a painter. One wonders what "painter" meant to him then. The work he has shown since 1979 in several solo and group exhibitions has make it clear that to the adult Edmondson "painter" means something very ambitious. He is passionate about painting as means: the nature and scale of surfaces, richness and density, the flow, drag and lumpish-ness of paint, especially when confronted with areas of evanescent slightness; the language of the brushstroke both as a direct personal gesture and as visual orchestration, as well as the brush's capacity of painting to appear flat of three-dimensional or both at once. A strikingly gentle person, he feels passionately about human relationships in the particular and in the world at large, and has long known that as a painter he has to deal with these feelings and with the ideas in which they call to be bodied forth in art. He is passionate about communicating, his understanding and experience of the world, and intent on finding the most potent – that is, impactful but also enduring – ways of engaging our attention.

Art school and his own growing awareness of art though galleries and books gave him professional footing in the wide world of modern art. I cannot imagine him as a non-figurative painter, more specifically as a painter of other things than the human image in some significant context. At art school he drew the figure incessantly; he has frequently worked with models since. That choice, combined with his strong feelings and his appetite for the means of painting, marks him out as a sort of Expressionist. Edmondson was noticed in Britain and the U.K. as one of the young painters making bold use of the figure, apparently in response to an invitation issued by certain critics and exhibition makers in London at the start of the eighties to "return to the figure" and thus end the hegemony of sixties "abstraction and seventies" Conceptualism. In fact, the figure had never lacked painters and a public in the U.K., where a particular tradition, at once Expressionist and Constructive, had been founded by David Bomberg in the 1920s and developed quite publicly by, especially, Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach. Lucien Freud's influential figure painting, at once realistic and symbolical, had been given sudden prominence in his retrospective presented by the Arts Council in the Hayward Gallery in 1974.

Though Edmondson must have been encouraged to find critics welcoming his paintings as part of a new trend, they owed little or nothing to it. Nicola Jacob's gallery showed him repeatedly in the eighties and was as remarkable for its non-partisan line in a decade of position-taking as for the high level of interest it maintained in its choice of artists. In 1987-1988 Edmondson was by far the youngest contributor to an exhibition selected by Pamela Auchincloss to tour Californian art centers, presenting six modern British figurative painters, including Bomberg, Kossoff and Auerbach. All six were chosen to show a shared "manner of paint application". In fact, the exhibition demonstrated their individuality in this respect as in others, with the three older painters displaying differences in spite of an underlying kinship and the three younger surprising diversity : John Lessore, then 49, stayed close to naturalistic reportage ;Kevin Sinnott, 40, worked in a bold, quasi-realistic idiom under the influence of Italian verism; and Edmondson at 32, demonstrated his already firm commitment to a pictorial imagination in which Romanticism embraces the great Venetian tradition sired and for ever presided over by Titian. He wrote about Titian in Modern Painters in 1990 with the warmth and the insight one associates with exceptionally intelligent painters of much greater maturity.

This explains what I referred to earlier as Edmondson's ambition. He is self-evidently a modern painter and not a Post-Modernist pasticheur to whom style is a game. He is also, and as far as I can see has always insisted on being, a painter taking his place within the great network of painting, old and new, as his natural and necessary home. Titian remains a particular hero. It may be that living in Madrid has both made him more aware of Goya as a radical influence – how could anyone wishing to make dramatic art on themes related to political and social oppression fail to confront Goya? – and led him to find a compensating model of economy and distancing in Velazquez. I glimpse Turner in some of his work, and Delacroix occasionally, and Kokoschka in certain details, and no doubt the list could go on. What is unmistakable is his undisguised membership of a great, inalterable tradition at a time when tradition is used as a retreat by some, as a plaything by those contents to dance briefly on the heads of past masters, and as something to avoid by those who see freedom in rootlessness.

"My name is Ozymandias" Is the largest and one of the most recent of his paintings. Its modernity is patent. A photograph of European monarchs of around 1900 provided, so to speak, the text for this pictorial parable. There they are, in all their power and glamour, in

the uniforms and sashes and decorations that stop them looking like the man in the street and help them resemble Queen Victoria to whom most of them are related. Adapting the photograph located this image in modern art's long and sometimes fruitful engagement with mechanized imagery. The original was intended to confirm and disseminate their illusion of greatness and permanence. We know it to be a sham. Yet they ruled and some people no doubt benefited from their rule while many paid dearly for it. Today we reckon we know about these things, but how much has the situation changed? Edmondson paints them without mockery, though he distances them as past and as background, leaving them in monochrome as he found them yet here giving them the scale of a monumental, celebratory group portrait just as some ham court artist might have presented them in their day. One of the heads is accorded extra definition and tonal weight to give depth to that background and serve as link (supported by booted legs on the right) to the eruption of paint, colour and movement that hovers between us and them. This introduces Edmondson's figures.

We see these here as incursions of demonstrative paint in a context of the intentionally slight paint areas in which the photograph is transcribed. They derive from drawn and found representations of bodies, reconstructed by collage and other means, re-figured and made dynamic way beyond their original character, and worked on the canvas to be reincarnated as pictorial phenomena that produce an immediate sense of drama and mystery and go on to strike echoes in our memory store of figure images in life and art. Their hovering is not peaceful but distressed. Their surfaces and apparently irresolute silhouettes, formed of thick, even clotted paint here, translucent washes there, and mostly in positive, emotionally charged colour, contrast with the passive tonal evocation of the borrowed background image. Their presence – something between action and inaction – is charged with drama and dynamism almost to the point of sacrificing legibility. But what, who, when, where are they? There is, quite properly, no ready answer to such specific questions. But what do they suggest?

Decades ago I saw a performance of Kurt Jooss's ballet *The Green Table* by his own company. It ended with a sudden, paroxismic explosion of movement by just one female dancer… and then stillness. The shock of it, the combined bliss and horror of experiencing that unexplained but instantly understood brief cadence against the background of the other dancers, locked into *rigor mortis*, is vividly brought back by Edmondson's flickering

figures in the foreground of his pictorial stage. Or in front of the foreground. Their hovering seems at some moments to bring them out of the picture, as though they had appeared in the space between us and it. At other moments, they are the picture, colours arranged on a flat surface as Maurice Denis taught a century ago, with the royals relegated to another sphere, a shadowy and vestigial memory without material presence. The extremity of this contrast, the assertion of such disparities in one work, is of course a characteristic modern sin against one of the unities preached by academic picture-making that of coherence of image and language.

Other Aristotelian unities are rejected here too, of action, time and place. Such denials are characteristic of early modern art. One could say they are the essential, negative, program of Cubism and Futurism. But critics too exclusively focused on modern art tend to see the art of the past as monolithically conventional. The freedoms won by Picasso and others in the early years of this century were available to earlier generations not intent on the total disruption of the classical tradition. They were available for special effect and special occasions, whether of celebration or protest. Moving between different levels of reality, often switching media to do so particularly effectively, was the very stuff of the Baroque and its prime means of linking us on earth to the holy and the divine. Perspective, control of colour and tone, compositions making for movement and figures engaged in it, groupings and gestures cunningly contrived to accommodate the visitor's sequential apprehension of the ensemble – everything was conceived and shaped to make us forget to ask what is real and what is not.

The effect of all this – most convincingly at the hands of such a great master as Tiepolo (I am thinking of his vast ceiling fresco over the Treppenhaus at Würzburg, but the also of Wagner's ambiguous appropriation of Baroque invasive methods for Bayreuth) – goes well beyond the "willing suspension of disbelief" called for, as Coleridge wrote, by the naturalistic theatre. We may resist, we may stay away, but invasion, like seduction, implies an element of force, of one will pressing upon another. A potent element in the process is the introduction of irrational, sometimes illegible or at least unnameable, forms. These prise apart our conceptual armour and lay us open to the penetration of deeper, often darker recognitions. Such forms may be presented in many guises, as a cloud, a fluttering drapery, a sudden rock, an extraneous character inserted into, but for ever adjacent to the narrative. The point is that it is left adjacent to any

reading we may manage to make. Its significance is subliminal, refuting our need to know. We have, significantly, no name for it and its history is yet to be written. Let us call it the portent.

It presupposes a context of rationalized narrative and description. The faceless, almost monstrous backs interposed between us and the main action in Giotto's *Lamentation* in Padua can be seen as initiating examples of it. Edmondson drew my attention to the disturbing form of what we know to be the angel in Piero della Francesca's scene of *The Dream of Constantine* in the Arezzo fresco cycle, a century and half after Giotto. Masaccio's dark spirit comes between the two, and after Piero Michelangelo and the many levels of reality he pictured on the Sistine ceiling as well as, later, the nightmare compactions of his *Last Judgment* on the altar wall. But then that cataclysmic theme calls for disruptive imaging, while celebrating a minor German potentate does not. It is Tiepolo's use of such dark portents in a content of celebration and even worship that gives a new dimension to the Baroque endeavour (and invites comparison with the dark moments in Mozart's comic operas), presaging Romanticism's descents into monstrous areas of the human imagination.

On the threshold of Romanticism, amid historical perplexities to which his art now seems an unavoidable response, stands Goya. We think of Goya as a sharp response to Tiepolo, as well as to Tiepolo's enemy as champion of Neoclassicism, the German painter Mengs. In fact, Goya was steeped in Tiepolo. During his journeyman visit to Italy, of which we know so little, he undoubtedly studied the art of Venice as well as of Rome; perhaps he saw Giotto too. There are aspects of his work in which he is visibly indebted to Tiepolo, most obviously in his frescoes and his etchings; there are others in which the influence worked on the conceptual level. His response to the bitter, black side of Late Baroque becomes evident after Goya's breakdown of 1792 amid Spain's dreadful convulsions. The black, anti-rational imagery he developed in the screaming satires of the Caprichos takes over all his art. The Apollo Belvedere, that great remnant of ancient sculpture, for the Renaissance the guiding expression of physical and mental heroism, becomes his Colossus, a monstrous, oppressive presence of no specific meaning. Images of war and indiscriminate carnage, in *The Disasters of War*, are accompanied by even worse images signaling the triumph of madness over truth. Art becomes the vehicle not only for reportage of the most painful sort but also for images reaching beyond that which can be seen, for prophetic intimations about the humanity's

capacity for evil. On the stage of the Black Paintings, portents are the main actors and the people are finally degraded.

The twentieth century has known how to realize Goya's worst expectations. Modern art, learning from him and those who built on his example, from Delacroix to the Surrealists, has accustomed us to images of extreme irrationality as well as to models of utopias and images of calm and perfection. Photography and film have made their contribution, especially in habituating us to the unbearable. How can today's art address the horrors and miseries of the present in terms that are personal enough to be strong, communicative enough to be useful, and artistic enough to exist as art as opposed to journalism, art that addresses more than the moment?

The aftermath of Fascism is not a world purified of lies and oppression but the mixture as before. Memories of Auschwitz etc. remind us, who would rather forget, that reality can match our darkest imaginings. Every day brings confirmation of this. It is not surprising that so much art of the so-called Post-Modernist present is art playing with art and demonstrating the impossibility of being significant. The Dadaists condemned Expressionism, in effect the whole of Modernism, for not preventing or trying to prevent the First World War; much art of the present does not even see the point in complaining, in taking a position vis-à-vis the world outside the studios, galleries and art magazines. Did *Guernica* prevent actions worse than what happened at Guernica? Is it a painting's power, despite the continuing, perhaps growing fame of this one, to modify behaviour? Before such questions we test our resources of faith. The balance between good and evil in human affairs, easily disturbed and thus never at rest, depends on unceasing input on the side of benevolence and pity and calls for lessons that give awareness.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that most art should always want, has for centuries often wanted, to evade grave humanitarian issues. Is not art accounted a form of entertainment? What is remarkable is the ability of art, in some hands, to insist on speaking out, to bear messages with the energy and grace that will make them heard. We have witnessed an unforeseeable explosion in art's material range, seeded by Cubism's call on fragments of the real world in collage and constructions. Since then, some of the most powerful artistic statements about the world have tended to demand more and more resources, not excluding the presence and performance of the artist himself. This explosion belongs quite specifically to post-1945 art history and has found its most resonant

examples in the work of the German artist Joseph Beuys, born at the same time as the Nazi movement and pre-eminently concerned to build out of the ruins Nazism left a structure of trenchant communication, advancing from German to global to transcendental teaching.

In this context, painting has tended to be marginalized as communication even though these decades have witnessed remarkable skills, intelligence and inventiveness among painters as well as worldwide proof of the continuing demand for an art form often pronounced dead. I have already stressed Simon Edmondson's proud adherence to the tradition of painting at its most painterly. In *Ozymandias* and other new paintings he reaffirms painting's dual potency as image and as impact, as word and as music. Think of the symbolic forms in lead or other materials Anselm Kiefer affixes to his monumental paintings to enhance their meaning and impact. They have their immediate effect, and certainly add a further element of dislocation to his already complex images, but they interfere with the attention serious art demands. They become what they are in fact, appendages. Edmondson's physically coherent images re-assert something easily lost sight of amid the technical restlessness of recent and contemporary art that painting is an immensely powerful, infinitely adaptable medium, capable of intense communication precisely when it confines itself to one material dimension and thus addresses itself to our capacity for empathetic understanding on a particular level of experience. He is not alone in this, though amid art's centrifugal adventuring we can lose sight of the fact. Think of Bacon and Rothko, of Matisse, Bonnard and Picasso, of what painting by itself has done in this century: think of the great tradition back to Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas* (a work of special importance for Edmondson).

In his earlier paintings he had turned to using visual themes from the media, symbolising political and financial power as blind forces governing our lives. This is familiar stuff to him now, mastered and available as , say, landscape and townscape are to some artists (including Edmondson himself in even earlier work), still life composition to others, as raw material. For many, of course, these art forms are complete in themselves, not raw material but the end product. For others, Edmondson prominent among them, art demands deeper commitment and purpose. The point here is that Edmondson realizes this ambition this insistence on seriousness, by means of paint alone, without recourse to the multi-media assemblages and events through which much contemporary art calls for attention. But here too a balance has to be struck if the

painter is not to end up, like Frenhofer, with a wall of paint and a lost image.

Ozymandias was worked towards in a series of studies on paper. On paper Edmondson ranges from oil to gouache or ink on paper, often with pastel. The immediate character of his works on paper – preparatory studies and independent paintings – is strikingly different from that of his large, oils-orchestrated pictures. Their modest size draws us close, involving us more intimately. Their slighter material presence renders them more contemplative than the large, commanding oils. In consequence they are also more ambiguous in their communication. Of course – this is something critics seem reluctant to permit the wider world to know – all art is ambiguous on the level of discourse. Yet this immateriality, even when the basic message is clear as in the small works associated with *Ozymandias* (including, *Conference, Asamblea, Trinity*, *Litigation, Europa, Map* and *Two Maps*) invites a more open-ended reading, a more personal act of interpretation. Edmondson was surprised when I found in some of these works on paper memories of Turner's Petworth watercolours, small, informal pictures, some of them little more than jottings, in which Turner around 1828 made jewel-like dream images out of the social atmosphere and the indoors landscape of the house, things in light plus space. The association still works for me, though Edmondson's paintings are obviously more austere and focused. It is partly the delicacy of his watercolour or ink paintings, the surprising note of rapture I found in these images of conflict, even in *Conference* with it's pair of cavorting portent-figures which suddenly and irreversibly remind me of the form of Salome in the *Dance of Salome* relief which is part of the 11th-century bronze doors of San Zeno in Verona, ecstatic to the point of paroxism.

We must not overlook the range of Edmondson's themes. He is less one-track than perhaps I have suggested and his meaning is not constrained by over-definition. There is a series that refers to hospitals and invites thoughts of healing and of care, yet refute these by revealing even these preserves as broken places, victims of intentional or indiscriminate warfare. The *Misericordia* series is the least defined, pulling us one way with thoughts of "mercy" and the partial ease given monks at their long devotion by the wooden supports to which the term "misericord" is given. A number of large and small paintings have this title. In some of them large looming forms remind us of Edmondson's paintings of six or seven years ago when landscape forms provided a dramatic context and counter to his figures. Yet in this series too his portent-figures are prominent,

bringing a sense of doom to settings that might have been consoling.

Other works, single ventures that may and may not find extension, e.g. *Witness, Chair* and *Member*, prove that the solitude, which is Edmondson's preferred working situation yields widening horizons rather that self-limitation or in-growing obsessions. What his range of work makes clear is that he is not content with threnody or even protest. In her outstanding account of the work and thought of Rothko (1983), Dore Ashton speaks of Malevich's pictorial world, "swept clean of centuries of painterly clutter". It would make better sense if critics today, instead of theorizing about Post-Modernism (a terms which makes sense when applied to architecture, though as a slogan it has led to pitiful banalities), recognized that a useful distinction might be made between art that sweeps clean in order to advance alternative strategies and emblems and art that accepts clutter in the sense of history and multiple associations. Edmondson's art is of the latter sort, notwithstanding the austerity of his pictorial stage. His associations are with the Baroque, as I have suggested, and with his hero Titian, and perhaps also with moderns such as Bacon, but not with Rothko. His question is not Rothko's "Will the world last another decade?" but the activist one of whether we can allow it to continue the way it is.

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