

FRANCISCO CALVO SERRALLER

THE WORM AND THE SILK

‘Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see

Men not afraid of God, afraid of me.’

Alexander Pope.

*Epilogue to the Satires: Dialogue II 208-9*

One of painting's survivors in a period notable for its lack of commitment to the medium, Simon Edmondson's persistence does not consist of turning his back on the world, but is rather based on the conviction that painting is the best medium for expressing what happens within it, including the unpredictability of the present. Edmondson's manner of painting, however, also avoids the type of approaches which some of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde movements have developed in order to neutralise the medium, particularly from Pop Art onwards, making it an object, mechanising it, or simply reducing it to a type of ironic caricature, making it hence deliberately "bad". As with Francis Bacon and the so-called School of London, Edmondson has found his unequivocally modern path compatible with the intensity of a tradition and one which continues even now, as all the great painters – be they Titian, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Goya or Picasso - did not just transform this ancient technique into an instrument for dealing with the representation of the non-canonical – that which lies outside the realm of beauty – but also made it a way of looking at reality in which the eye, or sight, was not necessarily obliged to divorce itself from the hand (touch and gesture), as well as a way of building up light. In this sense, this modern artistic lineage which accompanies Edmondson up to Bacon and beyond, sets out for us the

problem of a form of artistic modernism which is neither linear nor complacent but rather arises from dissatisfaction and challenge. Numerous writers also fall within this tradition, particularly poets, for example Eliot or Stevens, among other leading creative figures of our time. They, however, opted for a position mid-way between tradition and progress. In other words, they produced a body of work that was independent, sincere and radical.

If this did not make him geographically unspecific enough, Edmondson – who was born and trained in Britain – has for a good while now inhabited no other kingdom than that of painting itself, which has led him to live in various countries without definitively settling in any of them. This is not only or not just because of a preference for the cosmopolitan, but is in fact precisely in order to locate himself within a realm of liberty in order to be able to do what he believes he has to, fighting to achieve it. Thus, while he has worked and exhibited his paintings in numerous countries around the world, his fortuitous residence in Spain has allowed me to follow his fascinating career over the past few years, and to appreciate how his painting has continued to grow in depth as his vision of reality has matured, becoming ever more profound.

In a way, Edmondson's manner of painting could be described as expressionist, although not in the conventional or broad sense of the term, but rather because it has to feature the element of the body in his highly personal visions. For this reason, and in contrast to what he tended to do at the outset, Edmondson has gradually reduced the tormented and dark bravura of his early canvases and has become cooler and more precise in the representation of his images, which are at times the more terrible for being more light-filled and sensual. The result has been a personal and technical growth, as any artist who desires to create a visual account of the whole cannot allow himself or herself to be borne along by uncontrolled gestures or emotions. He cannot in other words go flat out, nor can he forget that the totality of the visible is not the result of an indiscriminate gaze but rather comes from looking at the essential and making a profound study of it.

In addition to these points regarding the "poetic" on which Edmondson has based his art, a simple examination of the paintings he is currently producing will provide a complete understanding of his work equally

well if not better. Firstly, his paintings do not just evoke identifiable images which are more than particular representations of events. Above all, they represent realms of pain, enclosed spaces which contain a catastrophe that we feel close to, that we can intimately relate to. This skilful eloquence is not contaminated in Edmondson's case by any moralising content, nor desire to correct or improve, but rather from a wish to ensure that no structure is concealed which focuses us on the irrepareable. We should also add that this is the case with Edmondson because he "paints" rather than "illustrates" stories: because, in other words, he provides us with the visual information which is not to be found within the bland channels that provide information in the modern age, deliberately devoid of individual values and in which the announcement of a fact is always stripped of its "atmosphere".

Could this be one of the reasons why the survival of painting is vital today? Francis Bacon, whom Edmondson has remained closely associated with both for his attitude and example, declared that: "As one sets down an image, of course, the atmosphere is created, as one cannot create an image without this image creating the atmosphere". He also noted that he aimed to "introduce the figurative directly into the nervous system with the greatest possible violence and penetration". Going beyond Bacon's particular case, here we have what I would call some specifically pictorial intentions. Edmondson confirms this when he captures and isolates an image, tragic or terrible as it might be or might seem, but for which the resulting "icon" submits itself to the logic of the sensations, which is the logic of the nervous system, a part of the brain which, however, has not yet been entirely domesticated by the communicative ordering of the conceptual. In this sense, rather than analysing what happens to us, he presents its tonality, its atmosphere, its tragic halo, elevating any chance event to the category of happening: something that makes us "pre-experience" evil, its rationally inexplicable absurdity.

What remains of the human tragedy? The tangible evidence of ruin. This, however, is more than just a devastated landscape, as what is ultimately ruined is human identity. Edmondson takes up the burden and the light of the European past, of western culture, which not only leaves behind it a long trail of ruins, but whose survival, like that of painting, is constantly threatened with ruin, by the decline of its moral

horizon. In this sense Edmondson's paintings often represent interior spaces, shells of monumental buildings whose grandeur is evoked by fragments which by chance happen to remain standing. He also paints vast rooms whose structure is immaculate but which accumulate an undefined litter, residues of an activity which remains unclear to us. Remains. The remains of History, which never seems to reach its end.

There are theories to explain everything: the decline of the West and the decline of History itself. The end of the great tales. Are we not in fact in the era of post-history and thus of post-art? If we have to accept this hypothesis, then the survival of painting today is a provocation, an accident, but above all, because painting (and not art) survives almost everything, except lack of discrimination: it will not be oppressed, it will not be reduced to the role of merely transmitting ideas. It is not true that it hates visual narration, as the historic avant-gardes naively believed at one point. What happens is that painting does not illustrate concepts, but rather embodies them. It captures thought on the surface and releases it with precision into the nervous system. This allows for a complicity with things, but also for a distancing: it meditates in the realm where words are unnecessary.

Some of Edmondson's paintings suggest settings that involve audiences, concert halls. In some of them we see linked lines of empty seats, while in others we see seated figures that seem to be seats. There are also long conference tables with dignitaries ranged around them with the solemnity of a Last Supper. Whether they are cardinals or other eminent figures of a grey tone, we notice that their choral rigidity, like fairground dolls, blocks our horizon with their repeated residual accumulation, preventing us from looking at the world and experiencing the life that is escaping us. This is the dowry of human misery. In the face of this prospect of rigidity, in which we are assigned a fixed position, there are also beds on which those who have already been converted into the remains of themselves are suffering. Red rooms. Finally there are rubbish tips with their little piles of rubble on which some dispossessed figure leans, its gaze lost in infinity.

Does all this amount, then, to an entertaining document of the suffering of humanity? Without doubt, but this is not enough: it is almost like remaining on the edge of what Simon Edmondson's painting offers us. To explain more fully and completely I can think of nothing better than

to propose another question, this one again taken from Francis Bacon: "Isn't it that you want something to be as real as possible and at the same time to be intensely thought-provoking, and that it opens up in the most profound way areas of feeling that are different to the mere representation of the object which you are trying to achieve? Isn't all art about that?" Suddenly we appreciate that painting's manner of showing is not that of demonstrating, but rather of going more deeply into what we feel in order to make us feel it differently, to make it unforgettable for ever. It requires that alchemical transformation in which, in the words of Wallace Stevens: "The poet makes silk dresses out of worms".

Could there be a better way of explaining Simon Edmondson's intentions, and his painting than describing it as the radiant and sensual silk dress which is also used to hide, but not conceal, the horror? While I could not describe as a novelty something which, as I said earlier, Titian, Velázquez, Rembrandt, Goya and Bacon all aimed to achieve in their time, I find it moving to observe Edmondson's ever more subtle ranges of colour, enlivened further by his way of constructing light and the way he makes the surface of reality into a remarkable and totally free gestural accident, as if the paint brushes had been applied almost scornfully, but without ever losing the mystery of the atmosphere and the sensation that penetrates to the very heart and nerves, to the most hidden and unexplored part of our brain. Ultimately, Edmondson reveals to us the miracle of light, which is, in turn, the luxurious brocaded blanket that covers the human catastrophe, and the gleam of hope. Perhaps Edmondson understood some while ago that this witness account could only be made through painting and since then he has not ceased to paint. And as he goes ever deeper, improving all the while, on this route of no return which is painting, his paintings become ever more light-filled and moving. It is clear that Edmondson can do no better than to paint, and I for one feel grateful as I stand before his work.