

# The search for truth in beauty

Painter Simon Edmondson talks about his Madrid refuge from modernity

REBECCA IVATTS, Madrid  
 "At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives / Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea," reads T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, a poem that, rather like the canvases of Simon Edmondson, points to the fragmented and sterile nature of the modern world. Indeed, Eliot's reference to that time of day — when, after the bright light of day, we find ourselves plunged into a woolly darkness that we both yearn for and fear — is alluded to in *Violet Light*, the title of his current show at Madrid's Galeria Alvaro Alcázar.

Simon Edmondson has to be one of the few British painters who both lives and has made a name for himself in Spain today, the Surrey-born artist bringing with him a legacy inherited from the so-called London School. This label was coined by R. B. Kitaj in 1976 to name artists in The Human Clay show at London's Hayward gallery — Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff — all figurative painters at a time when abstraction was the dominant and fashionable mode of expression. Edmondson was a member of the subsequent school of younger artists who, in the 1980s, both assimilated and reacted against the London School in search of a vision that emerges, not from a dogged pursuit of the real, but from the heart and soul as much as from the eye.

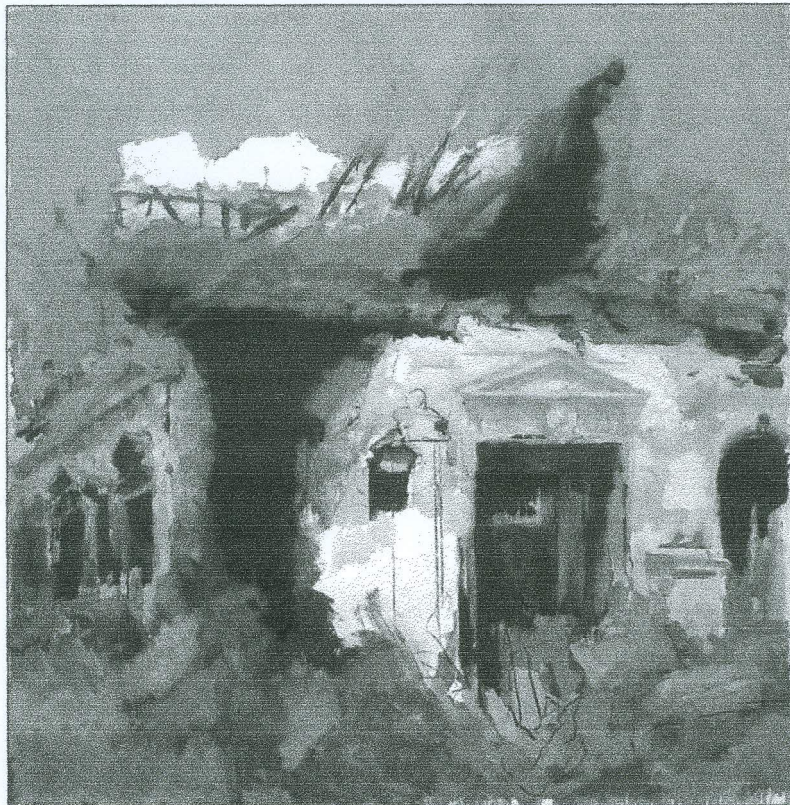
Edmondson's talent was immediately spotted. "Very impressive and quite unpretentious pictures by a young and intensely perceptive painter... a sensitivity to the perception of other artists but a remarkable, individualistic way of seeing," wrote the *Arts Review* in 1982. One of these "other artists" is Titian. A self-confessed lover of the 16th-century Venetian — and particularly his *The Flaying of Marsyas* (1575-76), an allegory of cruelty and suffering — Edmondson's admiration of Titian's bold drawing with the brush and dy-

"It's hard to see a new painting nowadays; oil on canvas is perceived as being old fashioned"

amic, spontaneous handling of paint is evident in his own fluid, generous use of the medium.

Since 1991, Edmondson has set up his home and studio in the Spanish capital. The unassuming artist, as elegant in demeanor as his two greyhound companions, explains: "I just want to get on with my work. Here in Madrid, you don't feel the intense pressure to be modern and avant-garde that you do in London, where values are subjected to a continual questioning. I mean, these values should be questioned and you have to reinvent, but I look around me and see people giving it all up."

Even so, Edmondson has witnessed big changes in Spain: "Things used to be pretty relaxed but now the Reina Sofia art museum has a whole series of spaces assigned to video art. It's quite hard to find a new painting to look at nowadays; oil on canvas is

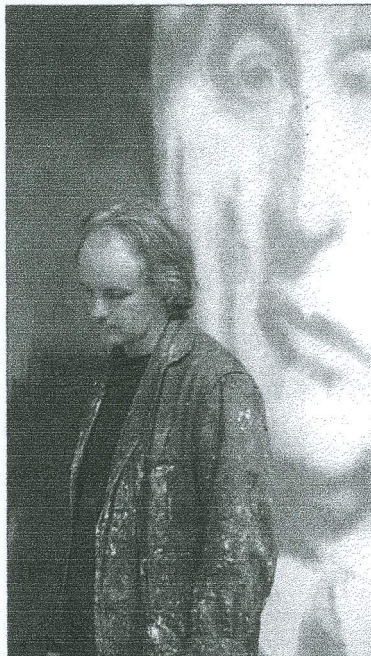


*Violet Light* by Simon Edmondson.

perceived as being old fashioned." Undeterred, Edmondson — who describes himself as "a slow changer" — has not relinquished traditional methods. "My techniques are old fashioned. I prime my canvases like Velázquez or Van Gogh used to, but it's a system that works."

In a world dominated by the camera lens that captures anything and everything with ease, Edmondson is concerned with the problem of producing images that convey a personal truth. "This struggle that you encounter along the way is where the interest comes into a painting — the things you come across, accidentally or at moments of confusion." Hence, he experimented with different hues of scarlet before deciding on violet, and its spiritual connotations, for the "risky venture" of juxtaposing a large violet stain with a loosely suggested building in *Violet Light*. "This is not a fortuitous splodge; it was part of my original plan, something that I wanted to impose intellectually. Without it, it would be no more than an impressionist scene, but the purple represents the unexplained."

Photography is a medium that Edmondson draws on to inspire his work, but not the shiny, picture-perfect images of the digital age, but rather archive material and old magazines — "As Francis Bacon



Simon Edmondson calls himself "a slow changer."

said, the worse and the older the photo, the better." The politicians' faces pictured on the red flags in *Manifestation* are taken from "anonymous photos in old copies of the *Illustrated London News*." The architectural elements in Edmondson's pictorial universe are no coincidence. "I'm fascinated with how structures stand up; my great-uncle designed the Sydney

Harbor Bridge." But Simon's rooms, buildings and churches are dilapidated and "broken." Peppered with recognizable human elements, be they a map, coat hanger, chair or hospital bed, they are imbued with a sense of nostalgia and decline. "I find change very sad, even though it's often for the best. Much of my work is generated by personal relationships, disasters and disappointments." This new pared-down emphasis on a defined space followed his "more melodramatic" works of the 1980s, which were populated with human figures.

Perhaps the most explicit sense of personal loss is conveyed in *At the Violet Hour*, which alludes to the death of Simon's father just one month prior to the Madrid exhibition. Simon explains the elements in this dark and potent work: "These spaces could belong to a house which has lost its façade; they are host to tables and chairs, things we recognize and know. In contrast to that, this spectral, floating shape, produced from a collage of human figures, represents the unknown we'll never know, the big question mark hanging over our existence."

Simon Edmondson. Until June 9 at Galeria Alvaro Alcázar, c/ Hermosilla 58, Madrid. Tel: 91 781 60 39

## Spain decries Eurovision loss and calls vote "a wangle"

EL PAÍS, Madrid  
 In a vote defined by Spanish television commentators as "a wangle and a manipulation," Serbia won the 52nd Eurovision song contest Saturday in Helsinki.

It was the first time that Serbia had competed alone in the popular show, which was followed on television by an estimated 120 million people. Serbia had previously participated together with the now-independent Montenegro.

Spain did not better than 20th out of the 24 finalists, only ahead of Lithuania, France, Britain and Ireland. The Spanish song *I love you mi vida*, sung by the group D'Nash, obtained 43 points, compared with the 268 points awarded to *Molitva*, sung by the 22-year-old Serbian Marija Serifovic. Her win was aided by consistent support among the televoters of other former Yugoslav republics. D'Nash members later said that at this rate, Eurovision will turn into "a festival for Eastern European countries" and that "the Finnish audience [...] disagreed with the vote."

## Egyptian antiques experts to analyze 17 artworks at Barcelona gallery

EL PAÍS, Madrid  
 Egyptian archeological authorities will travel to Barcelona to analyze 17 pieces on display at the Egyptian Museum there, following suspicions about their authenticity or the way they were acquired.

The mission "still has no exact date" and is the result of "friendly contacts between museum authorities and the Supreme Antiques Council of Egypt," according to one of its members, Ibrahim Abdul Meguid. Despite the friendly nature of the visit, the Egyptian delegation will travel with lawyers to examine the need for legal paperwork in case ownership claims should arise.

Among the artworks that the Council will inspect is a sculpture of Princess Nofret made of colored limestone and crafted during the 5th Dynasty (between 2,465 and 2,323 BC). Standing 43.5 centimeters tall, the statue was removed from an excavation site in Giza, southwest of Cairo, during the 1990s by the Egyptian archeologist Abdel Munem Abu Bakr.

The secretary general of the Council, the Egyptologist Zahi Hawas, told the Egyptian press that he had doubts about the authenticity of the piece. He also warned that if the sculpture turns out to be authentic, his commission will claim it back.