

STUDIO

SIMON EDMONDSON Between Two Worlds

CROSSING OVER, the title of one of Simon Edmondson's recent paintings, aptly characterizes all of his work. On canvases of rich browns, dull, brooding blues, stark whites and bolts of pure crimson, black or royal blue, all his figures seem to exist between two worlds—the physical, or real, and the spiritual, or imaginary.

The 32-year-old British painter, who was in New York this winter for his first solo show here, at Lang & O'Hara, says that he began painting the figure in 1977, when he was a student at the Chelsea School of Art. "I wanted to make pictures about our existence. All surroundings and the way in which I describe figures relate to the inner self," he explains. "There's always an earthbound figure, and then everything else in the painting"—other figures, faces, "spiritual guides" and angels—"is in the imagination of that figure."

Having in mind an image that matches a feeling, Edmondson begins a painting directly on the canvas, without elaborate preparatory studies. He gets down all the elements of figure and ground immediately, but he keeps each area in a state of flux and does not commit himself to details until a large part of the work has been completed. The paint handling is quite varied within each painting: it encompasses both modeling and drawing; abrupt shifts of color and brushstroke direction; small patches of solid clotted color and thinly painted, more expansive areas—skies of ocher and salmon pink, for example, which recall that Edmondson was once and still is a landscape as well as a figure painter. But surface activity is never at the expense of clarity, a quality Edmondson so admires in Picasso's work and strives for increasingly in his own.

Edmondson's paintings are built through drawing with pigment—drawing over and under the paint; sometimes, too, drawing is withheld, for deliberate underdescription. Edmondson says that his colors are a "compromise" between the realistic or atmospheric and the emotional. Often the color white and the painted line express what is most significant and spiritual in the painting: the surrounding white area emphasizes the priestly gesture of the hand in *Supper in Poland* (1986), for example; the red outline of a girl is superimposed on the painted figure of the young man in *The Exile* (1983) as a "projection, a conscience figure," Edmondson says. "The feeling of the painting is all that matters."

Initially, and at various stages of a paint-



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ing, Edmondson uses models in order to explore compositional possibilities. By not always referring to models, however, he feels free to make radical changes—moving figures about, turning the canvas upside down, even adding on to it—without the "considerable danger of the figure becoming more important than the overall effect of the painting. I want the space around the figure to have just as much life in it as the figure itself does." In fact, he says, "The painting is the figure. It's a rectangle figure." In the autobiographical *Tango Ergo Sum* (1986), for example, Edmondson, the central figure, stands between a pig's head on one side and a swan's wing on the other; they describe his "existence between two

extremes, the physical and the spiritual." The soft Picasso-blue space all around the figure is an interior one; its ghostly occupants are the "whole host of one's ancestors or the people who've influenced one in some way or another."

Edmondson arrives at the dramatic positions of some of his figures by working from scaffolding to view the figure from many angles. *Double Life* (1986), a painting of the same man with two women, connects space, figure, color and line formally and emotionally. The painting is divided into diagonal sections that answer each other: clothed couple above, naked couple, upside down, below; green-black of earth and abyss below, white void suggestive of sheets and empty sky above. The clothed young man has two right arms: one reaches across to touch the hand of the naked woman, the other is clasped by the clothed woman as it hangs by his side. If the painting is inverted, the naked woman, tinged with the green of the abyss, looks as much like an angel flying upward as she does a living figure.

Death is a presence of varying intensity in all of Edmondson's paintings. In *Beasts of Holm* (1986), named for rocks outside the harbor of an island in the outer Hebrides, the fatal sirens who cause seas to rise up and swallow boats are shown temporarily asleep inside the treacherous rocks. But in *Requiem* (1986) the sky opens like a veil between this world and the next; while the earthbound figure stands helpless,



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In *Double Life*, 1986, the male figure is caught between two loves.



***Supper in Poland, 1986.* Edmondson treats friendship and love as sacramental; here they are commemorated with bread and wine.**

two angels gather up his friend to carry her through the gaping rent in the sky. "Dying is something we all live with, and I wanted to deal with it," Edmondson says. "A painting that's about death has just as much to do with life, really."

The link between the two worlds is touch—the touch of the hand, the touch of friendship and passion, the touch of empathy. Hands say as much as faces in Edmondson's paintings: a man's healing hand laid upon a sick woman's forehead, a brotherly hand laid upon a friend's shoulder at

supper. Friendship and love are treated as sacramental and are commemorated with bread and wine, as in *Supper in Poland*. "My relationships with other people are all I've got to work with in me," Edmondson says. "I think that's all any of us has got."

The initial inspiration for his figures is often autobiographical—his wife, mother, father, brother, people from his past. But out of this personal "common denominator" of feeling Edmondson's empathy extends to the victims and survivors of war, exile and political oppression every-

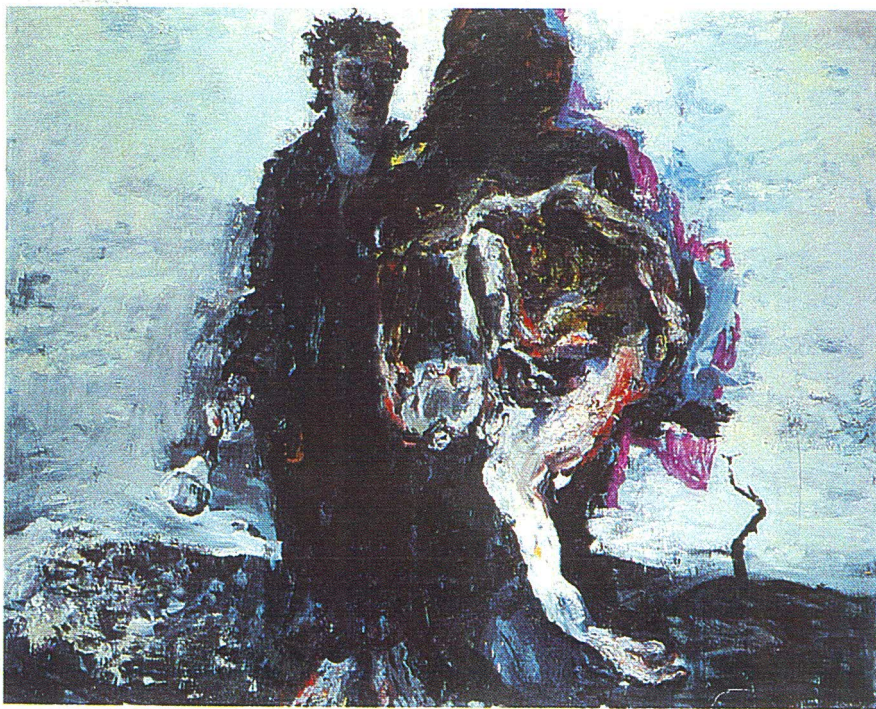
where—to situations, in other words, where there is an "intensity of feeling." He has painted survivors of a Mexican earthquake, terrorist bombings, concentration camps, war in Beirut and life in Poland under the Communist regime. "I think the artist is in a position to make a statement about the age he lives in, and I feel very critical of mine," Edmondson says, referring to the loss of the "virtues of touch" and intuition as technology and "wall-to-wall materialism" have taken over, and to the extraordinary violence of this era. "I don't want to turn my back on what's going on and study the light coming through the wine glass onto the apple. I don't think there's time for that." He searches for imagery that is "relevant now and has a timelessness as well."

Images for the Hebrides and Polish paintings were brought back in his head from his travels, then painted in London using drawings and studio models in reconstructed situations. "I can't paint every day without fueling myself visually. I travel, and I come back enriched." From his Polish trip in 1985, Edmondson returned "with subject matter for ages," and he intends to do more paintings on the theme of living a double life, not to participate in an amorous triangle in this case, but to survive under a repressive regime.

Edmondson says he would not object to having his work described as "illustrative," and he relates with feeling some of the stories that go with particular paintings: the story of the young sailors returning home from World War I whose boat went down in the harbor of one of the Hebrides Islands, and the superstitions their drowning engendered; the story of his camping out in a Polish forest where there are still bison, and of being brought gifts of potatoes and mushrooms by local children. He now fears that the forest, not far from Chernobyl, has lost its purity.

A visit to Treblinka and research in London archives on the liberation of the concentration camps were unbearably depressing to Edmondson. But he also felt that he was having his closest look at the human soul, and in four paintings he pays tribute to it. The huddled dark blue forms in the background of *Duologue* (1986) bring out an almost phosphorescent glow from the reclining skeletal figure and from the face of the figure wearing a yarmulke, as the pair carry on their separate monologues and share a can of food. Edmondson says, "All you were looking at when you looked at the victims was their souls. That was the one thing that was keeping them going."

—Judith Higgins



***Requiem, 1986,* depicts the passage from this world into the next as the woman is taken from her companion and carried by angels through the rent in the sky.**

Judith Higgins is a writer of fiction and of articles on the visual arts.