

Art in America

November 1989

Simon Edmondson at David Beitzel

Simon Edmondson is an exceptionally gifted young British painter whose intense, late-Romantic esthetic recalls that of certain contemporary British composers—Colin Mathews and Robin Holloway, for example. His relation to Böcklin and early Koschka parallels their relation to Mahler and Berg. Edmondson himself mentions his love of Goya and Titian—particularly the latter's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, which must count as one of the Western tradition's most haunting allegories of cruelty and suffering. As this reference might suggest, Edmondson's lush, painterly surfaces convey something more primal and more disturbing than romantic luxuriance and nostalgia. A harsh red or a glaring white will sometimes cut into the generally subdued harmonies of browns, blues and ochers like a violent, dissonant chord.

All five of the large oils (90 by 50 inches, for example) that comprised this show could be described as "landscapes with figures," but Edmondson wants to give new meaning to that worn phrase. The extraordinarily expressive faces of his figures are the real faces of studio models, while the contexts in which the artist has placed them are imaginary. In *Double Descent* (perhaps the most baroque piece here) a tangle of contorted limbs and faces seems to fall from the sky. In *Altenalp* a woman swoons in some kind of private reverie at the base of the painting while jagged crags and peaks rise behind her. She seems at once ecstatic and crushed. Like all his figures, she is suspended between two worlds—the worlds of dream and reality, rapture and pain. Edmondson's work is very much concerned with the idea of boundaries. As the poet Christopher Middleton would put it, he is an obsessively *liminal* artist, and it is significant that one of his most beautiful paintings (not included in this show) is called *Still Margins*.

Edmondson is also driven by a desire to find a way of using figures in painting without implying narrative. He is thus at the opposite pole from the relentlessly anecdotal Eric Fischl. Edmondson's figures are "lost to the world" in a way that would be familiar to Mahler. Even when two figures occupy the same canvas, as in *Maladie du Pays*, they are portrayed as turning away from each other. The crevices and ravines that characterize these landscape paintings exist *between* the figures, and while Edmondson's mountains are mountains of the mind, such expressive inwardness has nothing to do with escapism. His dreamers and abandoned lovers cannot forget the 20th-century history of oppression and mass slaughter.

After a visit to Treblinka, Edmondson remarked: "All you were looking at when you looked at the victims was their souls. That was the one thing that kept them going." Given this subject matter, and this ability to see beneath surfaces, there can be no simple narrative or literal representation. Only a poetic approach is adequate, and Edmondson's mysterious conjunctions of disparate images are profoundly resonant, never arbitrary. He wants to create paintings that are at once as visceral as Soutine's carcasses, and as ambiguously "sublime" and brooding as Caspar David Friedrich's seascapes. Nothing less will do.

—John Ash



Simon Edmondson: *Echo*, 1989, oil on canvas, 79 by 73 inches; at David Beitzel.