

Simon Edmondson

by JOHN KEMP

Three huge unfinished canvases dominate Simon Edmondson's studio in East London. They have a vertiginous grandeur, like a kind of nervy twentieth century baroque. Two of them portray figures juxtaposed deliriously against fragments of an Alpine landscape. They carry with them an atmosphere of unspecified tension, partly sexual in origin, partly expressing the thrill of any transporting emotion. The third canvas, less obviously dramatic, depicts a cloud of jostling heads and arms. Two years ago in his last show at the Nicola Jacobs Gallery, Edmondson exhibited just such a cloud in a painting titled (after Lorca) *A Hundred Ardent Lovers Fell into Eternal Sleep*. There they threatened to crowd the painting's ostensible subject, a pair of naked lovers, off the canvas. Here the couple are long gone, as indeed is any sense of background or setting, apart from a patch of blue in the middle, which might be taken for sky. Propped against the wall for the moment, the picture, Edmondson reckons, may eventually be displayed on a ceiling. Despite its suggestion of a collaged Tiepolo, there is nothing idealised or generalised about the heads which compose it. They sprout out at odd angles, alive with a jerky dynamism, like a panic on a tube train. Whatever their import, they are a disquieting presence, an irruption of the public face into the essentially private domain of the picture space.

Realism is part of the emotional language of Edmondson's work, even when his figures are subject to violent distortion. Citing Velázquez, he describes it as 'a heightened way of dealing with the imagination'. This impersonal descriptive element, the figures drawn direct from the model, endows his most extreme imaginings with conviction. Edmondson is a fine draughtsman, and without this sureness of touch it is difficult to see how the paintings could withstand the strain of the precarious tensions he imposes on them.

A willingness to push into areas of nameless though resonant emotion, a raw, risky quality, is the hallmark of Edmondson's current work. The physical environment which previously seemed on the point of coalescing – a territory at once psychic and actual, imbued with feelings of mystery and poetic sublimity, as in his paintings of the Hebrides – seems to have receded. Instead, the space inhabited is an unbounded psychological space which makes perfunctory use of landscape references and is characterised by incongruity and contradiction. *Ochre Mine*, executed following a visit to Roussillon, is an apt summation of the earlier phase of his work. A claustrophobic group of figures (actually the same model drawn in different postures to emphasise the solitary and Sisyphean nature of the task) is shown at the workface. The occluded horizon of the mine consists of a solid



wall of colour, out of which the artist's material must be dug. Metaphorically, it is a painting about the search for subject-matter. Through careful handling of his medium, Edmondson manages to suggest both the refractory nature of the physical material, and a veil, opaque yet permeable, a haze of colour beyond which something meaningful may reside. This ambiguity gives the painting conviction, while the manifest content and the presence of the paint share a common burden of meaning.

Ochre Mine is a comparatively straightforward painting which points towards something incomprehensible, in fact it takes incomprehensibility as its subject-matter. This is the case too in Edmondson's more experimental pictures, where it is the presence of the paint which tends predominantly to articulate the meaning of the work. These paintings are at once simpler in their paring-down of extraneous detail, and more baffling in their allusions. Bodies plummet through space and mutate into unrecognisable forms, duplicate limbs fly off and describe strange parabolas; perspective is subject to sudden disorienting shifts; the boundaries of individual identity are obscured. Edmondson wants 'to find a way of somehow taking the figure apart and putting it together again in my own way'. While the fragmented 'postmodern body' is one of the commonplaces of neo-expressionism, Edmondson has

in mind something more akin to the imaginative transformations of late Picasso. There is nothing denatured or self-consciously ugly about his figures, however extreme their dislocations. Nor can his work be truly called romantic, despite its emotional content, drama and yearning after intangibles. Although the flow of imagery and paint seems inchoate, Edmondson's canvases are structured in such a way as to provoke tension and disquiet, rather than a sense of resolution. They are designed, to adapt Eliot's phrase, to bring us to 'an overwhelming question'. Edmondson's work inhabits a borderland where consciousness meets the unconscious. 'I like to have this part you think you understand', he explains, 'and then turn it, so you think you're comprehending something beyond comprehension. I have to commit myself to saying "here is the question", rather than "here is the answer"'.

To fathom the mystery of these pictures one inevitably turns to considering the quality of the paint, by which they live or die. In one of the recent paintings a dark male figure married to an impacted wedge of flesh, which might be a tree-root or some kind of Grunewaldian monster, falls towards a splayed female figure who is borne up weightlessly, her body little more than a stain on the canvas. Neither figure is partic-

ularly individualised, the woman's face being eclipsed by a swathe of shadow. There is no narrative content to explain the mystery of their imminent collision, nor, perhaps even more crucially, is there any recourse to archetypal symbolism to provide signposts to the psychological domain. The whole painting happens in a kind of existential



Simon Edmondson, *Heart of a Glacier*, 1990, oil on canvas. 269.2 x 251.4 cm

paroxysm. Its focus lies in the hand of the woman, a piece of pure line-drawing, as it rests on her stomach in an attitude of languor. The whole meaning of the painting seems to reside in this gesture, its curious stillness juxtaposed with the precipitate energy of the male form, lightness against the hurtling compacted mass. Clearly there is a sexual component, but also something more mysterious and humane than can merely be explained away by psychology. Hands in Edmondson's work have always been eloquent, and in recent years he has exhibited a number of paintings concerned with the sense of touch. Any artist is in a sense a seeing hand, and it is through our sense of touch that we link our inner experience with the physical world and become aware of each other as sentient beings, not phantoms. For an artist like Edmondson whose work holds the distinction between inner and outer worlds in abeyance and seeks to make the intangible tangible, its significance hardly needs underlining. In earlier paintings dealing with Poland, with Treblinka and the experience of the concentration camps, it is through the hands of his figures that communication takes place, often contrasted with an inexpressive pitted gaze, as if the possibilities of words have been used up. In the painting *Duologue*,

almost incredibly unsold from his previous show, there is no communication between the garrulous skeleton and the Beckettian figure in the foreground, whose gaze rests somewhere beyond the edge of the canvas. The gestures of their bodies reveal how each is isolated within their monologue, while faces and clutching hands, phantasms of guilt and memory, loom out of the background. In the stage directions to *Ubu Roi*, Jarry wrote that 'the action of the play takes place in Poland - that is to say Nowhere', and, given the twist of tragedy, it is this existential, nebulous quality which Edmondson's paintings seek to articulate:

I was attracted to the subject because there was a point at which things that were normally invisible became visible...you saw the levels you don't normally see.

One of the characteristics of this borderland of experience is indeterminacy, namelessness. Edmondson works hard at allowing this indeterminacy to manifest itself on canvas, holding off from tried and tested devices in order to let the work develop in its own way. Often it seems that the question of a title is deliberately deferred lest it disturb the precarious equilibrium of the painting's meaning. He is drawn to unclarity, dissonance, uncertainty, qualities which give his paintings a vibrant edge. In this his risk is to paint merely the grotesque or obscure, yet, in their attempt to convey the strange contradictory world of the emotions, Edmondson's paintings testify to a conviction seemingly rare in contemporary art that the communication of humanity is both possible and valuable. It should hardly be necessary to state this, for if it is not so, then all art is a waste of time and we should all get on with doing something else. Yet this is the gloomy impasse into which unremitting philosophical dissection has tended to lead us, as if all that is left to do is to make cheap jokes at the expense of the eye. A world from which meaning is absent is a world in which meaning needs to be created. Edmondson's work is of a type which, while reflecting interior states with a proper realism and dispassion, contributes to this aim. To make a case for it as transcendental or mystical in intent would be to misrepresent it and mitigate its impact. Rather, one could see it as a furtherance of the aims of modernism in a time characterised by uncertainty and polymorphism: always questioning, but offering no easy solution.

25 April - 19 May,
Nicola Jacobs Gallery, London.