

Simon Edmondson

by TOM BURNS

Simon Edmondson believes that changing studios is good for him. He is certain that he has 'a Guardian Angel where studios are concerned'. He had a 'fabulous' studio in the east end of London, with lots of light (so good, in fact, that he still holds on to it), and now he has one that pleases him every bit as much in Getafe, south west of Madrid.

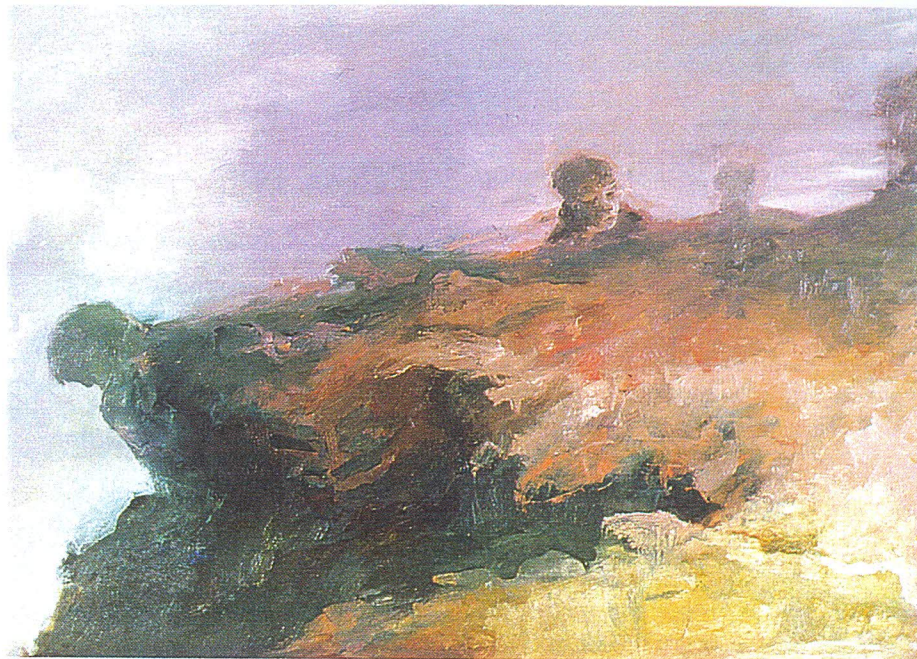
Most Madrileños think of Getafe as an industrial wasteland and they give it a wide berth as they bypass its satanic mills on their weekend trips to treasure-stacked Toledo. Edmondson, who has set up shop in a small disused factory that he has to himself in inner Getafe, calls his bolt-hole a 'little village'. His studio looks out on to a street that has old ladies and stray dogs and a family-run bar which doubles up as a restaurant. It serves three-course home-cooking lunches with a bottle of wine thrown in for £3, and will extend credit to regulars.

Edmondson takes the metro and then a commuter train every morning to Getafe from his apartment in old Madrid near the Opera House and the Royal Palace. It might be ten hours of isolation, excepting lunch, before he returns. There are breaks, of course. To the Guadarrama Sierra, a mountain range 30 miles north of Madrid that soars to over 5000 feet and which slices Spain's central plateau in two, dividing Old Castile from New Castile; or to Galicia, the Celtic north-western corner that could be Ireland and which was where medieval man who travelled to Compostella thought the world ended.

La Sierra and *Finisterre* are two of the canvases inspired by the Guadarrama mountains and Galicia. They reveal an Edmondson who, with his Spanish studio angel always on guard, evades complexity and strives for simplicity.

His new work represents a swing back towards landscape. Edmondson is dispensing with figures right now, although he does not want to renounce anything. 'I'm doing the same thing in different ways', he says. It would be pointless to quarrel with his own perception of his current work. Those who respond to it with entire admiration, and I am one of them, can only rejoice that he is finding new room for his art in Spain; that he is exploring the high plateau beyond Madrid where Teresa of Avila said she felt closer to God; that he has made his home, for the present, in a land of very long horizons, where landscape is a condition of the soul.

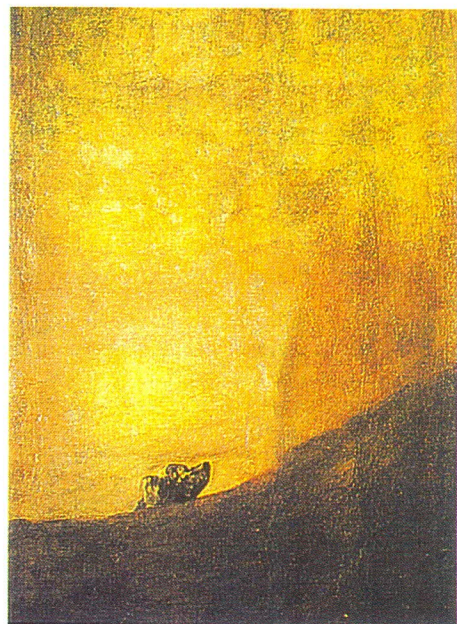
The Plateau is arguably the best starting point for considering Edmondson's new work, because it has the figure still in it. The canvas has a pair of shoulders and a head pressed up against a craggy rock face. The rest of the figure is hidden by the land mass. The crag is the beginning and the end of a high flat land, of a singular plateau that hints at bucolic greenery and yet has the formal austerity of a rarefied terrain



Simon Edmondson, *The Plateau*, 1992, oil on canvas, 142 x 200 cm. Photograph Inigo Martin

where the heavens are within touching distance. There are no hands hoisting the figure up to the plateau, no hands clinging to prevent what must surely be a long fall. Is the figure ascending, sinking, rising, descending? The face gives no clue. It is vacant, unresponsive and disconnected; it refuses to tell its story. This is a familiar Edmondson face and it is at the centre of the painter's well-trodden territory. The composition points to what he calls 'the figure and the landscape problem'. It is a technical teaser that seeks to reconcile figure and landscape by fashioning them into one and the same thing – a problem which, Edmondson acknowledges, 'many people would say is a lot of old hat'. How well he resolves the technical aspects is the least of it, for, beyond any immediate teasers, 'old hat' or not, his work is an invitation to consider landscape as an essential element of what 'being' is all about. In the vision Edmondson wrestles to create, landscape is all-surrounding. You walk in it, feel, mature and understand through it. 'Landscapes', he says, 'must tell people something about themselves'. Uppermost in his mind is the concept of 'landscape and I within it' that he learnt from one of his mentors, the poet John Clare.

Spaniards, as Edmondson will surely come to learn if he stays long enough, commuting to Getafe and discovering what lies beyond it, know all about that too. The poet Antonio Machado, for example, criss-crossed Castile – 'Black poplars along the white road, white poplars lining the river banks' – seeking solitude in the plateau's immensity and finding consolation for the young love that died on him and the hope-filled Spain of the 1930s that failed him. Machado's contemporary, the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, wrote his 'Meditations on Don Quixote' at El Escorial, in the fold of the Guadarrama Sierra. Affirming in this essay



Goya, *figure of a dog*, from the 'Black Paintings'

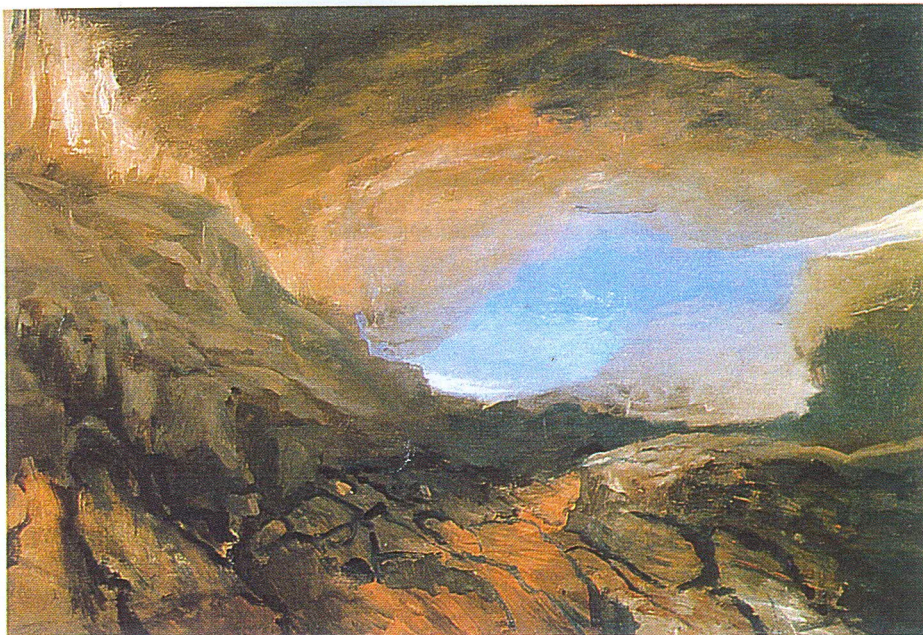
that his universe lay beyond the mountain passes between the Sierra's snowy peaks, Ortega y Gasset proclaimed that 'I am I and my circumstances'. Edmondson is on a similar track in seeing landscape 'as an opportunity to say something fairly fundamental about our existence'.

The Plateau, with the head and shoulders pressed against the crag, is bound, in a Spanish context, to recall the disturbing dog that Goya painted to decorate La Quinta, his home on the outskirts of Madrid, when he was deaf and very isolated. The 'Dog' now hangs in the Prado. Goya gave the beast a head and buried the rest of its body in quicksand. Is it quicksand, or is it, as Xavier de Salas suggested, really the sea that is engulfing the dog; and if the sea, is the dog therefore swimming against the current – as did Goya, sceptical and melancholy but unrepentant in his hopes and his illusions? If you need to tell a story about a

painting, then the figure in *The Plateau* might be suspended, as Goya's dog could have been, between the forces that drag it down and those that draw it up. Edmondson's figures could be heaving against gravity, just as Goya's dog might have been paddling for all its worth against the current. Edmondson himself would never suggest such a story line. He purposefully avoids a narrative element. When he crowded his earlier works with figures and faces, he was careful that they should not look at or confront each other – a deliberate evasion of narrative drama.

But Edmondson's studied ambiguity stops short when a figure appears together with a recognisable landscape, as in *The Plateau*. The painting conveys, in fact, a very legible message: the crag, the free fall below it, and the high terrain beyond it, the bush and the close sky are one with the figure. To grasp Edmondson's direction in his art, *The Plateau* should be viewed against his *Heart of a Glacier* (1989), and against *Odyssey* and *Gradual Ascent* (both of 1990). In *Heart of a Glacier*, those familiar faces and figures are treated like geological details: they are shaping the landscape. In *Odyssey* and *Gradual Ascent*, faces and figures have become the landscape. As in a landscape, you walk about the heads and shapes, each occupying its own space and oblivious to any other; you walk around the faces and figures, and through them.

For the present, that has all changed. After a year in Spain, Edmondson has emphatically decided to dispense with figures. He has come to believe that his work was getting 'over-complicated', and he says that he is reacting against it. *Odyssey*, for example, was 'a very complicated' painting. The emphasis, now that he has emerged on the other side of that complex and crowded passage, is on simplicity in general and on landscapes in particular. And something of a full circle is completed: Edmondson never painted figures until he went to art school;



Simon Edmondson, *Cave*, 1992, oil on canvas, 146 x 218 cm

when he was a child his landscapes were raffle prizes in the bazaars that his mother helped organise from their home in Kent.

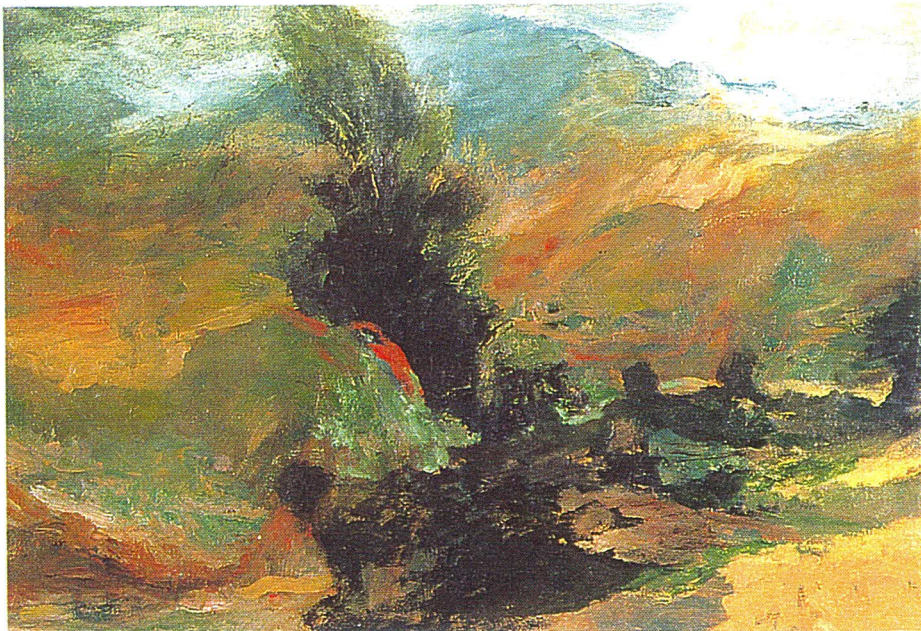
La Sierra and *Finisterre* are figure-free, but they do not, as he rightly insists, involve any renunciation. For the figure is not really absent: the onlooker, drawn into the painting, into the landscape, is now the protagonist. The figure has become 'I in it', as John Clare would have it – affirming 'my circumstances', in the Spanish idiom of Ortega y Gasset.

There is a peace and serenity in Edmondson's new work that are born of the newly-encountered simplicity. *La Sierra* incorporates what every walker in the Guadarrama mountains joyfully recognises as he 'loses' himself in this landscape: the blue-grey granite of the peaks, the darkness of the pines, the flash of cistus in bloom, of poppy, thyme and lavender; the land,

golden here and burnt gold there; and above all, the light – a light that is cool and high, rarefied, heavenly, and which sews the landscape together with shadow patterns.

Finisterre was inspired by looking straight down from the cliff edge to the treacherous rocks below that have earned Spain's north-west corner the title of the Coast of Death. There is a black rock at the bottom that could be a black hole, and there is also a gentle source of light that spreads out from the top left and envelopes the rock/hole with luminous sea spray. I don't know Finisterre with the intimacy I know the Guadarrama Sierra, but, without hesitation, I accept Edmondson's invitation to descend effortlessly the 'End of the Landworld' cliff, as would a gatherer of the mussels and periwinkles that cling to the rocks against the lashing sea. And, after plucking what is necessary from the shimmering mass of darkness and light that lies at Finisterre's daunting breakwater, I feel I would have strength enough to swim against deathly currents and to emerge head and shoulders above the cliff as in *The Plateau*.

Simon Edmondson is a young, highly sensitive, creative and intelligent English artist who is immersing himself in a land of great painters and great landscapes. I spent most of a morning in his company in the cafeteria of the Prado, chatting about Getafe and about Spain and what he is doing now. We then moved up from the basement to gaze at the pair of Villa Medici landscapes, or more exactly gardenscapes, that Velazquez painted on his second visit to Rome. One of the Villa Medici canvases has a white sheet draped over a balustrade. It is a lure, wholly ambiguous but utterly unerring, which draws you into the garden. It lent an insight to the work that Edmondson has been producing since, guided by his Guardian Angel, he settled in to a new studio in Spain.



Simon Edmondson, *La Sierra*, 1992, oil on canvas, 146 x 218 cm

17 June – 7 August, Benjamin Rhodes, London.