

SEARCH FOR SUBJECT-MATTER

SIMON EDMONDSON EXHIBITION by PADDY KITCHEN

SIMON EDMONDSON (b. 1955) has articulated the dilemma that confronts so many young painters. It concerns subject-matter. What, in these macabre times, when we know so much—particularly about art history—yet are certain of so little, can be deemed suitable subject-matter for an ambitious figurative painter with a romantic imagination?

Surely, some might reply, the choice is limitless? There is a whole world out there, and whether you regard it pessimistically and perceive only wars and threatened environments, or optimistically and celebrate its beauty and its mystery, there is no shortage of spectacular visual material.

Yet, three years ago, Edmondson painted a large canvas called *Ochre Mine*, which he said was a metaphor for his own search for subject-matter. It shows naked figures,

working underground, digging into the hotly pigmented earth with their bare hands. Without the title and the explanation, one might imagine the figures to be prisoners or slaves, buried in the smouldering heat of some nameless purgatory.

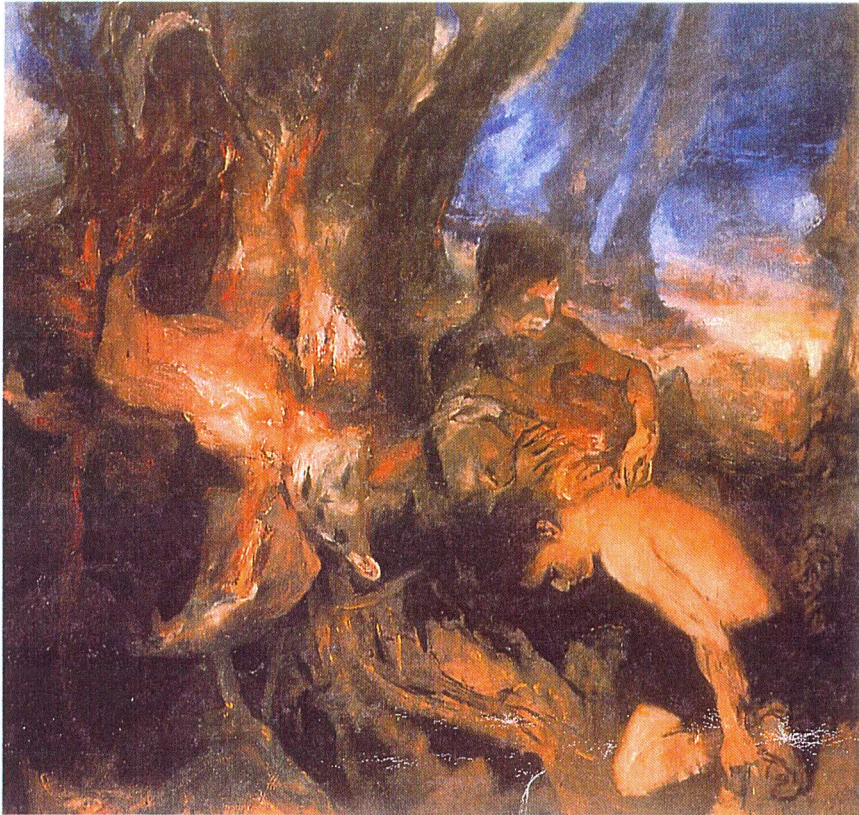
Edmondson's brief explanation of this painting, which is not included in his current exhibition, which contains only recent work, occurs in an article (*Modern Painters*, Autumn 1990) where he recorded his reactions to the large Titian exhibition held at the Doges' Palace that year.

Titian is one of Edmondson's heroes, but, while he was experiencing delight at the great Venetian's mastery of expressive composition, his bold drawing with the brush and his spontaneous handling of paint, Edmondson also felt envy.

This was not envy for an infinitely greater talent, but for Titian's unselfconsciousness in relation to his subject-matter. "It may seem," he writes, that "I am the ungrateful inheritor of a century of 'barrier breaking', but it sometimes feels as though the baby was lost with the bath water."

Many have shared that feeling; but it is one thing to have it from the spectators' sidelines, and quite another to be a young artist trying to do something about it.

The figurative painters who have dominated British art for 30 years—Bacon, Freud, Hockney, Auerbach—have portrayed an intensely personal world, frequently confined to their own environs. Others have come along, most notably the Glasgow painters,



Revival, 1992, an oil on canvas by Simon Edmondson, measuring 78in by 81in

much of it—Ken Currie is an exception—is the kind of personal mythologising which is difficult to crack, and often the actual painting is not exciting enough to encourage perseverance. The one thing that simply does not seem acceptable in an important contemporary painting is a complex figure composition in which it is fairly easy to work out what is going on. This means that most critical responses to new compositions are filled with vague statements, such as "they carry an atmosphere of unspecified tension", a quotation culled from a description of one of Edmondson's previous exhibitions.

But, given that Edmondson has been very direct in describing his dilemma—"Where is our subject-matter? Nothing unselfconscious comes on a plate for us today"—can one be equally direct when responding to his new work?

Of eight large canvases, three are landscapes without figures. Edmondson is working in Spain now, and the most dramatic of these is *In Galicia*. The imagery is northern romantic—cliff, stream, storm clouds and light, tree—and Edmondson takes risks in his attack: the broad, black outlining that almost turns the cliff into a coxcomb, the flaunting of any strict horizon. It is painted in the studio from a desirable sketch, and the question is whether there is enough power and lasting resonance in the composition and handling to merit nearly 42 sq ft of wall space. To be honest, I am not sure. I would need to see it hanging in a house

mixed company in a large gallery, to find out.

I feel the same about *Cave*. Here, warm light glides under a low aperture in the rock and the spectator's gaze is drawn towards an ellipse of blue sky. None of Edmondson's paintings is delivered with a cool shrug, making you think "So what?", but *Cave* did make me feel I needed to add an ingredient: memories of the sound of the prisoners' chorus from *Fidelio*, perhaps, or thoughts concerning Plato's cave allegory.

With at least three of the figure compositions I had no nagging doubts concerning scale. There is a small landscape sketch which shows the basis for *Boundary*. Two sandy cart tracks meet, and wend as a single path to the top of the picture—a quiet, pleasing study. In the big picture, there are two figures back in the foreground, one bursting out of the picture plane and the other escaping into it. They are drawn roughly but well, not "finished" in terms of painting, but they seem enough. There is no need to make up a story for them.

Revival, illustrated here, is apparently more alarming. At first, I thought the flayed figure on the left was a wolf, but then it was pointed out that I was reading the head wrongly, that it hangs sideways and there is still a human ear attached to it. Yet the gestures of contact between the two figures seem so calm and tender that one feels the worst whatever it was is over. It is dark behind the corpse, but there is light beyond the boys, and Titian's *The Playing of Marsyas* must have something to do with it.

With *Chestnut*, one is in no doubt about the immediate situation. This time a horse hurtles from the picture, while its rider ducks urgently beneath a huge bough that extends and forks malevolently right across the canvas. Any rider will identify with the situation, and the painting itself conveys rapidity, excitement and danger.

One might say that, in terms of actual painting, Edmondson takes his fences head on. I have had a reproduction of *Revival* on my desk these past few days. Normally, I would file it now, but it continues to grow on me, and for the time being will join the medley on my work-room wall.

The exhibition of Simon Edmondson's recent oil paintings runs at the Benjamin Rhodes Gallery, 4