

IDA EKBLAD Kunsthaus Hamburg, Germany

An honorific in both English and French, the word 'madam' can also describe a bossy child or the female proprietor of a brothel. The word needles because it manages to simultaneously infantilize and sexualize. In titling her solo exhibition at Kunsthaus Hamburg 'Diary of a Madam', Ida Ekblad seems intent on positively reclaiming this label for someone independent, bold and unafraid.

One wall of the Kunsthaus's lone exhibition space is taken over by a single work: seven two-metre-long canvases, of varying styles, are strung together end-to-end in a frieze that spans nearly 15 metres. The title of this piece is taken from a poem written by Ekblad: *Hitherto unexposed in the darkest part of some old ossuary, jardiniere, urn, krater, vessel, jar or pot, mouth blown in the fragile metropolis of Venice, in the 80s* (2017). Images of vessels litter these canvases. In one, a multicoloured pouring vase floats on a hazy blue background; in another, a double-handled pitcher lies sideways on a splashy, expressionist backdrop. These containers are painted to replicate the distinctive qualities of Murano glass, bringing to mind not only the craft involved in this specialized process but also the decline of a centuries-old Venetian industry.

Ossuaries and urns both store remnants of the dead, but it's hard to see any memento mori in these works, given their vibrancy as well as their lively mish-mashing of colours, styles and materials. In her paintings, the Norwegian artist incorporates multiple techniques that are often regarded as tacky or outdated, such as airbrushing, 3D puffy paint, graffiti tags and garishly painted fabric stuck directly onto the canvas. One stand-out panel, from the above-mentioned frieze, incorporates abstracted graffiti-style scrawls as a decorative border, evocative of the Latin inscriptions on medieval religious paintings. Ekblad has gleefully 'capped' (graffiti slang for tagging on top of someone else's work) her own paintings and, in doing so, raises this 'low' method of decorative mark-making to first-rate painting.

It's difficult not to think here of predominantly male artistic movements such as *junge wilde*, CoBrA and neo-expressionism – all of which valued free expression over 'good taste'. Indeed, it's tempting to view Ekblad's paintings, as well as her 'drift' sculptures – represented here by two chair-like objects made from powder-coated welded steel, *Aventurine and Ruby Glass Single-Flower Snake Armchair* (2015) and *We spent the*

remnants of the evening snacking on our own web to recoup some of the energy used in spinning (2016) – in relation to her gender: a fact reinforced by the exhibition's title. But, while I'll admit to feeling a thrill at the evidence of a woman welding and making large-format, expressive paintings, Ekblad's eclecticism shows her to be an equal-opportunity scavenger. Inspiration is taken from many sources and blended into a style that is wholly her own.

That's not to say the artist is against playing with our expectations. In the two other friezes featured in the exhibition, she inserts herself directly into the narrative. *Let me not forget to record, do not to disturb if death should happen in the night. Not to let me know it until I arise at my usual time* (2017) comprises three vessel-themed paintings hung directly on top of a row of identical posters that feature a Scandinavian-looking little girl. Underneath this girl's gap-toothed smile, EKBLAD is written in bold, red lettering. While the child appears to be the artist, I suspect her inclusion is a red herring. The flyposting – like the tagging – is another act of vandalism, and it is the action not the image that is important. The success of the exhibition lies in a painting's ability to withstand these indignities. But Ekblad's paintings are robust and, with the assurance of a true madam, can resist whatever is thrown at them.

Chloe Stead

Below
Ida Ekblad, *Hitherto unexposed in the darkest part of some old ossuary, jardiniere, urn, krater, vessel, jar or pot, mouth blown in the fragile metropolis of Venice, in the 80's* (detail), 2017, airbrush and 3D puff paint on linen, 14 x 3 m



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