

Restless in Oslo: On Ida Ekblad and Edvard Munch

An obscure dissatisfaction, a sense that no formal solution works for long, is shared by the art of Ida Ekblad and Edvard Munch.

Barry Schwabsky November 15, 2011 | This article appeared in the December 5, 2011 edition of *The Nation*.



Somehow I doubt that, as Virginia Woolf once asserted, human character changed on or about December 1910. The belief system of a certain stratum of British society may have collapsed, but an underlying assumption that human character is British evidently remained constant.

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The art world, too, sometimes mistakes itself for the whole of humanity, yet the shifts in its doxa—which can seem momentous from within, though barely noticeable to an outside observer—can go strangely unremarked. I tracked one shift some years ago, and to understand its dynamics you have to keep in mind that after the counter-counterrevolution that demoted the Neo-Expressionism of the 1980s, young artists, no matter what they were making, thought it compulsory to engineer a conceptual underpinning for their art. Not everyone back then was making things that looked like conceptual art—grainy photographs accompanied by texts quoting Lacan, let's say—but one could respectably be a painter only by being a conceptual painter, a photographer by being a conceptual photographer. Each artist had to articulate a new conceptual twist. The obligation to be conceptual persisted throughout the '90s, and it resulted in a lot of smart, well-executed but often rather bloodless art. Then one day I visited a young artist in her studio, and she said

to me, as if throwing down a challenge, "I don't really know what I'm doing in here. I'm just messing around." Suddenly the most sophisticated conceptual gesture had become the willingness to disavow conceptual gestures *tout court*.

I felt the ground moving under my feet when that happened. If having no concept could be a sufficiently enabling concept (call it "the concept of no concept"), then we were without stable criteria and had to go on pure nerve. God was dead and everything permitted. It felt good.

That was a while ago, and though the earth may have moved for me, I have to admit that this change in the character of art mostly went unnoticed. That was no surprise. How many artists could really have been daring enough to go conceptually naked? And yet I wish more would try. Ideas are the fetishes of thought, and while fetishes can be fun, more exciting still is the pure fluidity of thinking—when the open process of thought has not yet been reified into the stiff and brittle outlines of a rule, a slogan, an idea. In any event, even more quickly than it had moved, the earth stilled itself. In a matter of a few years, young artists once again seemed more eager to dilate about concepts first and present their work later.

Luckily, Ida Ekblad, a 30-year-old painter and sculptor from Oslo, isn't among them. Ekblad is one of those rare artists whose work offers neither clear guidelines for response nor tidy concepts. I don't always like what I'm seeing, and when I do like it I don't necessarily quite understand why; but looking at her work is more challenging and rewarding than pondering art whose greatest burden is to advertise that its maker has outsmarted the combined faculties of the Städelschule in Frankfurt and the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. The oblique formal intensity of Ekblad's work is patent enough to invite a reconsideration of pieces that on a first viewing may seem flat-footed. I've caught glimpses of these pieces over the last couple of years, sometimes in high-profile shows like "Younger

Than Jesus” at the New Museum in New York in 2009 or “ILLUMInations” at this year’s Venice Biennale, but only in the past few months have I been able to enjoy a sufficiently concentrated exposure to them to feel like I’m getting an overview. I recently saw Ekblad’s work at the Greene Naftali Gallery in New York City, where she had her second American one-person show; and then at West London Projects, where her current exhibition, with its appropriately cryptic yet colloquial title, “Low Tide Bring Da Ruckus,” is on view through December 10.

The New York show was fairly evenly divided between painting and sculpture; except for a single video work, the London show was all sculpture. Many of Ekblad’s sculptures are painted constructions of welded metal, and at first I was inclined to see them as an extension of her pictorial thinking into three dimensions. But maybe I was getting it backward. All of Ekblad’s work involves an intensely physical relation to materials, and her paintings compress this physicality to the flatness of the plane. The physicality is not primarily that of the paint surface, its evident facture, although many of Ekblad’s paintings do possess a rough, funky impasto. Rather, I’m thinking of the fierce way she treats colors—the way she seems to bang them around, twist them into odd shapes, and squash them against one another like stray bits of metal she might have heated up with a blowtorch and mercilessly hammered into some strangely twisted shape. Even when her paint is thin and her hues transparent, there is little space or atmosphere to her compositions; the colors jostle against one another in awkward, off-balance piles. The clunky shapes they make take unexpected, uncomfortable twists and turns that rhyme with the forced torsions of the metal shapes found in the metal sculptures.

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Looking at these strangely concatenated abstractions, a seasoned gallerygoer will inevitably think of possible pictorial precursors and referents. Yet the constellation of citations will be filled with seemingly irreconcilable if not entirely contradictory valences. Chatting with the gallerist during my visit to Greene Naftali, I said that I hadn’t realized there could ever possibly be a missing link between Per Kirkeby, the Danish artist best known for his sweatily earnest landscape-based abstract paintings, and Michael Krebber, the German painter whose artistic identity is based on a sort of supercilious disdain for his medium. (I have yet to be convinced that Krebber’s slacker dandy approach to painting is a winner.) The gallerist laughed at the incongruous connection, but a few days later the *New York Times* published Roberta Smith’s review of the show, wherein the same two artists were mentioned, along with many others, including the American abstractionist Joan Thorne, whose work has been sadly overlooked since her heyday in the 1980s and of whom Ekblad has likely never heard. Yet the flashes of Thorne’s work in Ekblad’s become hard to dismiss once they’ve been pointed out. That the paintings could evoke an inadvertent predecessor almost at random suggests that what Smith finally dismissed as a “bandwagon of references” may not be one at all. Ekblad is not working under the sign of eclecticism; the internal consistency of her aesthetic trumps any passing allusion to the styles of other artists. She seems to be negotiating a path that winds between various styles without ever landing squarely on any of them. Her work doesn’t proceed by way of a commentary on received styles or cataloged movements; she simply doesn’t go out of her way to suppress potential allusions. Impurity is all to the good.

Perhaps there is an equivalence between the way Ekblad incorporates found materials into her sculpture and the use of cultural materials in her work more broadly. She once told the Italian magazine *Mousse* about the clandestine trips she made to a government-run scrap yard near the Oslofjord to explore “colossal mountains of shiny, scrappy, rusty, multicolored pieces of metal. Industrial products that once fulfilled various purposes for society, now defunct: crusty, twisted skeletons of cars, bikes, train tracks, beams, ironing boards... A marvelous, gargantuan pile that reveals our forlorn condition and the absurdity of our world.” To group her work with contemporary “unmonumental” assemblage, despite their surface resemblances (and the image of Ekblad clambering across a landscape of scrap), would be a mistake. Ekblad makes what used to be called junk sculpture, in the tradition not only of its more or less *démodé* practitioners like Richard Stankiewicz and Anthony Caro but also of the innumerable unrenowned amateurs whose public face might be the beatnik artist Dean in the 1999 animated film *The Iron Giant*. If there’s something potentially corny and dated about making welded metal junk sculpture in the twenty-first century, Ekblad triumphantly brushes

aside the technique's kitsch potential while generously letting her work own up to its kinship with subartistic cognates.

Similarly, if her paintings sometimes recall the products of a passé expressionism or an untutored Sunday painter's take on abstraction, so be it. I'm reminded of how, in 1955, Clement Greenberg saw that Clyfford Still had appropriated for real art, and entirely without irony, the strange and seemingly irredeemable aesthetic of what used to be called "buckeye" painting—"a race between hot shadows and hot lights whose invariable outcome is a livid, dry, sour picture with a warm, brittle surface." As with Still, there is this vernacular dimension to Ekblad's practice. In her sculpture, for instance, she uses a technique that sophisticated artists had borrowed from blacksmiths, mechanics and tinkers but that then migrated from gallery art to the backyard workshops of hobbyists—and she rejects nothing of this meandering history. Painting her constructions in bright colors, she erases the patina of use and age that typically lend a sentimental aura to such concoctions. There is nothing melancholic about Ekblad's junk sculpture. The discarded fragments she uses may be defunct and forlorn when she finds them, but she sets them dancing in space. Their former function is no longer relevant. It's as if some beauty and energy long dormant in them has been set free.

My favorites among the sculptures in these two shows were three large pieces at Greene Naftali that took the form of gates. (There is a smaller, less elaborate gate at West London Projects.) If Ekblad's other painted metal assemblages liberate their components from a forsaken functionality to find an underlying gestural energy, the gates reincorporate gestural fragments into a new pseudo-functional arrangement. Free-standing objects in the middle of the gallery, these gates neither block nor permit access to any space save that of the imagination. Somehow, Ekblad wants at once to take things as found and to transform them; she deals with them casually yet with care. No wonder I feel wrong-footed so often when contemplating her work. This elusive and paradoxical quality somehow connects with the signature her paintings bear, the two block capitals I and E. Besides standing for her given name, the two letters could just as well be the familiar abbreviation for the Latin *id est*—an abbreviation that purports simply to point, bluntly enough, to what something is, but always in such a way as to remind you that what it is may not necessarily be what you thought.

more loosely painted than the earlier ones. The deepest reason Munch had to keep painting, and reinterpreting, *The Sick Child* may have been to keep it unfinished.

Other sections of the exhibition address Munch's use of photography and his fascination with cinema and theater, as well as his occasional quasi-journalistic forays into painting current events. These topics overlap curiously with others; for example, because Munch's photographic experiments mostly take himself as their subject, they are related to the autobiographical elements in his painting, in which self-portraiture became a more and more important element as he aged. Perhaps less obviously, the section on "staging" makes most sense in relation to the room devoted to "visual space," because his recurrent use of claustrophobically enclosed settings and forced perspectives is part of his effort to project—to use an appropriately theatrical term—his paintings from the stage of the canvas into the viewer's reality. The use of exaggerated perspective in paintings like *On the Operating Table* (1902–03), *Galloping Horse* (1910–12) and *Workers Returning Home* (1913–14)—notice how the workers in the foreground of the last actually seem to be about to tumble forward out of the picture—is particularly interesting because, far from representing an attachment to classical ways of constructing pictorial space, in Munch's hands the device tends to overturn conventional perspective. Treating the flatness of pictorial space after Impressionism as a given, Munch attempts to forge a new vision of things pressing forward toward the viewer rather than receding into the distance.

The Pompidou exhibition raises an important question: What makes Munch a modern painter? It can't simply be his curiosity about new technologies based on the camera, which were so often put to uses inimical to Modernism: for every Dziga Vertov, there was a Cecil B. DeMille pursuing the cinematic equivalent of nineteenth-century salon painting. And Munch's normal attentiveness to the world around him, as reflected in a 1917 woodcut depicting the panic in Oslo on the declaration of war several years earlier and a 1929 lithograph depicting the execution of Finnish Communists during the civil war in that country in 1918, hardly amounts to a new form of visual journalism (which would have been more a nineteenth-century concern anyway). That Munch returned to such scenes years after their occurrence suggests that his interest in treating them artistically had nothing to do with their news value. His modernity resides elsewhere: in his restlessness and dissatisfaction, which were no more assuaged by the outside world than by his inwardness, and impelled him to explore incessantly the physical and emotional byways of vision and the materiality of the image. Picasso said that the lesson of Cézanne was his *inquiétude*—his "anxiety," as it's sometimes translated. "Restlessness" might do as well, or even better, insofar as it is located in the body as well as the mind. It's not only what Picasso shared with Cézanne but what the whole modern tradition from Manet through de Kooning and Pollock shared—an obscure dissatisfaction, a sense that no formal solution ever works for long. Munch was part of that tribe, which often seems to have died out or gone to ground. Once in a while, though, an artist like Ekblad comes along, tempting us to hope that there might still be among us daughters, and sons, too, of that uneasy lineage.