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Devotion 1999, 2017



Afterglow
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I met Ida Ekblad this September in a noisy cafe in rainy Oslo. By the time we had finished talking, almost two hours had passed and the cafe had emptied for closing. I was met with an outpouring of generosity and charm akin to that which pervades the artist's lively work. During our interview, the artist describes a phenomenon she has dubbed as "afterglow" a certain specific mood or feeling that an individual can be left with after seeing a particularly special live performance or dancing all night at a rave. Of course we both agreed that – while very rare – this sensation can similarly be felt when overcome by a painting or an exhibition. What I didn't tell her was that she was describing precisely how I feel when I see her colourful canvases, her sculptural handling of paint and bold compositional arrangements.

In Ekblad's recent paintings, puffy paint lifts her shapes off the canvas and into a space; swirling amassments of saccharine colour that bizarrely undulate, bubble and swirl. Despite the three-dimensional effect of this material, Ekblad's paint somehow disavows any room for spatial depth in her work. Objects that appear and disappear – often flowers and vessels – are flattened by a graphic approach to form rooted in an engagement with graffiti. Cartoon like subjects occasionally float into the pictures, as do textile patterns from faded table cloths, both emphasising this intentional flatness. This playful tease of space and depth results from an enthusiastic, constant oscillation between painting and sculpture in the studio and so proposes a challenge to our expectations of both. In similar protest, Ekblad's choice of visual lexicon enables her to reference both high and low culture in a single space, where Venetian Murano glass vases appear alongside graffiti tags and smiling dolphins.

Much like Ekblad's flattened motifs, structural elements similarly repeat. Borders enclose the paintings, whether filled with purposely illegible text or decorative shapes. Evoking picture frames for family photos, these



Painting: Me say Me walk walk
Sculpture: Step Motherfucker, 2017

borders elevate and protect their treasured contents. Mining her childhood memories for raw material, the artist includes visual references to specific experiences, which surface in texts or interviews that accompany her shows. Ekblad establishes a kind of collective nostalgia – reinforced by her choice of materials and technique – where the viewer becomes unsure if they are experiencing the artist's memories or their own.

These journeys into Ekblad's past to find subject matter emulate a similar motion to the *dérives* of the Situationist International during the 1960s, referenced in her occasional "drifts" through cities and rural landscapes where she collects discarded materials and scrap to build her sculptures with. For Ekblad, even Schloss, the project space and experimental live music venue she founded in 2016 in a disused Porsche garage in Oslo bolsters her understanding of what constitutes material for future works. In our interview, we discuss to what extent sourcing and sampling feature in her practice and the potential for "bad" paintings to be reworked into

what she considers her best work. Besides the effect her work has on me, what I also didn't think I'd tell the artist was that I also felt the same "afterglow" we had gushed about after I left the cafe. The best part? She messaged me on Instagram not much longer after we said goodbye to say our conversation made her feel exactly that. Magic.

ANTONIA MARSH While some of your exhibitions have combined painting and sculpture, in others we see one medium but not the other. In *Diary of a Madam* at the Kunsthau Hamburg in 2017, coloured metal structures made from found materials accompany a wall hung solidly with paintings but then at *PROPER STUFF* at Herald St in London also in 2017 we just see four large canvases in the space. I'm keen to understand the relationship between sculpture and painting in your work and how vital one feels to the development of the other.

IDA EKBLAD It changes. I started out doing both painting and sculpture. The new paintings I've been making with the puffy paint are sculptural themselves in a way, so painting feels similar to sculpting because the paint is really really thick, almost like clay. For me, both practices are very similar, I don't consciously think that I'm making a sculpture or a painting.

AM In your sculptural practice you often use found objects, picked up on self-appointed dérivés in rubbish dumps or along beaches. In your paintings there often appear words and imagery that feel similarly 'found,' whether imagery taken from childhood memories or words lifted from song lyrics.

IE The processes of making a sculpture and making a painting are very similar for me. One feeds the other all the time. I start by finding the material. I go out and find some scrap from a beach and I might look for pieces that get washed up onto the shore that are turquoise in a certain way. Thinking about colour in sculpture makes me think about colour in painting, it's hard to separate them, they are completely intertwined. If I focus on one for a while, I miss the other, so I'm always doing both.

AM Maybe you are able to figure something out for a painting while you're working on a sculpture?

IE Exactly. I spend a lot of time raving about my studio experimenting in painting with materials that aren't meant to be painted with. I test things by hand and make a lot of mistakes and it's important for me to be kind of sloppy and mess around. I need that experimentation.

So when building a sculpture, I can use really thick, sloppy, chunky strokes as if I'm painting. I can find a shape that I want in a sculpture in something my brain has been doing in painting. It's a very intuitive process, but they definitely feed into one another.

AM It seems that rather than all your energy being focused on one work at a time, you're constantly moving between different works. That must mean that a lot of your time in the studio is experimental.

IE Sometimes I work with watercolour paper, and that will make me want to figure out how to make oil behave the way watercolour looks, or the way a washed-out graffiti sketch looks. For example, weirdly I put pigment and oil paint into women's stockings to make these huge lumps and I squeeze paint through the holes super thick and use my whole body to move the paint around.

AM That's such a physical way to paint, it does seem almost sculptural. It's interesting to think of a lack of separation between two mediums that instead feel united as a single practice to you. For me, the way you use found objects in your sculptures feels the same as when you use words in your paintings - first sourced then repurposed in the same way, referencing something or somewhere specific but still making new meaning in their new context. This process feels similar to sampling in music: the sample comes first, forming the genesis of the track, a springboard from where the rest of the song can unfold. How do you begin a painting?

IE It all depends. What I can say is that there's no rule. Sometimes I make sketches, sometimes I can spend a whole day painting in a very old-fashioned, super emotional and intuitive, almost abstract painting process that I do without having any kind of plan and the whole construction of the painting is completely motivated by I don't know what. Another day I might already have a sketch and know what I want to do, or I have a text border to start with.

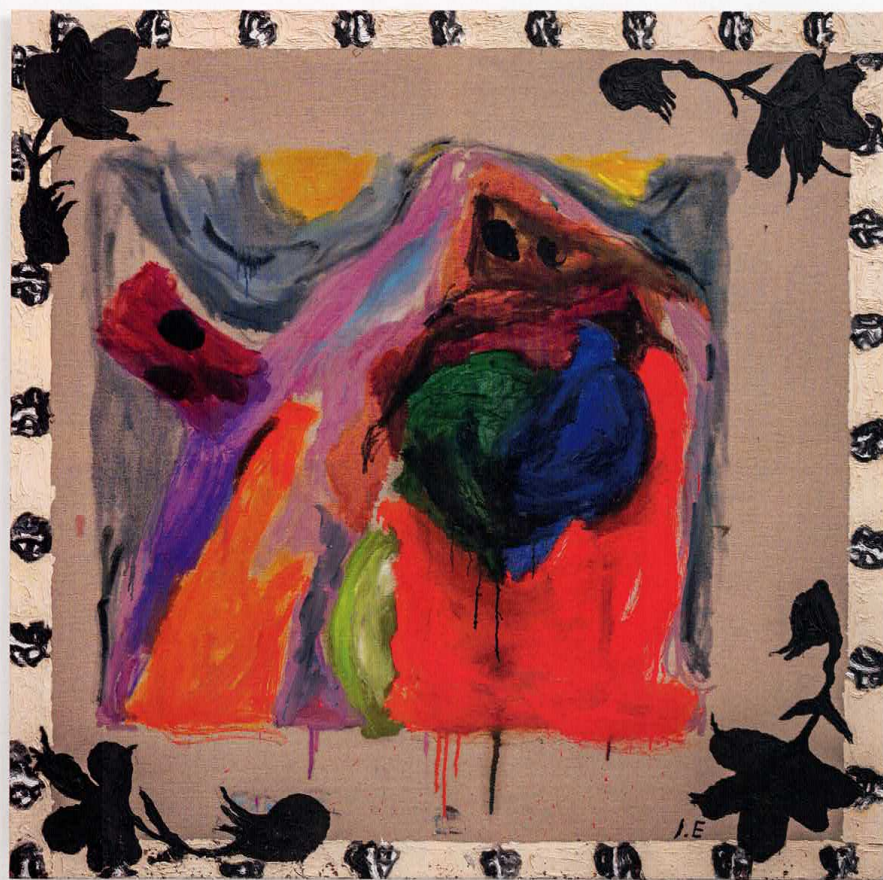
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Shady Bench on a Boat Ride, 2018



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AM I want to ask you about the text in your paintings next.

IE Probably about five years ago when I initially started to use text in my work, I remember I had this urge to make paintings that looked like my old sketchbooks filled with bled-out faded marker. If you did graffiti when you were young it can be something you distance yourself from. In the art world some people see graffiti as the worst, so I felt this kind of itch to go right in there and do it. It's this weird mixture of being repulsed and loving something at the same time. Those are the best moments in my studio – when I really don't know if I'm making the worst painting in the world or one of the better ones I've made. It feels very off and not trendy.

AM I used to work for an artist who would always tell me that he was interested in that precise moment when things aren't cool anymore because its exactly then when things become raw material, readable by everyone.

IE It's raw material, exactly, to take that kind of visual language and reuse it along with other ingredients so the work doesn't just become a pure "this is my graffiti" presentation.

AM Aside from text, other motifs reappear in your work: vessels, flowers and bands of repeated symbols. What does repetition serve you?

IE Repetition... visually I somehow opt for the doubling of an image. Graphically I think that way when I paint. I like to make borders or continue one sign and then use it throughout the border to frame the painting. I repeat myself for a little while in one series of paintings – maybe I made 15 paintings with vases and now I probably won't do it again because very often after a certain point it'll feel like a closed circle. Sometimes I save a few paintings in my studio that I want to continue to work on to add whatever the next place I'm gonna go with the paintings into the work. There are always a couple of paintings that have a mix of something new with that earlier repetition from six years prior.

AM Like secret paintings that you go back to.

IE Often my best paintings are made on top of bad paintings that I've painted over because they offer me a space where I'm really not scared to experiment at all, I can just destroy it further. That lack of fear makes the painting interesting. I believe very much in being at my studio, of trying to paint, trying to turn a bad painting into a good painting.

There are always a couple of paintings that have a mix of something new with that earlier repetition from six years prior.

AM I want to mention the text you wrote for your exhibition *PROPER STUFF* at Herald Street because it blew my mind. So much of what I read at shows is either super academic and inaccessible or meaningless trash so to walk into a gallery and read this utterly personal narrative – essentially a story, a memory – has affected how I've approached the output of information about artists' work in my gallery since. Artists and galleries often seem afraid to be personal.

IE A lot of my source material is obviously personal, but its always difficult because I don't want the text you read to be sappy: one can get very tired hearing about other people's emotions all the time. But it comes from this kind of archive of childhood memories that I use – I paint from there and that's not something I want to hide under a layer of another type of language. I have an utterly personal output, but somehow it's also not so important that people know about it. The works are most important so maybe I'll say a couple of things I'm interested in – this, because of that – but I don't feel I need to explain it all. I'm super into materials and all the experimentation in the studio, so those two ingredients mixed are where the work is sourced from.

AM There's something intrinsic to memories in that if you

present them to people in a certain way, you can still avoid talking about your emotions. Your words just make me feel something and that's why it's a successful text because when faced with one of the paintings, I can feel at least something close to what you felt when you made it. That's the point, right?

IE Yeah, of course. I think that's why I always envied music. I like music in so many different shapes and forms but I've always envied that extreme physical impact that music can have on you – like boom boom you can feel in love, or you can feel down or have a weird afterglow after a party, all those things. I want painting to be like that but it's not. There are gonna be some receivers in this world, and quite often I find those are other painters, but with music, masses of people can react instantly to a rave banger. There are not a lot of people that will want to spend time with a painting, so it's much narrower and might not affect so many people, but hopefully that's what you want it to do.

AM How much does writing figure in your practice?

IE Writing that text for Herald St and another short one I wrote for another show recently, a mansion for all lovely forms make me want to write more. It helps me to clarify the processes of how I think and how I work in the studio.

AM In every interview I've read, you talk about music as being something that you listen to all the time and with Schloss you're actively involved in releasing records and booking live shows. How essential is music to your practice as an artist? What attracted you to hosting parties?

IE When I started Schloss, I wanted the space to host not only art shows but also function experimentally, so I thought it would be nice to programme these musical gigs that feel almost like shows or one night exhibitions with their own poster and in collaboration with an artist that I like.

Of course other places do that – The Kitchen in N.Y.C. for example – but maybe it's not the same kind of club music / artist-run space combined.

AM Looking at your live programme, which includes artists like Odwalla1221 and Karima F, you're creating a community that seems to share your understanding of the immersive quality of music and sound and how this can expand someone's artistic practice. How often do you host shows?

IE More than monthly, it's too hectic. I wish I could put myself in three places at the same time. Either someone has come from the U.S. and I wanna hang out with them, but I also wanna see my children and at the same time I wanna be in the studio.

AM Do you ever include your children in your work? If you're thinking about childhood memories in your paintings, having your daughter must remind you of the sort of thought processes we go through as children.

IE My daughter loves to come to Schloss and the studio. We do a lot of printing T-shirts together, the merch for Schloss. There's one T-shirt with a little girl on it that my daughter drew and helped carve the linocut that I think is one of the coolest designs. Being a mum, those are the most perfect moments.

AM A lot of the materials you paint with are quite childlike and playful – the puffy paint as one example.

IE Regarding the puff paint, while writing that text and thinking about why I like this material – and there's a hundred different reasons – I realised it draws a line right back to growing up in the 80s and buying a matching tracksuit with a puffy print design on it and I remembered how magic those puffy prints were. They were like so out of this world, 3-D futuristic, and now I'm painting with that material that made that magic.



Step Motherfucker, 2017

AM You have a solo show coming up next year at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City (23 March – 7 July 2019).

IE Yes, I'm trying to focus as much as possible. If I don't, I get so nervous and it bothers me constantly during the night or in the back of my mind. I really like the curators and the people that invited me to do the show so I feel like I have total freedom. Sometimes as an artist you feel you have to be play a different role or downplay some parts of your work, but this time I feel quite free.

AM How do you plan a show, what's the process?

IE I've always had some weird, intuitive, chaotic process where nothing's very planned so it's more kind of messy and day-to-day, but somehow it just works itself out. I'm not an artist with a huge, staffed studio - I don't know how, but I just keep working basically all the time and read and think and the shows come from that.

AM You were doing dérives for a while, which is where a lot of the material for shows would come from. It seems that many of your shows relate to the city or country the galleries are located.

IE I haven't thought about this for a little while, but for a long time I used to like to include part of the location of the show in the work. The London show didn't have a dérive but some of text in the paintings came from London made records.

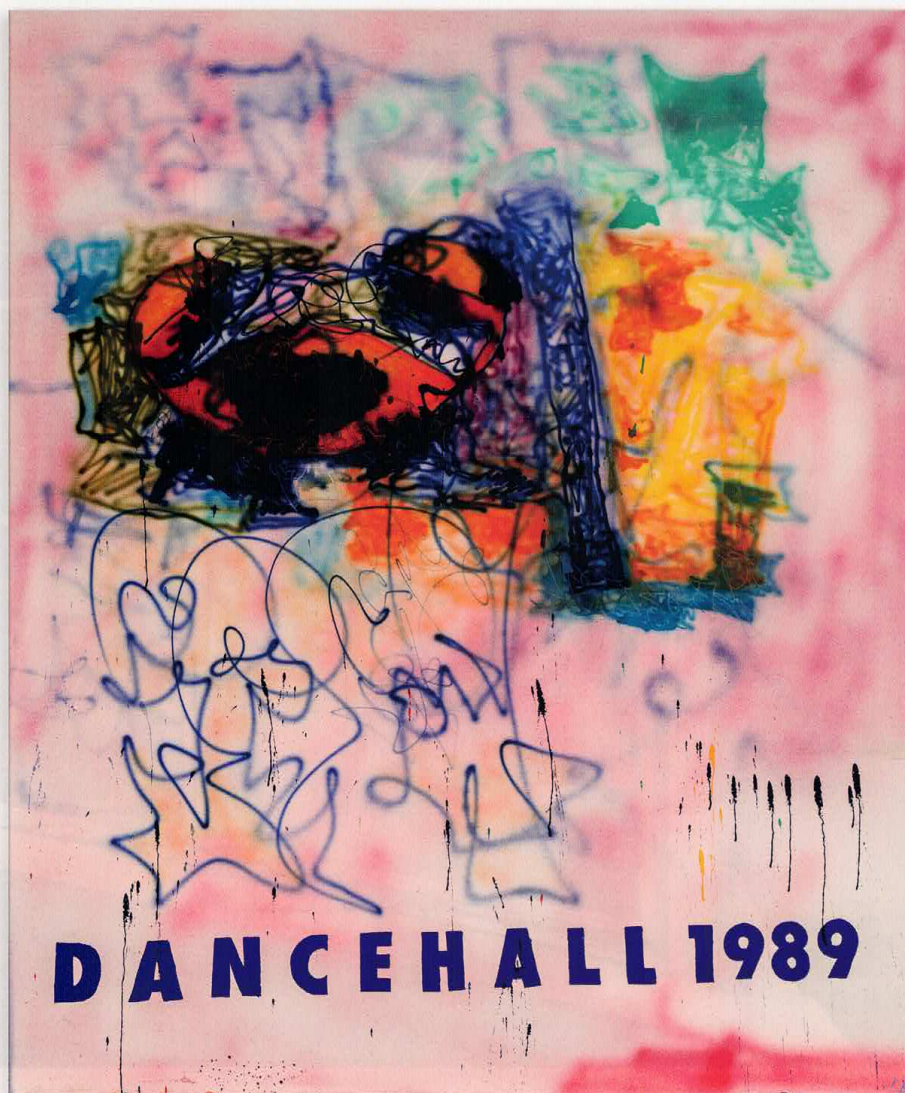
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Stage desing for "Constellations
by Nick Payne. 2015



Photography by Vegard Kleven and Charles Duprat

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AM How do you relate your studio practice and exhibitions to your endeavours in music, to Schloss? Is there any cross-pollination between the two?

IE One thing that I suddenly realised in terms of Schloss and my practice, is that they maybe intertwine in the same way that painting and sculpture do. Maybe some of my paintings sell and I run Schloss on the profit, so that then I can do some-

thing I find interesting like making t-shirts, inviting artists and putting on shows or gigs... then we make the posters and there's a playfulness where you don't have to think "this is going to be a painting" because it's just gonna be a poster for a show... then that imagery feeds back into the paintings again... so Schloss becomes like a sculpture too, or my painting practice becomes some kind of weird end result – like the worm biting it's own ass.

AM An infinity moment. So your painting practice feeds Schloss and vice-versa. I would imagine that when you get to a certain point as an artist there are eyes on everything you do, endless expectations that mean you lose the space to experiment so much. With a project like Schloss you can keep that freedom.

IE That's definitely something that I find. It's not really my space in that sense but I don't feel scared when I'm there because it's a framework that I feel comfortable with. We have the whole garage space and a backyard where you can play loud music and host your friends.

AM Schloss becomes raw material. The work of other artists must be important too if you're saying what happens at Schloss can also then go into a painting.

IE Weirdly that's how it typically happens. You meet artists or writers that you really like and you create a comfortable bubble where you can become a better artist because you're in an environment surrounded by stuff you find interesting, and can try to avoid as much trash as possible. Then you can see other projects like Arcadia Missa for example and other good little environments, energy centres that lots of things are created around... you see the same thing happening in other cities around the world and it's really exciting.

AM To see what you're doing with Schloss serves as a really timely reminder why experimental spaces exist and what they can do for a community not just locally but internationally.

IE Back in the day if there was a curator in town they would choose from a list of artists, as if there was some kind of office, but now because of these bubbles of energy, there's no fake curatorial platform where someone can show you this or that – or not. That's an important element to what we're doing.