

Story Time

Marcus Eek is a Swede who lives in Berlin and is showing in Helsinki and Stockholm. I am an American living in London who has long found the charms of Scandinavians irresistible. I too have been lost in their dark forests and deep cold waters, well metaphorically at least. Most people who know me know that I am a city person. The charms of the natural world or at least camping and hiking evade me. It makes it all the odder that I have found the people of the north so sympathetic. In Norway they long to be the first to step onto virgin soil, the first to see a particular sunrise or vista, they have a concept for it: *Oppdagelsestrang*.

It leaves me cold, but then that might be the problem, I am not good with cold, I like the look of snow but not the reality. I am from the desert, not many trees, lots of scrub brush, cacti and sand. I grew up in El Paso on the border with Mexico where the Rio Grande river forms a natural barrier. High up in the mountains there is a place called Cotton Woods Springs, where a small, measly trickle pours out into the desert. I often rode my horse deep into the desert. Yes I had a horse – it was Texas, but no, not many people we grew up with had a horse. When I tell Europeans about my childhood they say how exotic it sounds but their childhoods are just as exotic to me. Those dark green forests, those frozen lakes, ice skating on the sea, bears, reindeer and months of night all hold out an exotic and erotic pull to me. Who is in those woods, which milky skinned person will shake off the icy water as they rise from a lake, who will rub my hands warm again?

I am telling you stories because Eek's work tells you stories, or at least starts them off, and leaves it for you to finish, or wander around, lost in the woods of his imagery, or drowning in the waves he paints. For he is a painter and by that I mean he certainly knows how to use paint to make his imagery. It is real and thick and viscous and does not hide its painterliness. He draws with colour, with the paint itself. He is not a draftsman, which is not to say he does not know how to draw. He makes his marks exactly where they will cause the most disruption. They are even a bit messy, but I like that.

I like mess, anyone who has ever visited my studio or office will know that, no matter how much I like minimalism and austerity in art, which I do, I am always a sucker for a real messy work. I liked scatter art long before it was popular and while I worry about a return to expressionism, it seems clear to me that Eek has a plan, that he knows exactly where he is going, even if we don't. These are not stupid paintings. They are not dumb luck. The mess is messy on purpose, it seduces the eye to look deeper, to see what is hiding behind the mess, to see the structure that lies beneath.

For Eek's paintings always do have a structure, they lay down clues to other layers of meaning. They might look like *nature morte* paintings and they often are on one level, but they hint at other meanings. In *Black-out*, 2008 he channels Ross Bleckner; tiny spots of light hover above a black ground, and in front of that, floats a huge pink flower. But the lights are small white shots of spray paint. They are not Bleckner beacons to remind us of lost lives, but Eek must know of those famous 1980's works, they are a reference point, but he moves us on. To the right, and right in the centre, flashes of another space call to us. These are spaces for exit or entry and our eye moves on, in and out of the many spaces he is presenting, the many possible histories and stories. Who or what is being blacked out is up to the viewer. In Eek's paintings, as for many of Bleckner's, *'The dialectical relationship between seduction and repulsion may serve as an example: Bleckner's paintings possess a strange, seductive beauty deployed with just enough to make them difficult to bear, to resist. Or as Rilke says, "Beauty is nothing more than the beginning of the terrible"'*.

His new series of paintings, many called *Suggesting Landscape* depict flowers emerging from a watery ground. They look drowned, the flowers droop over, exhausted from a mysterious flood. The water looks like it might be soiled by oil or tar and a greasy film looks like it is moving about. Has global

warming caused this, is it a more obvious man made disaster? They remind me of Cy Twombly's green paintings *Untitled (A Painting in Nine Parts)* from the late 1980's 'which, in both subject matter and style, directly recalled the Rococo Venetian painters of the eighteenth century such as Giambattista Tiepolo, these works are aimed very much at the floating city in the lagoon.'

Other similar *Untitled* works are a bit perkier while others are darker still in every sense of that word. Some look like they are in the middle of an oil storm. Perhaps the title is so suggestive that my mind is flooded with my own histories, my own stories and I imagine that that is what Eek wants. In either case it makes no difference for every viewer will bring to each image their own stories and will either connect to the art works or not. If they do, it might be because his paintings strike some cord in the viewer that they can make a new story from inside their head.

With Eek a viewer can equally find the stories of art history, the recent history of modern abstract painting and the application of paint. Some brush strokes remind you of Fiona Rae riffing on Jules Oliski where 'the sense in these paintings lies in their structure, the unfolding of the dramas they contain: things sprout, dangle, loop and bounce, they swerve trip and stumble into the net, but with a sense of effortlessness and inevitability.' Eek's paintings also look back to the late 1950's and early 60's when men with loaded dripping brushes could make big paintings, heroic paintings. But Eek undermines that heroism, that macho-ness by making images that look like failures, that look exhausted, that look depleted or defeated. They give the viewer a way out of that cul-de-sac and a way back into the glamour of paint on canvas. For oil paint is such a seductive material, it smells like art, it looks like art even when many times it is not. Bad painting is everywhere – and by that I mean painting that aims or even thinks it is good but fails to be art. There is also painting about bad things and, good *bad* painting and Eek has to work hard to address all those ideas and traps, and while in no one painting do all those issues come to a pictorial resolution, when you see them on mass you really start to get a feel for his intellect. These are not pretty dumb blonds, they are not the Swedish entry to Eurovision, and they are not really even the Finnish one either.

It is the depth of the paintings, conceptual, pictorial and physical that they assert themselves as good painting, as good art. For they are about painting, the leaving and the making of marks, the erasing of them and the overlaying of one upon the other. The crazy thing is that the marks are also narrative, organic and economical. One need only look at how a mark, which remains a mark on the surface, is also the broad petal of a flower: Eek does not often use lines to draw an image, he uses paint and its painterliness. The paint floats and flows and shifts and does not seem to settle on the canvas. The watery imagery leads the viewer to think the paint is still in flux. All of this keeps the paintings safe from charges of mere show, showing off, being intellectually off putting.

While Eek's paintings in no way look like Luc Tuymans they do share a certain economy of approach and economy of narrative. There is always just enough in them for you to make up your own stories with both their works. Tuymans has said that 'being part of the television generation means there is already an overload of imagery available. But a lot of the imagery is not lived through but just seen, or you pretend you've at least seen certain images, so this implies that there must be a huge amount of distrust towards what you're looking at. The practice of painting is much more of a habit, rather than being something exquisite.' It's a bit like story telling, you have to repeat the same narrative over and over again, but it is always the delivery that is merely tolerable or a real wonder.

Michael Petry
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Brea, Jose Luis , *Ross Bleckner: Watercolour*, Arena Editions, Sante Fe, 1998, page 6

² Cullinan, Nicholas, *Writing on Water: The Green Paintings, Cycles and Seasons: Cy Twombly*, Tate Publishing, London, 2008, page 181

³ Searle, Adrian, *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1994, page 78

⁴ Harris, Gareth, *Why paintings succeed where words fail*, The Art Newspaper, London, HYPERLINK "<http://www.theartnewspaper.com/issues/205>" issue 205, September 2009

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