

'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, and some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, Nature is Imagination itself.' William Blake, 1799,

All of this is, of course, subjective. What an artist chooses to communicate will, obviously, prompt different responses in each person, but Andreas Eriksson's deeply atmospheric paintings, photographs and sculptures have elicited this one from me; one that tangles images with ideas, and assumptions with facts; one where every imaginative rejoinder is either fuelled or rebutted by its relationship to reality.

I know he lives in a house surrounded by a forest in Medelplana in Sweden but I have never been there. I assume it must be lit by the kind of pale light that dissolves without warning into sudden dusk and gets into bones and daydreams. I imagine the night sky as clear as black glass. I imagine the muted song of cold birds and ice cracking like gunshot. I imagine an inarticulate sense of anticipation in the air, the prevalence of shadows and the ubiquity of darkness. I imagine the monochrome landscape an abstraction only faintly interrupted with intimations of snow and rain. I imagine how, when spring comes, its vivacity must feel almost too bright: like an optical overload or a delirium or drunkenness. I assume that trees are of central importance, and infinite in their variety and know that extreme climates can prompt delicate, often complicated, responses.

Eriksson, however, tells me that he is surprised by my romantic image of Sweden. He says that to him nature is neutral, something both 'very precise and convincingly coincidental' and free of 'an intended, constructed or strategic placement'. He does not think of nature as something that operates in contrast to culture, although he

acknowledges that it's impossible not to sift an environment – or a picture, or a sculpture – through cultural and personal associations; in other words, it's impossible to see anything as *simply* one thing. Everything sets off a chain of connections, an allusion to something else, a memory. Eriksson tells me that he paints pictures or takes photographs of nature not necessarily in order to explore it but to more deeply examine himself in his environment, with the materials that are at hand. He is, in other words, attempting to understand himself and his own processes *through* images of nature – not the other way around.

Eriksson was forced to move from the city to the countryside when he developed an extreme sensitivity to electricity. This affected not only his relationship to his environment, but to art itself – what would be an appropriate visual response to this shift in his circumstances? The natural world became, to a certain extent, both a place of safety and of imprisonment; this is echoed in his work, which evokes an ambiguous atmosphere of failure and of hope, one where mistakes and coincidences are as privileged as resolution and clarity. In this, his pictures and sculptures express both a connection to and ambivalence towards his surroundings – like rain shot through with rays of sunshine.

Despite being inspired by his daily life and his environment, Eriksson's work is not, however, diaristic, in the conventional sense. He tells me a story which he says, has 'affected me deeply and is closely related to my approach to art.' He writes: 'for some time I have been documenting a row of four houses. They were built in 1913 as identical homes for workers. In the 1950s they were sold and became private property and since then one of the houses has remained unchanged, another is a miniature castle, the third a villa, and the fourth is rented by illegal Polish workers who seem to have shrunk it.' What is

interesting here, and what is analogous to Eriksson's thinking about art is that although the houses are essentially the same, through function, personal taste and circumstance they have evolved into unique dwellings – a new aesthetics has evolved from something uniform into something unexpected and fresh.

Eriksson's art is at home with suggestion and enigma as it is with reverie and allusion. However, even in his abstract pictures, the abstraction is firmly rooted in reality, in its evocation of pools and puddles or the wrinkled details of bark or a heavy sky, the intensity of a stick or the textures of a leaf. To make his 'shadow paintings', for example, he took photographs of the shadows on his wall that were cast by the lights of passing cars. He then transferred parts of these images onto aluminium using colour with a binder and then painted over the surface in a grey monochrome, which dissolved the pigment beneath it, allowing the shapes of the shadows to bleed through. Layers, erosions, and erasures: the 'shadow paintings' embody both introspection and clarity. It is not in shadow's nature to be either fixed or precise and thus these seemingly abstract pictures both describe and exemplify a reality. Eriksson's approach to making them is not unlike how we struggle to remember the details of the past: what is memory but a constantly over-painted shadow?

Erickson paints landscapes comprised of fragments – but then what painter doesn't? It's impossible to encompass the world in a single image and most art is as much about art as it is in the world the artist lives in. Even the largest of history panoramas is only part of something greater than itself – be it time, medium or language. Eriksson looks through and into his environment and treats a field or a forest like both a still life and a formal exercise that is allowed to go wrong – as an image comprised of minutiae in which each element has both a literal and a symbolic relationship to the whole. He writes to me:

'I have been thinking about the connection between the shadow that grows/bleeds through (paintings), melting snow (photographs), the bird that believes in the illusion (sculpture), and how it is all about the same thing.' There is a push and pull here between what is revealed and what remains; what we should trust, and whether what we create perpetuates illusion or strips it away. This is clearly expressed in Eriksson's pictures of windows; they represent a relationship between inside and outside that is a little uncertain, almost as if the person doing the looking is so deeply inside themselves that the details of the physical world have become blurred or as if Eriksson, in the act of painting, is drifting outside, even while his body remains inside. (Perhaps all paintings are invisible windows – traps that encourage us to lose ourselves in illusion?) We often do not know exactly what we are looking at, or for; recollection supplies the details strained through the shards of our concentration.

Eriksson collects birds that died after flying into his studio window. He was filled with guilt at their deaths and kept their bodies. He has halted – or at least re-figured – their decay by casting 20 of them in bronze, along with the supports and channels that are an essential part of this method of preservation; the result looks a little as if the birds have been released back to nest in a stranger version of their original trees. Guilt, however, was not the only reason the artist wanted to preserve the memory of these birds. Eriksson draws a connection between the way they died and the risks the painter takes: that illusion is a trap, something that can trick you into believing in something that is not there. He wrote to me: 'there are no optical effects in a painting: it is a *painting*', a blunt statement about perceptual complexity. It is for this reason – to avoid illusion – that he will often leave part of the canvas bare or apply paint in a way that reiterates its materiality: that it is 'only paint and not as colour or image'.

Eriksson has also made casts of the molehills that have emerged in his garden. Moles are, apparently, loathed by the local community, and attempts have been made to repel them by poison, sound waves and even urine. Eriksson, however, sees them as something oddly, even symbolically, positive, in that they are uncontrollable – in the same way, perhaps, that painting is. (After all, it is rare for a painting to end up the way the artist originally intended it to.) His casts are a homage to this; to unpredictably and to the artist's lack of absolute power – which, I am guessing, is, to Eriksson, less a source of frustration than one of strange solace.

When we look around ourselves, we are usually occupied by our own thoughts. Nothing is more vivid than our internal worlds; everything we see is filtered through this. Andreas Eriksson knows that distortion is intrinsic to the way we perceive the world; in his acknowledgment of this, he is a realist. He does not make paintings or sculptures or photographs for people in a rush. This is their strength.