

## Stepping Out Of The Narrative

Some thoughts on Mamma Andersson's wood block prints

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The deeper an artist sinks into the time stream the more it becomes *oblivion*; because of this he must remain close to the temporal surfaces. Many would like to forget time altogether, because it conceals the 'death principle' (every authentic artist knows this). Floating in this temporal river are the remnants of art history, yet the 'present' cannot support the cultures of Europe, or even the archaic or primitive civilizations; it must indeed explore the pre- and post-historic mind; it must go into the places where remote futures meet remote past.  
Robert Smithson: *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects*, 1968

The gazes are averted. Necks and hairdos appear more often than the ovals of faces. It is impossible to capture and hold a gaze. Every individual figure is confined to a world of their own. The narratives entice, while at the same time keeping the viewer at arm's length. The classic narrative's beginning and end with a peripeteia somewhere during the course of the story has been replaced by an elliptical form that holds the viewer riveted in the image's mental space.

In an interview conducted by Lars Norén in conjunction with Mamma Andersson's exhibition at Moderna Museet in Stockholm some ten years ago, the artist stated: 'I tell my friends who go to therapy that I don't need to because I let it all out in my work. I don't dare to, because I'm scared of losing that source of energy.' As viewers of her images, she likens us to the couch in Sigmund Freud's study. But unlike that famous item of furniture, the viewer can both see and process the seen.

While in her studio, surrounded by the new woodcuts, Andersson suddenly makes the unprovoked assertion that artists who transition from the figurative to abstract become unhappy. She refers to Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still as examples of this. She then uses Philip Guston to exemplify the opposite, that painter who abandoned his abstract expressionism for a figurative approach that triggered a euphoric surge of creativity in his final years. Back to her conversation with Lars Norén: '...I think I long for abstraction. More and more. I feel that those instances when the painting starts to groove and is on to something is when it is on the verge of becoming abstract.' Has she changed her position? I wouldn't interpret these two statements as being evidence of this. Instead, they describe the

charged field in which her paintings come about. The struggle between the power of desire and the compulsion to sacrifice are key aspects of the conditions of life.

One can substitute the examples provided by Andersson with Piet Mondrian and Barnett Newman. When Mondrian put a jazz record on the turntable and danced alone in front of his right-angled compositions—that he in fact considered to be truthful depictions of nature—he was hardly unhappy. When Newman, in Emil de Antonio's film *Painters Painting*, forcefully maintains that painting must have a subject, he is convinced of the resilience of his choice of narratives from the Bible and classical philosophy. His tone is triumphant when he, towards the end of his life, dedicates a suite of large format paintings to Mondrian: 'Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue', the only colours Mondrian used except for the 'non-colours' black and white.

It is against this backdrop, that one should view the extensive production of woodcuts that surged out from Andersson's studio around 2016. First of all, she has not chosen the woodcut technique for the classical, historical reason that it enables multiple re- productions of the same image. Every print is unique in its colour scheme, and in the end the wooden printing block itself becomes an artwork. We are far from the artists who once used woodcuts as a means of informing an illiterate general public.

In Andersson's case, it started with the technique. A colleague persuaded her to take over an old printing press that she then placed in her newly built studio. 'I've had a hard time adjusting to this studio. I've been fraught with anxiety here. Everything was too nice and new, but when the printing press arrived, it was like putting a heart in a body...' That heart would soon start pumping huge amounts of paint around a few simple motifs: a cat, a roebuck, a few classical sculptures, a pair of gauntlet gloves, a wind-worn pine, a doll. The artist felt as though she had overstepped a taboo of her own: 'I've been doing things one shouldn't do. Skeletons, swans, cats. Silly things.'

Silly or not, the narrative takes a back seat in favour of simple acknowledgements that, when applicable, let us encounter their gazes. Undeniably, the cat and the roe- buck have little need for Freud's couch.

Here, the paint and colour flows more freely and diversely, and is furthermore directed away from the subtle colourism that has, thus far, characterised her painting. There is a vapid, matt quality to the surface of the paint that one readily associates to the painting of Dick Bengtsson, an artist that always turns up as a reference point for Andersson. When she eventually finalises the work process by turning the wooden block itself into a work of art on

par with the others, a rawness is introduced to the image flow that also puts a focus of the craft itself. The eye follows the chisel's carved path through the wood. The act itself of seeing meets resistance. The expressive potential of abstraction is especially evident in the diverse approaches to colour. The simple motifs are wrapped in a wide variety of moods that together transform the walls into a visual choir of grandiose proportions. Hence, time also becomes an integral part of the works. Not only the hours of the day, with their varying light relationships depicted through the combinations of colour, but also the seasons move through the ocean of images.

One can naturally marvel at the fact that it was the printing press that made it, to use her own words, 'groove'. Her painting has no doubt grooved before, but the rhythm has now taken a decisive hold of her creative impetus, and it is hard to imagine anything that could possibly hold it back.

In a newly published conversation with the poet Joar Tiberg, the question emerges for whom one writes and for whom one paints. Andersson quickly answers: 'I paint for Edvard Munch.' It is indeed also Munch who comes to her aid when she decides to print with more than one colour on the same block, something which easily results in the colours blending in an unintended fashion. Munch used a fretsaw to separate the different colour fields on his blocks so that he could print the colours separately. The seam that the saw left behind in the print in the form of a white line was allowed to become part of the image. So, she went out and got herself a fretsaw!

Andersson describes herself as conservative, and states that being conservative can actually be quite a radical approach in certain situations. In many ways, we find ourselves in that type of situation here and now. The magnetic poles have changed their positions to such an extent that the compass has lost its bearings. It is therefore quite a jolting experience when a well-renowned painter delves into the age-old woodcut technique with a total lack of respect for the game rules, while at the same time stepping out of her own narrative to, instead, pet the black cat, as it were.

This new phase of her work makes no ingratiating gestures towards her earlier admirers. Instead, here we have a raw energy that knocks the playing field off kilter. The old printing press becomes her tool for exploring the opposition between abstraction and figurative narrative, between a depressive longing for death and a euphoric desire to tell stories that clearly constitute the driving force behind her work from the start.

One image in this suite stands out from the rest : the solitary, wind-worn pine that raggedly yields to forces we cannot see. This tree bears a kinship to the drawings of Carl Fredrik Hill, executed in total seclusion over a century ago. The mastery is revealed by a decrepit pine that says so much about the drama of being an artist and a human being. This tree is a provocative (self)portrait of the significance of existence.

Music has always been an important part of Mamma Andersson's life and work. As she now stands at her printing press, Duke Ellington pertinently comes to mind, who poured a little red in the blues, turning it into indigo. She herself has access to a huge selection of pigments that sets the world in motion, and effectively captures its changeable nature.

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