

Advertisement



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE  
06 JUN 2002

# Morning stands on tiptoe

Mamma Andersson



I once stayed with a friend in the middle of the countryside, in a house surrounded by very white birch trees. It didn't take long to discover why the trees were so white: my friend's father scrubbed them regularly with bleach, despite the fact that moss would grow back at the drop of a hat. His actions made me think of the anxious relationship women have with anti-ageing creams. The trees surrounded the house like elegant ghosts of their former selves; at night their paleness was almost translucent. The house itself was also white, a severe Modernist design - all windows, marble floors and flat roof. When it snowed, the house and the birch trees seemed to disappear; perhaps that was the point. Living there, you could imagine a world uncomplicated by walls or moss, a beautiful place with nothing to distract you but your thoughts, which are impossible to scrub clean.

There is something about Swedish artist Mamma Andersson's paintings that made me remember the futility of my friend's father's attempt to hold back time. Her pictures - which can be as gangly as a child suffering a growth spurt or as considered as a textbook - describe a melancholy, vaguely anachronistic world where beauty and confusion go hand in hand, and then dance until they're dizzy. If it wasn't for their jittery energy and wild imagination you might want to keep the world they describe at bay: it is as ominous as it is compelling. The rough-hewn shapes, earthy colours and other-worldly look of the characters in her paintings evoke the magical transformations of fairy tales and the all too human tribulations of folklore, but you would be hard pressed to identify any one story in particular. Paintings, after all, do not tell stories; they ask questions, but prefer the answers left dangling. Looking at these pictures, I remembered the fear I felt as a child on hearing tales by the brothers Grimm, a fear eventually assuaged, however, by a last-page resolution. Andersson offers no such reassurance: in this sense she is a realist. She abandons the viewer in an unresolved netherworld, as if the storyteller were compelled to leave in the middle of the tale, never to return.

Birch trees are complicated and oddly human. The lines scattered over their surfaces look like the wrinkles found on fingers, their trunks are as brittle as skeletons and the bark is as papery as old skin, yet in some cultures they symbolize renewal and purification. Georgia O'Keeffe painted them to look like torsos; Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the silver birch the 'Lady of the Woods'. The wood is tough and heavy and, drawing on the symbolism of new beginnings, traditionally used as a material for babies' cradles. Birch trees are everywhere in Scandinavia and are, along with pines, aspens and spruces, a recurring motif in Andersson's paintings, yet what they represent is as mysterious as an anonymous sculpture in a landscape. You can do with these pictures what you will. If you like, you can regard them simply as somewhat skewed landscape paintings, but if you are of a darker turn of mind, you may prefer to view them as echoes of lost stories of long buried conflicts that refuse to die. Then again, that a sculpture or a tree is a product of a particular culture or mythology doesn't necessarily stop you using it as a table or for firewood.

The trees in Andersson's pictures are never alike: they co-exist in a throbbingly anthropomorphized world in which a felled forest feels as anguished as the massacre of innocents. Her pictures describe both an actual place - Sweden - and an abstract one: a twilight world populated by sprite-like children who look as if they have skipped on to the canvas from the 1930s: disorientated adults fleeing from undescribed calamities or gazing at cold, sad skies that saturate mainly brown landscapes. Disordered interiors are filled with desks, sculptures, upturned furniture and easels: there is obviously some clash going on, most obviously between tradition and renewal on the one hand and more subtly between didacticism and mysticism on the other. These are scenarios that suggest you can supply the tools of the trade (be it a desk or a sky or dancing shoes), but that to employ them constructively and imaginatively is another matter. Trees burn down, dissolve into the atmosphere, are chopped up or used as a building material; clouds billow into ghost-like shapes. Every person, object, leaf or tree implies a heightened state of mind, and time is muddled: women in 19th-century dress mingle in post-apocalyptic landscapes that could be the moon; spooky children with Symbolist eyes dance around Modernist sculptures in hothouse environments; school rooms are places where strange lessons are learned.

The wonderful titles - occasionally borrowed lines of poetry - reflect, rather than explain, the strangeness of the pictures' content and their fluid relationship to both emotional or temporal stability: *Men hur åt det att leva med svettiga, svarta naglar i det eviga fifflandets atmosfär?* (*But What Is It Like Living with Sweaty Black Nails in an Atmosphere of Graft?* 1998), *En får inga ro te äte, kärninga var blek, barna skrek* (*No Peace to Eat, the Hags Were Pale, the Children Wailed*, 1998); *Där mina drömmar bor* (*Where My Dreams Are*, 2002); *Idag är igår imorgon* (*Today Is Yesterday Tomorrow*, 2002). The paint application - which, although occasionally illuminated by rays of light, tends to lurch elegantly between the turgid and the desolate - cautions that the surface of things is unstable; you can imagine the objects and environments Andersson describes changing shape at any moment. In *Första mötet* (*First Encounter*, 2002) two figures blur and blend into the landscape beneath the shadows of rocks: it is difficult to tell where a figure stops and the earth begins. This is what corpses must look like when they melt into the ground, yet it is also what happens when lovers roll about, embracing in a field (murder investigations and love affairs both begin with the discovery of another's body). The composition is vertical, recalling the European fin-de-siècle obsession with all things Japanese; birches and other less identifiable trees punctuate the sky like exclamation marks, and a small desk with a curious, brightly coloured chair is placed incongruously in the centre left of the composition. The ground is, unusually for the artist, a deep blue sea green: a field for lovers to drown in. Learning, coupling, a story implied but as yet untold: the elements of this painting are like a checklist of Andersson's preoccupations.

Despite citing influences as diverse as Brian Wilson, the Swedish poet Gustaf Fröding, Alice in Wonderland, the Cobra group and Scandinavian painters Carl-Fredrik Hill, Dick Bengtson and Ernst Josephson, Andersson approaches a painting without a fully realized plan, building up layers of paint and meaning as the work progresses. As a result, some elements in her compositions are as dishevelled as hair after a fist fight. In *Idag är igår imorgon*, for example, four young girls stand in a semicircle on what appears to be a frozen pond. A group of paintings floats lightly above them, while in the distance a group of awkward trees sway and bleed into each other in a riotous confusion of colour that clashes with and animates the otherwise chilly atmosphere. It is an image sprung from a splintered provenance: like a new bottle built from shards of glass found in a ruin.

There is something furtive about these paintings that draws you in; if things are hidden or in the process of hiding, it does not mean they do not want to be discovered. It seems obvious to mention dreams, but they do spring to mind. As in dreams, Andersson bombards you with images, many of them inexplicable and all of them multi-layered: trying to decipher them is like sitting on a bus trying to make sense of snippets of overheard conversation, an ever changing view out of the window and your own thoughts all at the same time.

Overall, Andersson's paintings are visually catchy, a little unhinged, in love with paint and trees and the strange meanings that people pull from the world and the even stranger shapes that these meanings assume. But they are also obsessed with childhood: not so much nostalgic for it as relieved that it has been survived, even if survival into adulthood means the struggle has to begin all over again. Time is an image skating on thin ice; like a story your grandmother told you when you were small but which you cannot quite remember, you look at it afresh and the details surprise you.

### JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze's* first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

First published in Issue 68  
Jun - Aug 2002

Share this:

MAMMA ANDERSSON

PAINTING

JENNIFER HIGGIE

Advertisement



### MORE LIKE THIS



What to See and Do in Digital Paris



Michael Armitage Renders Political Violence in Kenya with Fauvist Colour



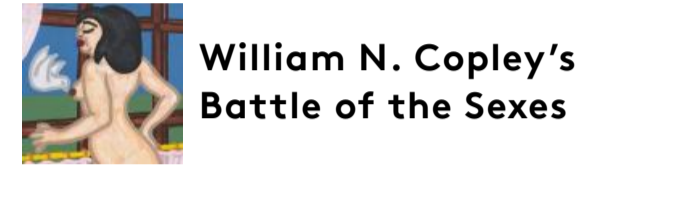
Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni: How to Make Sense of What's to Come



Finding a Home in the Layered Abstractions of Julia Fish



Tschabalala Self's Pantheon of Vexed Interiority



William N. Copley's Battle of the Sexes



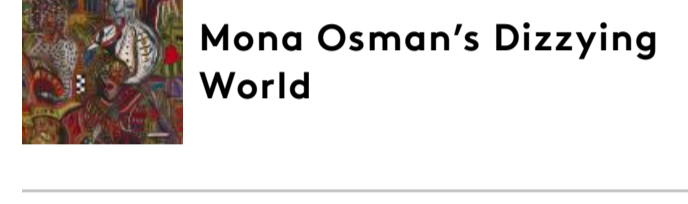
The Many 'Souls' of Henrik Potter



'Propositions in paint': The Many Lives of Martin Barré



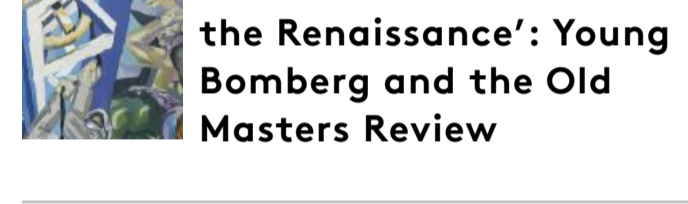
A.R. Penck's Homecoming



Mona Osman's Dizzying World



How Has the Art World Changed Since 2010?



'I Hate the Fat Man of the Renaissance': Young Bomberg and the Old Masters Review

Advertisement

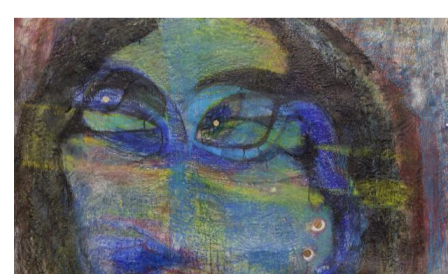


### MOST READ

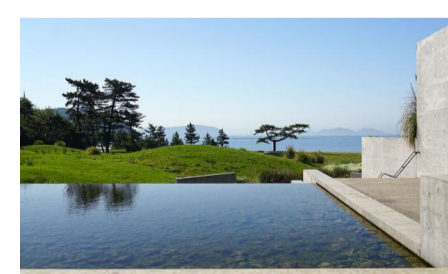
SEE ALL



The Threat to Freedom of Expression in Japan



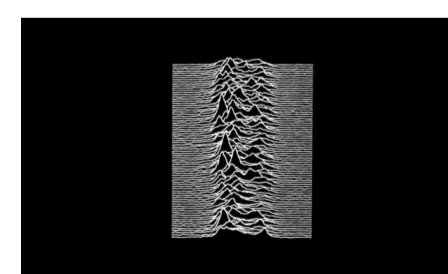
I Learned Enormous Things: Hans Ulrich Obrist Remembers Marisa Merz (1931-2019)



Editors' Picks: Our Favourite Art World Holiday Destinations



An Afrofuturism Show With No Black Artists: What Went Wrong at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien?



Pop Culture Is the Great Educator: An Interview with Peter Saville



'Learning How to Be Queer Again': Remembering Douglas Crimp (1944-2019)

### LATEST MAGAZINES



frieze magazine  
Issue 209  
March 2020



frieze magazine  
Issue 210  
April 2020



frieze magazine  
Issue 211  
May-June 2020

# Subscribe now and save up to 40%

SUBSCRIBE