

Art for Agneta Ekholm is a solitary transport. She is an artist who turns inward, honing paintings that act directly on the thoughts and emotions of a sensitive viewer; as if Ekholm aspires to offer an antidote to modern life. In this maddening world that is so crammed with bustle and stress and agitation, to gaze upon her compositions is to be instilled with serenity. Working quietly and confidently on what are her own creative terms, her contemplative paintings have depth, a tranquil depth.

There is no scatter of trendy art magazines in Ekholm's light-filled studio, nor are there jargon-riddled books about dense "debates" or impenetrable "issues". Instead she has a CD player to one side, along with an assortment of music discs: classical music that is. But Ekholm does not play them as she paints. Music is used when she considers an unfinished composition. It shapes those brooding hours spent sitting and considering—like a grand chess master—what will be her next moves on the canvas. The drama of horns or the grace of massed strings or the playful longing of a solitary piano aid her, focus her, establish a creative tone that she reaches for. Ekholm quietly admits to often playing a symphony through, then sitting in silence long afterward, mentally trying to get the measure of its imaginative 'hum', wanting to offer similar fulfilling moods but in wholly visual terms. Mahler, Debussy, Ligeti would understand and approve.

In critical terms Agneta Ekholm's disciplined abstractions might be described as late contributions to the action painting ethos, but with a high measure of control. Confidently working to international standards, they build on the mid-twentieth century breakthroughs of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, especially the achievements of these two masters' talented protégés Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis. She uses those suggestions of eloquently dripped and poured paint, as well as their veiled and luminous colours, then Ekholm takes these qualities further, making subtle compositions which throb with historical awareness yet are also so uniquely her own. Rising above provincial matters, the artist is unmistakably part of an international movement within abstract painting today.

Like all strong creators Agneta Ekholm has with maturity sharpened a "signature style". This is the technical term for what we often savour in talented creators; like the way a novelist chooses and sets out words, or an accomplished soloist plays the music, or an artist applies paint using their own "voice", an essentially personal idiom which cannot be copied. With Ekholm this signature style involves her layering of thinned coats and creamy films of semi-transparent pigment. She applies the paint with a fluent

ease using brushes and sponges, and has such a practiced hand when working that she never resorts to masking tape to get those crisp edges. It's a matter of sureness, a sort of visceral control of the paint, which is why no one else can do these things. Besides, her studio tools are uniquely hers (Ekholm has some made to her own specifications by an overseas specialist manufacturer).

It's an old conceit to link difficult art with landscape, and in these works it can be hard to avoid thinking of heavy snows and caked ice when describing how Ekholm gathers the floods and spills of white pigment. Indeed, sometimes this whiteness does bring to mind the sensation of looking down at the blanked-out frozen ground before one's feet after a dense snow fall. But her whites will be often inflected with shadow-like near-black blues, or other hints of form and colour penetrating from beneath. And there are pronounced senses of gravity, and of verticality to how she manipulates the paint as loose bands, thereby emphasising that these are wholly abstract compositions that operate entirely in their own visual terms, not summary images at one remove.

Compositionally, there are recurring configurations and abstract motifs within Ekholm's broadening oeuvre, although in keeping with the action painting tradition she always improvises. There is no set drawing or design plan made before which she then carefully follows through as she paints. Nor does she produce pictures to a set formula; indeed, Ekholm abhors the prospect of making endless variations of one successful piece. Each work must open up afresh a new set of chromatic and emotional relations: paintings will lead to more paintings, art to more art. This is the reason for that tranquillity and elated solitude the work communicates to a suitably attuned viewer, a subdued magnificence that lifts and transports the weary mind.

The artist Henri Matisse famously said that he aspired to make paintings that were the mental equivalent of sitting in good armchair at the end of a hectic day and getting life back in balance. A few very fine Australian artists I could name are making such work today. Agneta Ekholm is certainly among them.

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