

Agneta Ekholm

Agneta Ekholm's large canvases with their subtle, dissolving semi-transparent veils of colour, even on first encounter, are striking and unforgettable. They are deeply immersive paintings – refined, exquisite and restrained – works that operate on a non-verbal, contemplative level, more like painted music than a painted narrative.

Ekholm was born in Helsinki, Finland, into a Swedish-speaking intellectual family. Her father, Henrik Ekholm, was a biologist and academic who came from a family steeped in the arts, while her mother, Pirkko Lindberg, is a prolific writer and journalist. Ekholm spent ten years studying art in Finland, the final three years at the small Swedish Art School (Svenska Konstskolan) in Nykarleby. This was a fairly conservative establishment with an emphasis on training in the craft of painting from making pigments and pastels to stretching and priming canvases. Ekholm was drawn to the art of Finnish modernists, including Ellen Thesleff and Helene Schjerfbeck, and, while still in Finland, was painting in an expressionist style focusing on portraiture, possibly inspired by the Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch.

In Finland, Ekholm met an Australian backpacker whom she married and with whom she travelled to Melbourne in 1994, where she enrolled at the School of Art at RMIT that had recently been reclassified as a university. At the time, installation art was in vogue at the art school and painting was discouraged. However Ekholm, who was in her late twenties and hence slightly older than many in her student cohort, had her mind set on becoming a painter, even if this meant, to some extent, swimming against the tide of fashion. The teacher whom Ekholm found most memorable was the painter Peter Clarke. Although Clarke had retired as head of the RMIT art school in 1990, he continued to teach part-time and inspired Ekholm to paint in a more experimental manner.

Ekholm's method of work is unconventional – it is an intuitive, contemplative approach where the artist surrenders to the passions of the moment and plays with the watery cascades of colour. She does not work from sketches, drawings on the canvas or any other aide-mémoire. Instead, it is akin to emptying the mind of thoughts about the mundane world before acrylic pigment is brushed onto the canvas and the artist, with a moist cellulose sponge in the shape of a wedge, starts to manipulate the painted surface. It is a reductive process of painting with constant erasure of the films of semi-transparent layers of pigment.

Acrylic is a fast-drying medium. The decisions made by the artist are instantaneous and intuitive and do not pass through the censoring prism of the rational intellect. The accidents in spillages and washes of paint are not there to be controlled but to be exploited; like snippets of fading dreams or half-remembered thoughts, they feed the imagination. Ekholm has frequently mentioned her admiration for the films of David Lynch with their slightly surreal, 'mind-bending' strategies. In her paintings we encounter a fluid watery world with translucent veils of colour suspended in the air like floating lengths of silk. Although the medium compels a frenetic pace of work, the resolution of some of the large, walk-in scale paintings can be measured in weeks.

Ekholm is a non-figurative artist; in other words, the discovery of figurative content or parallels with a seen and observed world do not reveal the intent of the artist but reflect the associative imagination of the viewer. Titles for her paintings emerge rather late in her work on the canvas and she does not attribute particular significance to them. Armed with the knowledge that she is a Finnish artist, some commentators have imagined snowy wastes and pine and spruce forests in her paintings. If such associations exist, they are neither overt nor intentional, but an association that may have arisen instinctively in the process of work. Personally, in my mind, Ekholm's paintings bring associations with Zen thinking concerning a transient and stark beauty, a subtle profundity and a spiritual tranquillity. However, I am the first to confess that such associations may stem from my recent over-indulgence with the writings of Matsuo Bashō. The contemplative experience of encountering Ekholm's paintings have brought these associations to the fore.

When asked about the artists who particularly interest her, Ekholm singled out Pierre Soulages, Georgia O'Keeffe and Agnes Pelton. These are interesting choices as these artists are united through an inquisitive mind and an interest in the spiritual dimension in art rather than a style or sensibility. The spiritual is also an important aspect in Ekholm's art with the invitation to the viewer to dissolve and enter the picture and, through this experience, attain a different plane of being. Her art belongs to the contemplative tradition of slow art where, within a distilled silence, we may hear waters lapping on some celestial shores.

In some of her recent paintings, including *Allude*, *Divulge*, *Incite* and *Verdure*, all painted in 2023, the work has generally gradually grown in scale, the pictorial elements are more sparse and minimal and the focus is on fewer aspects that inhabit space with a breathing ease. In 2021 the artist lost her 90-year-old father in Helsinki and, because of COVID, was unable to attend his funeral. With her father died the link with his uncle, Kurt Ekholm, who forged a revolution in studio ceramics in Finland where, as artistic director of Arabia, he established the factory's famous art department that employed many of Finland's leading artists. This formed the cultural milieu in which the young artist grew up.

It may be inaccurate to describe Ekholm's recent paintings as some sort of memento mori for her father or to read meaning into some of the dark veils that seem to descend from the heavens in some canvases, but an aspect of this may have crept into these works.

In the almost thirty years that Ekholm has spent in Australia, she has been a slow burn artist who has generally existed beneath the radar of the art world. Always an outsider and an inward-looking artist, almost to an obsessive degree, in recent years the strength and integrity of her paintings have made her art no longer possible to ignore.

Sasha Grishin