

Sensitive Days

Mamma Andersson oscillates between landscape drama and silent homes in a major solo show at Louisiana presenting confident paintings with a laid back vibrating undercurrent.

By Nanna Friis 29.06.21 Review Artikel på dansk



Mamma Andersson, *Cuckoo Hill*, 2019. Oil on linen, 90 x 118 cm. Private Collection c/o Beaumont Nathan Art Advisory © Mamma Andersson. Photo: Per-Erik Adamsson. Courtesy of the artist, Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stephen Friedman Gallery and David Zwirner.

A widely held expectation for landscapes, especially those set in the great Nordic midsummer, is that they should also be a little scary. That behind all their golden beauty something else is always lurking, some damply-scented dark melancholy lapping at their edges, ready to darken the mood. While the expectations for Mamma Andersson's solo show at Louisiana were not the same as those for Scandinavian landscapes, it turns out that the eerie tenderness that can live in the twilight of empty forests or drag itself through the mountains when the night light is at its peak can also be found among Andersson's paintings.

Humdrum Days

Mamma Andersson

Louisiana Museum of Modern Art,
Humblebæk

17 June — 10 October 2021

Over and over again, there is this feeling of something haunted, trembling and breaking a little at the sight of the swans in these pictures of clearings, dolls, and empty rooms, the way we also tremble at the richly contoured evening forests of real-life autumn. Andersson is a painter in the most Romantic, traditional, and seemingly timeless sense of the word: engaged in a silent and very scenic figuration where the main protagonists are usually nature, homes, animals, and, sometimes, people with their backs turned. Among all the sixty works featured in the exhibition, we find only two (!) humans gazing back at us from the picture.

Faces steal the energy of a painting, according to Andersson: our eyes inevitably stop wherever a person's readable face is. By contrast, an open landscape lets us float along, our eyes following with ease when a red fjord towers up above us, or spreading out to take in the enigma of a juicy forest floor.

Some of Andersson's works are painted on wooden boards, giving the format itself a robust and subdued air that helps hone our awareness of the drama inherent in the places themselves. Minimal and often unframed, the boards accommodate a technical virtuosity whose handling of colours and materials never stops tearing a little at your heart.

For example, it is almost impossible to stop looking at the yawning black surface of a sea so deep with sorrow that the museum setting around the painting simply and instantly fades away. A frozen pine forest – you can tell it is entirely still – locks our gaze in its ominous crime-scene atmosphere. Something darkly obscure, as psychologically formless as it is tangible and pitch-black, seeps out of these paintings and their landscapes, whether free from human presence or ravaged by them, settling on the unobtrusively curated galleries like a chill air.

Besides life in nature, a gentle indoor life also takes place. Infused by the same brittle sense of significance, these scenes embody the tedium suggested by the exhibition title *Humdrum Days*. There are tableaux with dirty dishes and tables set for meals, a linen closet, a bedroom, and a sofa someone sat in a moment ago.

All of these everyday interiors, so underwhelming at first glance – ‘the little home’ as a mundane archetype – create an obvious, yet never banal contrast to magnificent, striking natural wonders. One gets the sense that thin lines stretch out between the paintings forming axes along which a Scandinavian welfare life can unfold: our passage through the years, constantly oscillating between bills and cooking and birch trees, laundry baskets and sublime sunsets. There is a feeling of connection, of coherence, in the distance between horses heading towards a dissolved flaming mountain range and the furniture, cats, and books just lying still in the living rooms.

Andersson’s paintings are effortlessly confident in a toned-down way, from the strangely precise and carefully staged scenographic mood of the interior scenes to the way in which a skeleton or a tree trunk is painted with a cement-like medium that makes it rise up from the picture plane in delicate relief. Despite their dimensions and heft, they behave differently from more masculine painting traditions, thick with oil and power, that always and tirelessly strive to be seen and loved; at no point does it feel as if Andersson’s works are shouting to be heard.



Mamma Andersson, *Underthings*, 2015, Oil on panel, 83 x 122 cm. McEvoy Family Collection © Mamma Andersson. Photo: Mark Blower. Courtesy of the artist, Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stephen Friedman Gallery and David Zwirner.

Humdrum Days is underpinned by a vibrant, humming feeling that these paintings might exist and be significant without a large museum to frame them. That they are windows opening up on a sensibility that feels at once universal and hyper-personal, unimpressed with themselves and their potential viewers – not apathetic, but expressive of a calm and a strength with a certain ‘feminine’ air.

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A strictly binary reading of Mamma Andersson’s work is at best uninteresting and at worst disrespectful, but to downplay gender as an important underlying condition of a life and a practice would also be wilfully ignorant. Being a woman within an art history that, in terms of (figurative) painting, is particularly infected by men must make any work situation, any mode of expression examined, completed, and exhibited, a potential source of trouble. This is not to say that a painting can be reduced to being a singular feminist reclaiming of the home as the woman’s battleground, or a forced appropriation of the Romantic approach to nature that has previously been the exclusive preserve of men and their enormous egos.

The private is not political; it is just private and pertinent and universal, even though all sorts of painters of the male persuasion have practiced a different pathos. Here, landscape painting is not an arena for bravura displays of technique, rather it is the ultimate stage of every life lived (and every death).

Mamma Andersson presents a reality as it is, lives of a kind known and shared by many. But the exhibition also embodies a single person’s tremendous sensitivity chipping its way into the body and lodging itself there. Her particular eye for both the ordinary and the overwhelming evokes a sense of access to lives that truly belong to other people. Of course, landscapes and everyday life are infinite and belong to everyone all the time. That is why both seem all the more important when places are filtered and presented to us as fields of an exact beauty we know but have never seen in precisely that way before. Feeling other people’s moods, translating them, and letting them expand one’s own inner self is, after all, one of the most beautiful things about being human.



Mamma Andersson, *Swannery*, 2019, Acrylic and oil on panel, 124 X 99 cm. Private Collection, Dallas Texas © Mamma Andersson Foto: Lucy Dawkins. Courtesy of the artist, Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stephen Friedman Gallery and David Zwirner.

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