

GLADSTONE

Charles Desmarais, "A story in the details," *SFGate*, September 3, 2016

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ART REVIEW



Gladstone Gallery

A story in the details

Compelling
Cecilia
Edefalk
exhibition
in Berkeley
demands
our close
attention

By Charles Desmarais

A full 86 objects of varying size occupy a large, stark gallery at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Some are convincingly realistic, others hauntingly re-constructed — sculpted or painted or photographed or all three. A presentation of works by the Swedish artist Cecilia Edefalk, it is one of the more peculiar and affecting exhibitions I have seen this year.

At 62, Edefalk has had relatively little exposure in the United States, though she is represented by the formidable Gladstone Gallery in New York. Sweden is very far off, of course, but I get the sense that is not the

Cecilia Edefalk,
"Mask" (2008);
painted bronze.

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Sibila Savage / BAMPFA

Intensity without trappings of fame

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only reason she is not better known. Her subject is nature, her view idiosyncratic; she repeats herself in self-referential artistic mumbles that seem to have a logic all their own. And she works small. These are not the trappings of fame in the art world today.

Eight bronze, masklike sculptures occupy pedestals at one end of the room — repetitions of the same androgynous face, their surfaces variously polished, patinated and painted. They are roughly propped up on their leftover casting sprues — bronze webs formed as the molten metal cools and hardens in channels when the sculpture is poured.

Like history itself, they seem half alive, half manufactured. They refer, a wall label tells us, to a second-century Roman sculpture of the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius as a young man. They are tortured with nails driven into the surface, toppled and turned upside down; flowers sprout from their brows. History abused, history buried; history as the mulch of culture.

Along one wall, on a dozen canvases, nebulous images emerge from sky-blue backgrounds: portraits not of the emperor, but of his sculpted likeness — the marble original that inspired Edefalk's obsessive bronze retellings.

Like antique depictions of the phases of the moon, each canvas describes a different aspect of the sculpture, from front, to side, to rear and back around. We learn from curator Apsara DiQuinzio's brochure essay that, in fact, the artist coordinated her work to coincide with a full lunar orbit.

The 12 paintings, taken together, make up the work "To view the painting from within" (2002). On the opposite wall, 12 photographs constitute "To view the painting from the



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Above: The Cecilia Edefalk exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive runs through Oct. 16.

Left: Edefalk's "Portrait of a Sculpture" (2006); bronze.

outside" (2008); each depicts the sculpture in the foreground from a different angle, the corresponding painting behind.

To describe Edefalk's work in such detail seems necessary. It is the only just way to respond to her compulsion, but more than that, it's my method of understanding her process and thought, as she meticu-

lously peels away the frail tissues of time. Her reverie becomes our own meditation: on the past, on memory, on life.

Other metaphors for such feelings, and the connection of self to nature, abound in the exhibition. A dandelion in seed could be a cliché about fleeting moments. But Edefalk is convincing in her obsession

with the subject, with a tiny round painting of a seed head set against a pair of oversize photographs in black and white, one of a hand holding a single puffy stem, the other of an entire meadow of them.

A wall of botanical watercolors takes on an extra-scientific significance in this context. An odd bronze sculpture, posing as an open, wooden,

Cecilia Edefalk: Matrix 261: 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Sundays; Fridays and Saturdays until 9 p.m. \$10-\$12. Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2155 Center St., Berkeley, (510) 642-0808. www.bampfa.berkeley.edu

box-shaped form, bears the title "Minne" (2008). Sure enough, the Swedish word means "memory."

The sentimental in art is very much out of fashion, with its appeal to emotions so in conflict with our demand that serious art be critical, ironic, theoretical. But is there anything more needed in our current moment than authentic intimacy?

This, I think, is what Edefalk offers. Not the mass-produced consumer ware offered up online and in-store, but the genuine feeling that would drive an artist to catalog in bronze and paint what would seem to be every twig and limb of a birch tree (of the weeping variety, no less) cut down on a neighbor's property.

The series is extensive, and it wanders from the strictly documentary — a cut branch painted white and black — to small, subtly pigmented pieces suggesting variations in the colors of light at different times of day or year.

And then there are the peculiar works that conflate the scars of tree bark with a human eye, the crotch of a branch to an heirloom high-top shoe. With searching attention to the smallest detail and constant recapitulation, Edefalk draws us in until we, too, are as entangled in affection as she is.

The exhibition is on view through Oct. 16.

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