CECILIA EDEFALK
DOUBLE WHITE VENUS

CECILIA EDEFALK is a Swedish painter of deeply concentrated, expressively oblique images. The artist exhibits comparatively few paintings; her studio-based process demands periods of intense absorption and, at times, isolation. Her work, almost always a serial exploration of a single motif, is distinguished by experiments with duplication, scale, and installation. Edefalk can be a brilliant colorist, but she generally restricts her palette. The mode is essentially figurative, although some of the latest exercises verge on total abstraction. This focus exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, Edefalk's first solo museum show in the United States, premieres a series of new paintings executed in spectral grays, blues, and whites. In process since 1999, the works are based on a black-and-white snapshot the artist made of a fragmented, classical sculpture of Venus in a garden. The finished paintings rely in equal parts upon this image, the artist's memory, painterly incident, and a touch of mysticism. The exhibition includes 12 canvases of widely varied scale, one or more of which are distinctively presented with a projected image of a painting from the same series. The combination of actual painting and projection, while both innovative in the field at large and new within the context of the artist's oeuvre, is squarely consistent with her investigations to date.

In one way or another, all of Edefalk's paintings emerge from a dialogue with other modes of representation, most notably photography. Importantly, her relationship to photography does not center on its ubiquity; rather, she is selectively invested in quirky, esoteric finds. Past subjects, forming a seemingly incongruous and idiosyncratic list, include the comedy duo Laurel and Hardy, self-portraits, a couple having sex, and a Roman marble mask of a young Marcus Aurelius. Her topics, however, are never chosen for their most obvious attributes. Laurel and Hardy serve as a way to explore spatial dynamics, not slapstick humor. The hardcore sex pictures are a vehicle to reflect on Buddhism,
not pornography. A carving of Marcus Aurelius provides a formal trope to investigate the phases of the moon, not Roman history.

Repetition is central to the artist’s methodology; her painting practice intentionally confuses original, replica, and copy. In 1990, facing a creative impasse just two years after her first solo exhibition, Edefalk made a painting, Another Movement, of a photograph taken from a magazine: a shirtless man rubbing, perhaps applying lotion to, a woman’s exposed back. She then exactly repeated the image—first in a small format and then in a larger size—six more times. Aside from the scale of the works, the differences between canvases in the series involve only subtle tonal and tactile shifts. When she returned to live in Stockholm in 1999, after nine years based in Germany, the artist reprised the exhibition of the complete series, installing it in the very same space in which it was first presented. For Edefalk, repetition can summon the comfort of the familiar; in this sense, the exhibition strategy was meaningful in the context of a homecoming. The tactic, however, evidences a more ambitious intellectual conceit. The artist explains:

Repetition is a way to underline the uniqueness of painting. . . I realized that if I worked long enough on a drawing, the graphite on the paper would start to live a life of its own [aside from] the actual motif. . . I noticed that I was able to transmit a certain intensity lying somehow beside, not behind what the drawing represented, like overtones in music. Within a given group of works, each work is repeated in an individual way. Repetition is a tool to express different ideas.2

Edefalk’s project is peculiarly conceptual. She is a profound and sensitive thinker who also happens to be a painter, and her concerns as an artist extend beyond the specific limits of the medium. Sol LeWitt famously wrote: “Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.”3 Edefalk’s choices are guided by just such an uncanny, rigorous intuition. Mystery and magic inspire her imagination. Ultimately, the Venus reference, like all of the artist’s chosen themes, reveals itself as a cipher. The series explores her belief in the power of chance, accident, and circumstance and in the hidden purposes and attendant obligations of uncovering coincidence. Her work remains open, or is an opening, to the possibilities of the unseen and the unexpected.

For Edefalk, sculpture, notably historic statuary, has been a creative catalyst. She has consistently used the medium of painting to reflect on experiences—epiphanies, even—that bind her to particular works of art. During a 1998 visit to Italy, the following story occurred:

THE END OF THE CIRCLE CECILIA EDEFALK

In the autumn of 1999 I was visiting London. At the Tate, I was intrigued by J. M. W. Turner’s paintings. I went to the cafeteria in the basement, which comprised many rooms, including a circular one. Working there was a man with one white eye and one normal, very dark eye—he fascinated and scared me at the same time. He looked perhaps North African and I thought it could be interesting to paint his portrait.

I chose a bottle of lemongrass-and-ginger pressé and sat down in the circular room to the right of the door. I couldn’t open the bottle and I asked the woman at the register for help; she pointed to the man with the special eye. He helped me open it and smiled. As I drank slowly—the taste was very intense—I studied the label. It had an expiration date of May 6, 2000, 15:33. The preciseness of the “15:33”—3:33 in the afternoon—surprised me. I drank half the contents and put the bottle in my handbag. On my way out I bought another bottle with the same date and asked for the man who had helped me, but he had left for the day.

I wrote a note for him—his name was Amore—“Love” in a different language. I wondered what I
for example, the artist became fascinated by a quattrocento statue, a polychrome, wooden angel of the Annunciation, in the Museo d’ Arte Sacra in San Gimignano. This led to a series of paintings of the figure—again starting small and then gaining in scale—called Elevator (1998). She became similarly transfixed by a Roman marble mask of Marcus Aurelius while preparing an exhibition at the Malmö Konstmuseum in 1999. The result was a cycle of paintings titled To View the Painting from Within (2000–02). In May 2000, Edefalk experienced a revelatory moment—the culmination of a series of seemingly unconnected coincidences—in the garden of the Chelsea Arts Club in London. In the darkness of night, she glimpsed a flash of unexplained light emanating from a grove of fig trees (see “The End of the Circle” below). In this case, unlike in other instances, Edefalk did not knowingly have a direct experience of sculpture; she only discovered the Venus amid the greenery the next morning when she returned to the scene. At that time, she took one black-and-white photograph—with a flash—of the statue. This image became the basis for a series of new paintings, the artist’s most ambitious and strikingly original to date.

Her itinerary, characterized by delays, detours, and temporal loops, is far removed from the expectations of the media or the art market. She works in slow motion, and it seems to me that her paintings rely upon the considerable time span that separates them. A painting by Edefalk is a rare thing, and the scarcity of the output seems intrinsic to her way of working.

In 2000 Edefalk made two small, nearly identical grisaille oil paintings based on the Venus photograph. A third, similar painting of the same size was completed in 2003. Subsequently, Edefalk recognized the base of the statue as an ideal surface—a white cube, literally—on which to “hang” an image of another version of the same painting. With this revelation, the idea for the series began to crystallize. She created a larger composition with a small facsimile of the painting rendered on the sculpture’s base as if it had been projected there. Edefalk was intrigued by the complexities of thinking about “a painting inside a painting.” (The title of the sex paintings, executed ten years earlier, is In the Painting the Painting.) As new works emerged, they became progressively lighter, larger, and more abstract. She began experimenting with tempera on an unprimed, raw linen support. In the sixth version, Edefalk rotated the canvas in process, allowing the paint to flow in different directions.

would be doing on May 6, 2000. I prepared myself for everything, but I believed that whatever was going to happen to me would not occur in Stockholm.

The following spring, I was asked to teach in Malmö a week before the special date. Six days in advance, I decided to join friends going to London for the opening of Tate Modern on May 9. I went to London via a ferry to Copenhagen. There was only one man in the booking office. I saw him from far away and thought there was something strange about him. On my way out I looked him in the eyes—they were Mercury.

I arrived at Tate Britain from the airport shortly after 3:00 and entered the cafeteria at 3:20. There were only a few people there, but the man with the black/white eyes was one of them. He was talking with a female colleague in the passage outside the circular room. I sat down at the same place as the year before and put the bottle I had bought in the fall on the table. Looking at it, I was struck by a yellow light that seemed to emanate from inside, and on the glass I could see the reflection of a white shape changing
These drips, articulated in the artist's notes in advance, allow the "paint to do the work." Nearing the end of the series, the statue dematerializes, appearing only as a silhouette, but always in precisely the same location. The image of the painting on the base becomes a vestigial shadow. The drips themselves now form the central element of the composition. By the seventh canvas, the work is increasingly improvisational and schematic. In the ninth, Edefalk introduced black marker lines and added a layer of clear plastic collage to the surface. She gave the originally limbless Venus arms and removed the image of the painting from the base of the statue. The artist's next two works—a small, single canvas and a large, faint, horizontal diptych—use a mirroring strategy, depicting a double of the sculpture as if reflected in water. Here, in a fitting return to a photographic effect, the painted Venus dissolves, replaced by her own negative image. Intriguingly, the series ends with an emphatically painterly work. While it harks back to the earliest paintings in terms of scale and medium, it also, Edefalk believes, reveals a new sensibility:

The light of two heavenly winter days made it possible for me to make this last small painting. It was done in one go, very quickly, and is ethereal, almost invisible. The podium is a darker tone of blue, not a white cube, and the figure has an interesting movement—reaching out and opening up. In a way it is a "reversed" grand finale to the series that points to something new in my painting. I never dared to be elegant in this way before.

The complexly repetitive, serial nature of her endeavor has led Edefalk to think in unconventional terms about installation, which she regards as an integral part of her practice. In order to maximize the possibility for differentiation, she makes use of mirror effects and displays paintings perpendicular to one another or upside down. All of this establishes a carefully choreographed system of viewing. Such animated configurations lend a performative quality to her exhibitions. The effect is also distancing: the repetition breeds estrangement. Despite the presence of discrete, beautifully made paintings, no single work asks to be regarded as autonomous or even precious. Interactions among images and objects, places and people—in the studio, in the museum, in private or otherwise personal moments—recall and generate associative chains of memories and meanings. This energy is, for the artist, more important than any individual painting. Edefalk's conception of the display of these paintings has, for some years, involved the use of slide projection. (In fact, the idea preceded the subject of the series. Because she is not from an eight into a zero into two circles. The man and the woman entered the room and sat down on the other side of the door. They talked about work and at 3:30 Amore said, "It is a very special day today." The woman left and I decided to talk to him. I walked over to his side, telling him why I was there and invited him to look at the bottle. Examining it carefully, he said, "It is a very strange light. I don't believe in magic, but it is a very special light." He fetched a newspaper, the Guardian, and pointed at a small article. I could read "Peace talks collapse" in Algiers between Somalia and Eritrea. The man himself was Eritrean. To the right of the article was a big advertisement for Ridley Scott's film Gladiator. I took photographs of the bottle and the newspaper and I asked if I could photograph him. We planned on meeting again the next day. I forgot the bottle in the taxi to the hotel. The following day we took pictures of each other. After the opening of Tate Modern some days later, an old friend asked me to join him at his private club. It was late on a starry night when we arrived at the white two-story house in Chelsea. He led me out...
particularly prolific, Edefalk had long considered projecting a slide of one of her paintings on the wall as an efficient method of making more work. She has also recently begun re-presenting her own paintings as exquisite photographic and filmic details.) Within the space of this exhibition, Edefalk matches the painted doubling that occurs within a number of the works—the image repeated on the statue base—with an actual, ten-by-seven foot projection of a slide of the second of the three small paintings. This projection is superimposed over an original work hung on the wall in such a way that the small painting appears on the base of the magnified image. Within the space of the projected painting, the role of the tiny replica is assumed by a real object. Among other things, this dramatic exchange allows the artist a different access to scale. In actuality, a painting the size of the large projection would be difficult for her to realize with the same intensity and focused, dense brushwork. The projected surrogate possesses greater drama and clarity than the small original source, and, curiously, it can reveal more about the nature of the object itself—the tooth and weave of the canvas, the texture of the brushstrokes. A counterintuitive truth emerges: the duplicate commands more authority, more authenticity than the original.

For Edefalk, slide projection becomes a self-consuming form of repetition that re-creates and erases, empowers and diminishes painting. As installed, the small originals are virtually lost in the shadow of the larger, ersatz painting. The overlay of images collapses the spatial and temporal distances—and elides the material differences—between the two forms of visual information. Edefalk understands memory and picture as equally impoverished records of the real. In this way, the projection is the truest corollary to the artist’s own experience in the garden. Light, like remembrance, is intangible, fugitive. Edefalk imagines painting as a facsimile of a fragment. In turn, she transforms her painted world into a phantom version of itself and, in the process, returns the original image, and its inspired source experience, back to what it was: light and shadow in the dark.

JAMES RONDEAU
FRANCES AND THOMAS DITTMER CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART

NOTES
1. A different gallery then occupied the location.
4. The Chelsea Arts Club, located at 141 Old Church Street, London, was established on March 22, 1891. Its membership has historically included artists, writers, photographers, and filmmakers.

into a very beautiful old-fashioned garden with lilies and roses and other flowers, surrounded by a white plastered wall. As we stood on the lawn admiring the garden, I heard a sharp sound and saw a silhouette illuminated by a flash of bluish white light in a corner close to us. The silhouette seemed familiar—like something I had seen before, perhaps in a drawing or a painting. Turning to my friend in surprise, I asked, "What was that?" He looked at me, bewildered, and said, "I didn’t see anything. Whatever it was, it was meant only for you." I was surprised but felt strangely content, fulfilled.

In the morning, I went out into the garden, to the spot where I had experienced the light. There was a sculpture of Venus in a grotto of figs; a small cymbal hung from a branch over her left shoulder. At first, I was disappointed—the silhouette I had seen the night before did not resemble the statue. I took a black-and-white photograph. That picture is the basis for the paintings in this exhibition.
CECILIA EDEFALK

Born Norrköping, Sweden, 1954
Studied at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm, 1973-77; Royal Academy of Art, Stockholm, 1981-86
Lives and works in Stockholm

SELECTED ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2005
Budbärare, Lunds Domkyrka, Lund, Sweden
Nya verk, Norrköpings Konstmuseum, Norrköping
Ich bin tot, Brändström and Stene, Stockholm

2004
Sketch for a Painting, Brändström and Stene

2003
Elevator, Malmö Konstmuseum, Sweden

1999
Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Kunsthalle Bern (cat. with essays by Jean-Christophe Ammann, Daniel Birnbaum, Bernhard Fibicher, and Cecilia Widenheim)
The Be Girl, IASPIS, Stockholm

1998
At the Moment Untitled, Galerie Johnen and Schöttle, Cologne

1997
Perspektive, Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany

1996
In the Painting the Painting, Galerie Johnen and Schöttle

1994
Echo, Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin

1990
En annan värld/Another Movement, Galleri Steen Eriksson, Stockholm

1988
Galleri Wallner, Malmö

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2005
New Swedish Photography, Hasselblad Center, Göteborg, Sweden

2004
Art Camp, Mountain’s Eye, Unduur Ulaan Uul, Mongolia
Joint Exhibition, Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
Falskt och äkta, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm (cat.)

2002
Documenta 11, Kassel (cat.)

2001
Mirror’s Edge, Tramway, Glasgow; Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Vancouver Art Gallery; Bildmuseet,
Umeå, Sweden (cat. with essay by Okwui Enwezor)
Szenenwechsel XVIII. Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main

2000
Szenenwechsel XVII, Museum für Moderne Kunst

1998
Nuit blanche: Scènes nordiques; Les années 90, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (cat.)
Szenenwechsel XII, Museum für Moderne Kunst

1997
Display. Charlottenborg
Udstillingsbygning, Copenhagen (cat.)
Deposition: Contemporary Swedish Art in Venice, Cinema Arsenale, Venice (cat.)
Szenenwechsel XI, Museum für Moderne Kunst

1996
Pitvna, Castello di Rivara, Turin (cat.)
Views from Abroad: European Perspectives on American Art 2, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (cat.)
Se hur det känns!/See What It Feels Like!, Rooseum, Malmö (cat. with essay by Jean-Christophe Ammann)
Szenenwechsel VIII, Museum für Moderne Kunst

1995
Das Abenteuer der Malerei, Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart; Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, Düsseldorf (cat.)
Revisi/Territory, Kulturhuset, Stockholm (cat.)

1994
XXII Bienal de São Paulo (cat.)

1993
Prospect 93, Frankfurter Kunstverein; Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (cat.)

1992
Expo '92, Swedish Pavilion, Seville (cat.)
Cecilia Edelfalk/Jan Häfström, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (cat.)

1991
Like med, Moderna Museet (cat.)
Stillstand zwischen, Sheddahle, Zurich (cat.)

1989
Aurora 3, Ateneum Taidemuseo, Helsinki
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works courtesy the artist and Brändström and Stene, Stockholm

1. Double White Venus, 2000
   22 x 16 cm; oil on canvas

2. Double White Venus, 2000
   22 x 16 cm; oil on canvas

3. Double White Venus, 2003
   22 x 16 cm; oil on canvas

4. Double White Venus, 2004
   135 x 95 cm; tempera on linen

5. Double White Venus, 2004
   198 x 155 cm; tempera on linen

6. Double White Venus, 2004
   240 x 175 cm; tempera on linen

7. Double White Venus, 2004
   240 x 175 cm; tempera on linen

8. Double White Venus, 2004
   240 x 175 cm; tempera on linen

9. Double White Venus, 2004
   240 x 175 cm; tempera, acrylic, plastic, and marker on linen

10. Double White Venus, 2005
    Two canvases, each 175 x 240 cm; tempera on linen

11. Double White Venus, 2005
    22 x 16 cm; oil and tempera on linen

12. Double White Venus, 2006
    22 x 16 cm; oil and tempera on linen
THANKS
Nick Barron, Andreas Brändström, Mickey Cartin, James Cano, Lisa Dorin, Edward Gallagher, Sarah Guernsey, Maria Håkansson, Dawn Koster, Jeanne Ladd, Kerstin Lane, Chai Lee, Maria Lind, Kristin Lister, Alfred L. McDougal and Nancy Lauter McDougal, Whitney Moeller, Barbro Osher, Therese Peskowits, Elise Peters, Katie Reilly, Rae Riefel, Dorothy Schroeder, Jan Stene, Elizabeth Stepina, Jim Szykowski, Peter Wahlqvist, and Jeff Wonderland.

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Front and back covers: Cecilia Edelfalk’s studio, Stockholm.

All photographs courtesy Carl-Henrik Tillberg.

OPENING EVENTS AND ARTIST TALK
THURSDAY 2 FEBRUARY
EXHIBITION PREVIEW
5:30–8:00 p.m.
Gallery 139
OPENING RECEPTION
5:30–8:00 p.m.
Mary L. and Leigh B. Block Photography Study Room, Department of Photography
ARTIST TALK
6:00 p.m.
Morton Auditorium

GALLERY TALKS
FRIDAY 17 FEBRUARY
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator James Rondeau
Gallery 100
FRIDAY 3 MARCH
12:00 p.m.
Exhibition coordinator Whitney Moeller
Gallery 100
TUESDAY 11 APRIL
12:00 p.m.
Assistant curator Lisa Dorin
Gallery 100
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