

Overview



Abandoned, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint and soft ground etching. 24¼ × 36 inch image on 33¼ × 44 inch sheet. Edition 40. Printed by Emily York.

Mamma Andersson

by Kathan Brown

Karin Mamma Andersson was born in 1962. “Now, when I’m in the middle of life,” she said in a 2007 interview, “I feel that I’ve left the past. I’m done with it, at least in the way I used to relate to it. ...It takes too much time and I don’t get much out of it anymore.”

This is interesting because the first impression of an Andersson painting is often a feeling of memory, perhaps with a dreamlike edge despite the solidity of the work. Critic Kim Levin called it a combination of “persistent memory and blank amnesia.” Andersson is Swedish, born near the Arctic Circle, and another first impression critics often have is of “a chill in the air” as Aidan Dunne put it in *The Irish Times* in 2009. Dunne hastens to add

that Andersson’s approach is centered on “hard work applied to ordinary life, to great effect.”

Andersson doesn’t reject history. “A painting made 100 years ago can still feel new to me,” she says. She works from photographs, often old ones. *Stump Up*, one of the three aquatints she did at Crown Point Press, for example, is based on a photo taken in Finland about 50 years ago. It’s a landscape “very similar to the one I grew up in,” she says. “Sometimes I like to work with time motifs, 100 years ago or a few years ago, it doesn’t matter.” Similarly, she searches paintings by other artists for “inspiration for combinations of color or a feeling



Stump Up, 2008. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints with aquatint. $24\frac{1}{2} \times 45\frac{3}{4}$ inch image on $33\frac{1}{2} \times 53\frac{3}{4}$ inch sheet. Edition 50. Printed by Emily York.

about something. I can find it in a Piero della Francesca or a Chris Ofili painting. It doesn't matter."

What matters, I think, is that she doesn't dwell in the past. To Andersson, "leaving the past" means using what she wants from it while she lives in the present. That life-view is characteristic of many creative people especially in her generation.

It has taken me a while to arrive at that simple thought. In a recent public lecture, I used Andersson's aquatint *Abandoned* to symbolize the deep recession embedded in our society right now. As I showed the picture, I told a joke about George W. Bush: "Confucius says: 'Never give a sword to a man who can't dance.'" Andersson invites people to use her work as an armature for a story, and the story I invented was one of foreclosure, for which I blamed our former president. On the plane home from Chicago, where I gave the lecture, I thought of the people who had inhabited the room in *Abandoned* as having moved on. They were finished with

that scene. They didn't have time to dwell there any more.

Moving on may be one part of Mamma Andersson's attitude or life-view—whatever you call the force that drives an artist to keep doing her/his art. For sure, story telling is another part. Andersson says that as a child she would talk to herself as she "drew stories." All children do this, but as she grew, she never let go of drawing or of stories. She spent nine years in art school, but says "if I wanted to learn to paint, I had to engross myself in someone else's work." Bonnard, she says, "is one of my house guards. I would almost say he's the best. Munch and Bonnard are there."

While still in art school, Andersson set up housekeeping with artist Jockum Nordström, and they created a lasting family with two sons now ages 17 and 21. Karin Andersson is a common name in Sweden, and to differentiate herself early in her career she accepted the nickname Mamma, which remains her international art world first name. She entered that world when she represented



Sweden in the Venice Biennale in 2003. In 2007 the Moderna Museet in Stockholm organized for her a retrospective that traveled to London. In the catalog, Kim Levin writes that “Luc Tuymans, Peter Doig, Neo Rauch, Marlene Dumas, and Karin Mamma Anderson retrieve enervated fragments of history, narrative, and politics, as well as a newly disruptive unreality.” I think this is a pretty good observation except for the word “enervated” which means “languid,” or “limp.”

The experience of working with Andersson in the Crown Point studio for two weeks last December was anything but limp. At home, she had prepared full size tracings of layers of color for several images familiar to her. She did this, she explained, because etching was totally unfamiliar. “The first time you work with a new process, you are not so brave,” she said later. “You are a little bit like Bambi on the ice. ...It was nice to have the feeling I could be safe in the picture and just have the technique to worry about.”

Right away, the first hour in the studio, she chose the largest, most ambitious of the images—the birch forest. “That’s a motif I can’t escape,” she said in an interview in her retrospective catalog. “I decide over and over again not to paint another birch. I just can’t stop—because they’re so beautiful.” Later, in a videotaped interview with me, she said about the landscape, “It could be a long time ago, or today. Memory’s there.”

Her most revealing comments in the interview I did with her following the completion of the prints, however, concerned the image called *Room Under the Influence*. It is from a photograph of a stage set at the Royal Theater in Stockholm. Andersson has said she is inspired by theater and once wanted to be a filmmaker. “Theater sets are very close to what I want to do as an artist,” she said. “A small story in a small square. To make a concentrated feeling for something, you have to reduce it to the few small things that can tell a story. Then you can make your own history.”

A theater set, by its nature is focused and reduced. Andersson further reduces it in painting. The third step is the print. “The print makes these things stronger than when I paint,” she said. “I am more extreme in a circumstance like this.” Kim Levin, writing in the retrospective catalog, asked Andersson what she meant by the title *Room Under the Influence*. “It is in rooms that we live our lives—or lived our lives,” Andersson replied. The room is under the influence of lives, but it is compressed, staged, so that each of us can create a different story for it. Memory is there, but not a specific past. We are done with that.



Karin Mamma Andersson in the Crown Point studio, 2008.



Room Under the Influence, 2008. Color spit bite aquatint with aquatint and soft ground etching. 20¾ × 35¾ inch image on 29¾ × 43¾ inch sheet. Edition 40. Printed by Emily York.

In the Crown Point Gallery

Setting the Scene

A group exhibition featuring Mamma Andersson's new etchings and including prints by Robert Bechtle, William Bailey, Christopher Brown, Edgar Bryan, Per Kirkeby, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Jockum Nordström, Laura Owens, Ed Ruscha, and Wayne Thiebaud.

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