

Emily Sundblad

*Un Violent Désir de Bonheur*

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Flowers signal something excessive at the core of painting: an unspoken, almost violent desire to abandon social responsibility in the full, sovereign enjoyment of its own powers, which are absent-minded and pathetic. In Emily Sundblad's canvases, flowers escape the still life genre and levitate over landscapes, piling up and out-shining other visual information as they invade non-floral genres without regard for perspective or scale. But the pathetic power of the flower is not just the garden's desire to wildly outgrow its own boundaries. Composition itself becomes efflorescent in the termite-like way it takes over large format canvases without any need for a large-format image or plan. We can see how the act of painting finds happiness in its own manual action, feeling its way from moment to moment, from color to color. It's a happiness located in the midst of ongoing catastrophe. And chaos is where these flowers come from, their compost and sun.

*Un Violent Désir de Bonheur* is a slogan seen on a banner at a recent protest against the raising of the retirement age in France. The human fight for happiness in the midst of the catastrophe of capitalism is another sort of pathetic flowering. And it was while painting in the studio that Sundblad heard Eileen Myles on the Apology podcast, explaining how the poet decided to start using the pronoun "they": when Jesus asked an evil spirit who'd taken possession of a man's body to identify itself, the reply was "I am Legion/For we are many." So "they" might name desire's inner army, demonic in their disregard for the property lines of the self. In Sundblad's paintings, the fight for happiness is wildly inclusive of subject matter and of any momentary impulse... inclusive also of gesture, text, sentiment, animals, color. It's in the multiplicity of motifs, as one scene happens upon the next and colors begin to blaze for the sake of blazing, flowering. Illustration becomes the all-over-ness of efflorescent composition without a big-picture plan, where anything could happen. The paintings are "legion" and also dream-like in their spatial distortions and in the sprouting of one vignette from another, in their disorienting joy of displacement.

In the midst of catastrophe, desire moves quickly and with lightness of heart. A storybook octopus watches over invisible children in a Long Island pumpkin patch: it's Halloween and there's war and death in Gaza, and all of this information coincides with the act of painting. We encounter smoking alligators and foxes with hats. While the paintings open themselves to the simple pleasures of children's book illustration, they also invoke a sort of cartoon opium den and a mother's daydreams of normal and non-normal love, perhaps getting drunk and fucking a tiger. Without the need to be right or strong about anything, painting enlists human sentiment in a tough and disorderly kind of kitsch that keeps pushing up funny, sick roses. We think of Berthe Morisot stealing moments of painting from the domestic clock. Or Paul Thek in Italy, painting divers and dinosaurs on newsprint, Balthus's illustrations of Wuthering Heights, Florine Stettinheimer's fantastic, autofictional mises-en-scènes and Tove Jansson's Moomins wandering into a Munch seascape. In Sundblad's own lost plein air seascapes, the wave is another sort of high-speed flower, a crash of colors gathered in swift, dedicated acts of painting.