ALEXANDRE

Edith Schloss: Crude Poetry

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> "How can you think of everything when roses smell the most and teapots lean on elephants and a spring is lost."
>
> — Gertrude Stein in *A Sonatina Followed by Another*, 1921

Edith liked the lively and the slangy way of painting things. "Crude daily poetry," she called it.[1]

For much of her nearly eight-decade career, Edith's daily poetry took form in painting eclectic junk-shop tchotchkes, which she'd line up on an open window's ledge. These compositions offer an honest elucidation of time and place, while reflecting her acquaintance with Giorgio Morandi,[2] to whom she made a pilgrimage in the summer of 1961, and who advised her that from *il reale* was the most abstract way to paint. Of these jumble-shop baubles she said:

> I look at them and the weather before and try to have clear ideas about it all and the world, and to put it down in the simplest color and line [. . .] Abstract Art? Figurative Art? All art is a fusion of the real outside, and that which is inside us.[3]

In life Edith was an unsentimental romantic, a disposition likely formed through the years of struggle, dismissal, and rejection experienced by every mid-century woman artist. Her recently published and celebrated memoir, *The Loft Generation* (2021), confirms that Edith was intrinsically linked to the milieu of postwar American art. She arrived in New York City in 1942 at age 23, having already mastered several languages while living in two of Europe's great art cities, first Florence and then London. "Coming from Europe, I believed in abstraction," she wrote regarding her early days in New York City. And she was "hungry for more."[4]

Soon she met the painter Willem de Kooning, passed her citizen exam with the help of the poet and critic Edwin Denby, and married the photographer and painter Rudy Burckhardt. She "happily absorbed" the downtown scene and "settled down to paint for painting."[5] In the 1958 canvas titled *Family Album*, Alex Katz captures the *ménage* that was Edwin Denby, Rudy Burckhardt, and Edith Schloss, with little Jacob in the middle.

> My mistake, 'aided' by Rudy and Edwin, was never to take a grandstand. But nestle in my little self-world, enjoying its coziness and sometimes cold thought—but no pushing to go out and hold it up for everyone—the macho world of The Club, beautifully unique, but a what the fuck man's land. Us 'girls' [were] very well liked but kept somehow from imagining ourselves serious competitors.[6]

Even in those early years, Edith gravitated towards "the sweep and touch of a quick hand and the catch of a clear eye."[7] But overall her sensitivity to art swung to the side of the primordial, the rough, and the raw. She gravitated to the stories painted on cave walls and glazed on Greek vases, "the before-Renaissance pink and gold Holy stories, the clumsy Romanesque sculptors, the Pisanis, the wedding chests in Florence, Goya, the early German expressionists, [Hieronymus] Bosch and [Heinrich] Zille, and Krazy Kat."[8]

The convincing free hand of Henri Matisse was also an influence. Once on a trip to Provence, she visited the Musée Matisse and the Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence. "I saw how all his life he learnt to unlearn while making things clearer to himself," she said.

> His depth, simplicity, and faith were also so close to that of the Sienese painters. There is something like this in folk art and in children's painting which are quite direct and from the way back. All these have become an example.[9]

In 1962, precipitated by a tangled separation from Rudy, Edith fled to Rome with Jacob in tow. Expecting to stay on only a few months, she remained a lifetime. There her second migration began. There the fresh-air views from bright open windows high above the wretchedness and wonder of humanity would shape her "self-world."

Life in Rome was lonely, but living among the ancients made her feel like a "lady in a fool's paradise."[10] In a letter to her close friend, the painter and poet Helen DeMott, she wrote that she had gone fishing and caught two fish. These she painted before she ate them. "I think my style is changing," she wrote, "sort of looser, lazier."[11]

The painter Jack Tworkov was among the first of many prominent New Yorkers to visit Edith in Rome. He took her to the National Etruscan Museum, had lunch, then praised her new pictures. She wrote DeMott, "If I didn't mind, he thought I was a female Soutine."[12] High praise, indeed, for Tworkov's essay on Chaim Soutine, published in *Art News* in 1950, has been singled out among his many writings as one of the earliest attempts to characterize the emerging expressionism of the New York painters.[13]

In 1963, she at last managed to find a place of her own. Writing to her close confidante, the artist and activist Lucia Vernarelli, she celebrates the *petit plaisirs* of her newly found apartment on via della Vetrina:

> Listening to South American music on the radio. The radio reminds me of Prue Devons, my shelves and things on them, of 21st Street. Jacob's whistling in the background makes it very jolly. Having an apartment of our own for the first time, painted white and with things all our own, cooking in the cunning little kitchen all the time. It's like our old life in Chelsea [. . .] Only you can understand thoroughly what it is not to have one's own nest, and so you know how I really feel quite alive for the first time since leaving 21st Street, well not alive, but homey [...] Before me is a bunch of wildflowers we picked in Veio.[14]

Though the apartment was a "mildewy mess," had no running water at first and rain flooded it twice, Edith describes feeling "truly vetrinaceous" [*sic*] with the wash fluttering outside her front windows. Every Sunday she went to the Porta Portese flea market telling herself firmly "no more broken things," only to come home with another piece of exquisite junk which she would make functional or place meticulously on the shelves she had salvaged from the street.

Steady and determined, it wasn't long before she was exhibiting in Rome. In March of 1964, she showed her assemblages at the Aleph Gallery on via Zanardelli. *The Rome Daily American* dubbed it the most entertaining show in the city.

Edith painted most during the summers, first in Liguria in the village of La Serra di Lerici, which overlooks the Bay of La Spezia. Part of the Northern Tyrrhenian Sea, it was also known as *The Gulf of Poets*. The English writers Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley as well as Lord Byron were among the many drawn to its dark blue waters, warm beaches, and soothing nature. It was where Shelley drowned. Rackstraw Downes had put her on to Edward Trelawney's *Last Days of Shelly and Byron* (1858) when they met in the fall of 1974. "The whole topic was new to Edith," he later wrote, "as an expat herself, and a fan of the area, she was fascinated."[15]

The irony of tragedy striking such a beautiful place was not lost on Edith. In fact, it added to the balance she drew from the place—a quiet steadiness in her still lifes of homespun objects "lined up against the pageant of the sea."[16]

Sitting rather conspicuously on the horizon in the Bay of La Spezia is the little lopsided island of Tino and its San Venerio Lighthouse. Edith made them her muse, and their *profili* became a recurrent theme in her paintings during this time and for years to come. Alone and at sea, this battered and weathered island could be a stand-in for a self-portrait—casting herself as the main character in a story illuminated by a rising pink moon or a sinking red sun. "We are all sometimes homesick for a past that may never have happened," she wrote, "so I imagine I have come from the Mediterranean and have returned to it."[17]

One summer in particular, Edith accompanied her new lover, the composer Alvin Curran, to Florence where he had a gig playing Dixieland Jazz at the *Red Garter Nightclub*. From her room along the via di Rignalla, she arranged whatever objects she managed to carry in her luggage from Rome, along with chic bric-à-brac she found around town, and painted a series of still lifes.

These paintings became more than just mementos of her sojourns. They establish what could be called her mature style. *Rignalla* (1967) and *Hot Cross Buns* (1967) are bright and honeybee sweet. They belong to a series of colorful lineups of flowers, tightly cropped within the frame so that the nestled still life pushes into the foreground—no hint of a horizon. At last, the off-kilter of Van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890) in Frankfurt that had so impressed her as a student for its "funny little equal strokes going to the corner like rain on a tilted plane"[18] had made it through to her own paintings, which would forever after squiggle and sway.

Consider *Spring Green* (1967), in which a thickly painted butterfly wavers over a stacked set of vases full of spinning flowers, or *Summer* (1968) and *The Day of the Hedgehog* (1968), which mark the first of many annual returns to the Bay of La Spezia—the latter an ode to Italy's 12th-century Riccio de' Ricci's weather forecasting *erinaceidae*.

As an introduction to her solo exhibition at Galleria Il Segno, Rome, in 1968, the avant-garde Florentine conceptual artist and experimental musician Giuseppe Chiari recognized the thoughtfulness in her paintings, offering that they were made of "kindness."

> It simply means that Edith Schloss has always put the stimuli that came from her own sensitivity before her—but I could also say the reaction of her, because one must not be afraid of this word—to stimuli filled with her own ideas. It is humble painting.[19]

Vanitas is an unavoidable theme in Edith's art. Not that she respected its stodgy connection to tradition or that she was obsessed with the symbolic representation of decay or death; her treatment of it more likely

alludes to her sense of transitoriness—the brevity of the moment and the ephemeral nature of life. Edith learned for herself early on that for an object to be worth painting, it had to have character, it had to belong to someone. From her memoir we learn how she came to appreciate still-life painting:

> At the Art Students League there was a so-called still-life closet, full of dusty vases, compotes, Chianti bottles, candles, mandolins, and lots of drapes. When we pulled out some of these objects, I could do nothing with them, nothing had any character, they did not belong to anyone. 'Phooey to still-life painting,' we said. But when I set up loft living at 116 [West Twenty-First Street] in Chelsea and started gathering furniture from friends and from the streets, I also found or bought vessels I liked for their shape or use or mysterious past. I have always been acquisitive about small, incongruous objects, an assiduous collector of jugs, jars, china and earthenware, Maine seafarers' antiques, lobster [buoys] in wonderful faded primary colors, curios, shells, bones, plants, and herbs. [. . .] My eye took in the gleaming porcelain, holding fruit or flower, standing in rows on kitchen shelves or in corners, and I let them stare at me and then I took action. From then on, I could never have enough of still-life painting.[20]

Edith reveled in the present and was brutally devoted to it. This is amplified through the titles she gives her pictures. She credits Edwin Denby with the suggestion to take some simple detail, "some perfectly ordinary time of day," and use that for a title. It was he who taught her to "use the near and not the far for poetry."[21] And from there, she "always tried to scoop out the intuitive and loose beyond anything learned."[22]

Knowing Bird (1970) mixed up her approach, moving focus away from an open window or a cluttered tabletop. Here a lively colored scaffolding-of-patchworks sets up a vibrant façade where up top a spotted bird is perched delivering its truth-sense song.

Peace (Sept 6) (1972), *Open Window (June 4)* (1974), and *July 9* (1975) all embrace the specificity of time. Each has its particulars—light, weather, and temperature. And each features a cluttered coterie of strange bedfellows. "It's the fine things explaining the daily, explaining the ever, wild, deep and blind," Edith wrote.[23]

In *Sundown* (1973), Edith brings everything to the table. Her favorite star-embroidered tablecloth becomes the playground for that clay pigeon she picked up in Porta Portese (the terracotta elephant found in the Christmas market in Piazza Navona would appear in later paintings). Though the sun is setting on the picnicking objects, it's clear that, with such a full table, the party will continue well into the night.

One might celebrate the *joie de vivre* Edith brings to her paintings, but it is only half the story. "Look again," she wrote, "there are other things. The Greeks cried: 'Oimoi!' which meant not only joy, wonder and mischief, but also taunt, fury, grief and fear."[24] There is something forlorn in the painting *Fringuelli* (1976)—her choice to relegate the still life to the right side and leave the left barren.

Edith's treatment of space is what gives each of her paintings a perspective unique to a location. In *Salita* (1974), meaning *the climb*, we see her friskily depicting the mountain quarries of Italy's Marble Coast—the colorful veining of rock paraded like a rainbow. From Carrara to Massa, from Seravezza to Pietrasanta, Edith had traversed the old Aurelian highway, crisscrossing its provincial roads. She studied the mountainous range,

and the breadth of her appreciation accrued into a heroic essay published decades later, which highlighted the uniqueness of the region going back to Michelangelo, Donatello, Bernini, and Canova.[25] This painting has a sense of Wayne Thiebaud in its echoes of the views he portrayed from his home on Potrero Hill.

In two of the latest works in the exhibition, *Melograno Dusk* (1978) and *Melograno* (1979), we are left with a hint of what is to come. Gesture and stroke, which soon became the dominant mechanics in her later works, flank positions of the still life. Space—the measured expansion and compression of it—is the compositional emphasis. In *Melograno Dusk*, Edith leaves open a page of her favorite Audubon book—the blue spine like an anchor grounding the scene. In the second painting, objects jostle unsteadily, unsure of their footing beneath a miasmic sky. In both, sour yellow hues that only Edith could get away with saturate the composition, and only she could get away with titling her work after a pomegranate.

With a crude grace, Edith again and again leveraged her emotions to show us what we must see: the ways in which all life, even the most mundane, everyday, normal life, is the stuff of drama, of tragedy, of poetry. It takes a considerable talent to make art that transmits a singular experience. Like a seemingly disjointed poem by Gertrude Stein, Edith's paintings just make sense.

She was a prolific and practiced image maker who chose to paint with an indirect directness. It is this directness that distinguishes her historically. The seemingly haphazard accuracy in her work leaves us in the middle of a memory—a sensation suspended between sight and touch, color and form—but nevertheless infuses us with an understanding of that memory as the honest crude poetry of the day.

1 Schloss in "A New York Painter to a European Intellectual," November 17, 2009, unpublished. Edith Schloss Burckhardt Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.
2 Schloss visited Giorgio Morandi on July 21, 1961. Schloss and Morandi share the same birthday of July 20. A chronicle of the adventure appears in her memoir, *The Loft Generation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 238-248.
3 Schloss in "Edith on Edith," *International Daily News*, Friday, March 28, 1980, 15.
4 Schloss in *Loft Generation*, 7.
5 Schloss in *Autobiographie*, Rome, October 1990. Edith Schloss Burckhardt Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.
6 Schloss, letter to Hermine Ford, Rome, March 1, 2010. Courtesy studio of Hermine Ford, New York.
7 Schloss in "A New York Painter to a European Intellectual," November 17, 2009, unpublished. Edith Schloss Burckhardt Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.
8 Schloss in "A New York Painter to a European Intellectual."
9 Schloss in Allen Ellenzweig exhibition review, "Edith Schloss," *Arts Magazine* (March 1977), 8.
10 Schloss, letter to Helen De Mott, Via Giulia, Rome, June 14, 1962. Edith Schloss Burckhardt Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Jack Tworkov, "The Wandering Soutine," *Art News*, 47:7 (November 1950), 31-33, 62.
14 Schloss, letter to Lucia Vernarelli, La Vigilia of Columbus Day, 1963. Edith Schloss Burckhardt Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.
15 Rackstraw Downes, letter to the author, January 2015.
16 Schloss in *Autobiographie*.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Giuseppe Chaiari in essay for "Edith Schloss: Oils, Watercolors and Assemblages," Galleria Il Segno, Rome, Italy, 1968.
20 Schloss in *Loft Generation*, 50.
21 Ibid, 50-51.
22 Schloss in *Autobiographie*.
23 Schloss in "A New York Painter to a European Intellectual."
24 Schloss in *Autobiographie*.
25 Schloss in "The Marble Coast," *Wanted in Rome*, June 23-July 7, 1993, 12-14.

Jason Andrew is an independent writer and curator. He has worked closely with the Estate of Edith Schloss for nearly a decade, organizing the first retrospective of her work in the New York in 2015. Recent published essays include *Elizabeth Murray: Back in Town* (2020), *Of the Stark and the Spartan: Jack Tworkov in the 70s* (2021), *Joan Witek: Paintings from the 80s* (2020), and *Janice Biala: Intimacy & Exile* (2020).