

Against Nature

Essay by Jean Wainwright

Nathalia Edenmont's self-portraits startle with their honesty and sing with their beauty, In *Piece of Me* we see love, hope, loss, grief, pain, and overwhelming poignant loneliness.

There is a metaphoric umbilical cord that links each of her self-portraits from the past seventeen years: Images fashioned from thoughts that 'hit her head' and invade her mind, bursting with symbolism from her traumatic lived experiences and memories. We see in her photographs, taken on a large format analogue camera the 'wraiths' that invade her mind, resolved in beautiful and painstakingly constructed compositions: Not only are her self-portraits her confessional and comfort, as she *has* to expel them from herself, but there are some that in the making almost resulted in her death as she searched to provide us, her audience, with the faithful rendering of her mind's eye.

I begin with *Self Portrait (Wheat Stalk)* (2005) Edenmont's poignant image of resilience. The symbolic energy in this artwork both stark and beautiful. The single wheat stalk standing straight and strong, bending but not breaking, is both her core and her creative force. She picked the stalk near her home in urban Stockholm, and the butterfly wings (sourced from Peru) with their fragility are Edenmont's important symbolic and artistic material, the insects her metaphor for life and death. The allusion to wheat is partly biographical, referencing her dramatic journey migrating from the Ukrainian city of Yalta, 'exiling' herself to live permanently in Sweden in 1991, it is also a representation for agriculture in the former Soviet Union: But she insists that 'Maybe because of my heritage I unconsciously made it curve like a wheat stalk... there is also the significance of the seven butterfly wings, I was born on the 7th, it is an important number for me and I only had seven wings in total to make the work. Then there is the loneliness of the single stalk and

the black, which absolutely made me recognise myself. This is *me* and the emptiness I often feel'

Fragility and nature weave their way through many of Edenmont's art works entangled in symbolic threads of memory and memorial. In *Self Portrait (October)* (2005) with its one butterfly wing attached to a stem, she reminds me that 'Beautiful leaves are blowing away from the trees in October [in Sweden] and I was thinking that I have no family, I am like the last leaf on the branch, but this is not a leaf, it is the last of the butterflies four wings. I am the last one from the family tree, disappearing like the butterfly wings. It is the last wing, the last leaf, everything is the *last one*'. The markings on the wing appear like two small scorched holes, a reference to the burns Edenmont made when at the age of fourteen, a neighbour interrupted her ironing her graduation dress to tell her that her mother had died, returning, she found her dress ruined. Also significant was the colour of the butterfly as her mother's 'favourite colour was yellow ... she had only one beautiful yellow dress, (this was the Soviet Union), and she would wear it all the time, so yes I was thinking of her'. Four years later Edenmont returns to the trauma of her mother's death with *Devotion* (2009). She stands straight and unflinching against the black background, her red dress the colour of the Soviet flag. The detailing of the silk flowers blackened with burns reminds us of darkening clotting blood, dead blooms and Eucharist wine; fragments of burned silk are scattered on her chest. a charred shard of the silk dress threatens to pierce Edenmont's throat where a tracheotomy would be performed if one was choking. She is the proud surviving bloom, tragically alone.

Three other Edenmont self-portraits specifically address her mother's death *Self Portrait (Deathbed)* (2007) *Soul* (2007) and *Family* (2007). In 2007 Carolina, Edenmont's enduring model was fourteen the same age as she was when orphaned, provoking her into a

reflective connection. Older now than when her mother died, (aged only 47) Edenmont acknowledges that she became very anxious when she got closer to that age questioning 'How can I be older than my mother? I did not know I would feel so bad, both before and after I reached that age.' In *Deathbed* she 'becomes her own dead mother holding Nathalia's hand, the hand she [Edenmont's mother] would never feel, but might comfort her'. Her mother had been laid in an open coffin at the gate of their apartment block which allowed a large number of people to pay their last respects. Edenmont's emotional memory resulted in her photographic image that took place in a '...physically demanding ten-hour photo session' She admitted that 'I look at [Deathbed] and this is one of the important works in my life, I am happy I created it, but I feel it is too much for me to almost look at now, I feel someone else created it for me, someone who was a much younger Nathalia who created it for the Nathalia who is much older now'. *Family* is also an evocation of grief. as she explains 'My dress is a visualisation of my tremendous grief about becoming an orphan. My parents should be sitting on the chairs'. Similar chairs had supported her mother's coffin when it was outside her house and Edenmont's black creased three-metre-wide voluminous gown especially commissioned from her dressmaker was designed to 'exaggerate her very huge sorrow', the image has her anchored by memory and tethered by loss. In contrast *Soul* offers a surreal juxtaposition of screws and worms as a metaphor for death as she explains 'They put nails in my mother's coffin hitting them loudly before they put it in the ground. For me it was 'Oh my God, this is a human being... These nails and screws were in my memory. Sometimes when people disappoint or when they die it feels like someone screwed them into my soul, into my heart'. Realising the similarity in colour, Edenmont cut off the worm's heads and inserted the screws into them. She appears to be holding an iron heart in her hands, the grooves in the shape of the cross on the screw head reminding her of her Orthodox background as they draw ones eye upwards through the central axis to the black abyss.

Edenmont's art confronts her fears in artistic exorcism, she is phobic about worms and snakes yet they appear frequently, lodged amongst flowers, in her hair and in *Full of life* (2016) some awakened and began to slither and slide on the shoulder of her raiment made from heavy earth. In *Nathalia* (2004) she stares impassively at us, but this is not Medusa, the snakes are sleepy, one is coiled as if about to invade her ear, her tempting red lipstick (not something she normally wears) a reminder of the curse that befell Medusa's great beauty for forgoing her celibacy. Like Antonio del Pollaiuolo Portrait of a Girl (c1470) the snakes become an elaborate coiled hairstyle that Edenmont 'felt she needed to somehow create for her own pleasure'. The attention to detail of her coiffure's in her work, the teasing, curling, and braiding of her natural hair, become seductive extensions to her body.

Edenmont's self-portraits are often hauntings of her younger self and homeland. In *Behind the Scenes M* (2009) she remembers people wearing rabbit fur hats as a buffer against the Soviet winter or playing with glove dolls and puppets, placing them on her hands and giving them a personality. One is reminded of Joseph Beuys performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) with its silent dialogue, as Edenmont attempts to communicate with the dead rabbit., perhaps a metaphor for the barriers she faced as an immigrant arriving in a foreign country where she did not speak the language.

Heirloom (2008) reminds us of her heritage. Taken at fourteen by her mother to a professional photographer she wore her grandmother's traditional shawl, one of the only precious things she took with her when she left her country. Wrapped around Carolina's naked body in *Heirloom* it becomes 'really a self -portrait, I didn't know I would continue to do the flower dresses and the flowers in the shawl would grow and spring into life' as it does in portraits such as *My Way* (2019). In the images the densely packed blooms protect

and clothe her. The overlaid symbolism of the luscious flowers contrasting with dead heads and petals, the red Begonias and the Anthuriums with their phallic spadix are a potent narrative. There are reminders of portraits of Queen Elizabeth 1 in the extraordinary ruff at her neck and of the 19th century painter Jean-Antoine Chazal with flowers evoking those laid on graves.

In *Propaganda* (2016-2019) Edemont also weaves her past into the present. Standing on the street aged nineteen in Yalta an older man cruelly suggested that her time was 'now' because although 'young and beautiful' in two years she would be 'an old potato'. Aged forty and in hospital, undergoing fertility treatment, she was told catastrophically that her eggs were dead provoking the man's 'comical' words to rebound in her head.

Propaganda is though teeming with life, the green leaves, the potato, a staple food for Edemont in the former Soviet Union, the long purple sprouts strangely entangled umbilical's, though poisonous if eaten in excess. One is reminded of the scene in Günter Grass *The Tin Drum* where Joseph Kolaizcek has sex with Anna Bronski under her skirts in the potato field. Here is Edemont the survivor, a proud mother earth, her hands resting defiantly on her hips.

In contrast in *Not Amused* (2011) there are echoes of John Everett Millais painting *Autumn Leaves* (1856) but the four children are no longer present, Edemont is alone and representing autumn. The shoot itself was problematic, having assembled her team of people there were difficulties with the model, a substitute was found but he was also not suitable as Edemont explained 'I had a team of many people waiting and I decided that it was not possible to do [the shoot] with the new boy ...I said "I will do it myself". The hairdresser for the King and Queen of Sweden is always on the set and was waiting and I told him "I don't have clean hair as I was in the bushes for two days picking up all the

leaves and didn't have time to prepare myself as I was not supposed to be the model" He told me that the aristocrats from the past often did not clean their hair for months'. I had been anxious as he was touching my dirty hair from only two days'. She decided that although she was 'not amused ' she would become a 'self-portrait'. When looking at the Edemont's hair in the image I was haunted by the lyrics written by Alan and Marilyn Bergman in *Windmills of My Mind* 'When you knew that it was over you were suddenly aware; that the autumn leaves were turning to the colour of her hair'. Her glorious locks catching the light, the leaf palette with its golds, reds, rust and browns, the exotic butterflies, are her cycle of renewal, hope death and camouflage.

In contrast in *Only Me* (2011) Edemont emerges from a huge bouquet of lilies, those symbols of purity and fertility. Here we are drawn back to the narrative of her five marriages, the first taking place in the Soviet Union. Her husband's parents worked for the government and Edemont '...was determined to have beautiful hair and shoes'. Having booked the best hairdresser, when she arrived she found due to sickness there was no-one available, so she commandeered the cleaner who had been observing the skills in the salon, to style her hair. She told no one of the irony of the situation. In *Only Me* she is almost overwhelmed by her gigantic 'wedding bouquet and I am allergic to lilies' for this occasion she again used the Swedish Royal family hairdresser, her hair wound around her neck in a strange hair noose and the gigantic stalks deprived of water bruised and beginning to discolour at their ends.

Edemont creates because she must, her self portraits pulsate with her traumas. In *Only Child* (2012) she confronts her tragic miscarriages. Her Madonna is pure anguish, she is the proud mother holding the baby to her lactating breast but it is raw meat covered in maggots, the scene is surreal as it often appears to be, when one is in shock. She recalls

that when the 'young woman doctor told me my baby was dead inside, I asked her how long she had been working in the hospital in case she had made a mistake'. During the shoot Edenmont confessed that her stress was so great that she could not feel or smell anything until she '...felt the maggots moving' which she hoped was her imagination, they had in fact begun the wake after being put in the freezer to sedate them. They spill from the fresh meat down her legs appearing to be assembling themselves into the pattern of a womb and fallopian tubes across her purple raiment. *Fulfilment* (2015) was for Edenmont 'another way of creating out of pain 'If I cannot have children my art is another way of dreaming reality' The image is full of hope, she is not alone, one child is sleeping one is suckling. This is an image of peace and tranquillity; nothing must disturb her constructed Eden on the bed of withered but still beautiful blooms.

Edenmont's ability to transport us through the corridors of art history, through dialogues with myths, the nude and the female gaze is always firmly rooted firmly in her own aesthetic. In *Eternity* (2008) she is naked, foetal, her vulnerable flesh and her ribs echoing the exposed frame of the bed, she is a new Ophelia turning herself away from the world. The black bed was stripped and put in chemical to make it look rusty and as she explained '...it represents those nights when you cannot sleep however comfortable or expensive the bed, I am getting old together with the bed, they are speaking together like a pain in the stomach'.

I end on *Enemy* (2009) Edenmont at her most brave resurrected by and in, the very enactment of her fears, the radical suspension of life and death captured by her camera. Like so many of Edenmont's works it was anchored to a memory. One of her friends had hanged himself from the ceiling leaving three children, recalling her own depressive moments, she decided to see if it were possible to enact what might drive someone to end

their life. This shoot needed careful planning with each of the team having particular responsibility. The noose was placed round Edenmont's neck, its traditional eight coils making it difficult to loosen and tighten. The shots clearly show the trauma her breathing was in, the person in charge of the rope had stepped out momentarily to attend her crying baby: In quick succession the woman attending to her hair realised Edenmont was in difficulties and pulled hard on the rope releasing it in the wrong direction, by the time it was loosened Edenmont had fainted with her neck showed bruising for days later. What we see is the artist in charge of her destiny, her wilful creative force, her head thrown back, her face turning purple as her lungs struggle, her legs appear from her swaddled garment as if from a chrysalis, she is pushing against her enemy, the terrifying black void.

Edenmont has always played hide and seek with us. In *Piece of Me* she stares out of her Self Portraits, confronting and challenging with creative force. We find her in Cranach the Elder, the German Renaissance, the Pre Raphaelites, and Tracey Emin but we are chasing shadows as we try to anchor her. She is both herself, her dreams, her fears desires and her loneliness. Edenmont's self-portraits are a trail of deflecting mirrors unflinchingly held up to us so we too can see and share her pain wrapped in the raiment's of artistic beauty.

Like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel

Never ending or beginning on an ever spinning reel

As the images unwind, like the circles that you find

In the windmills of your mind (Alan and Marilyn Bergman 1968)