

WETTERLING GALLERY

Eternal Memories

The sufferings of memory are exacerbated by similarities.

- Gustave Kahn

There is in Nathalia Edenmont's new butterfly series *Eternal Seduction*, an almost delirious intoxication in the colours and forms, in the mass of butterfly wings painstakingly glued and collaged, then photographed with her large format camera and mirrored in huge glowing panels; the fragility and luminosity of the wings preserved in the vibrant shimmering and glossy surface of her artworks. The juxtapositions of jewel like complexity are rendered with a fantastic and magical intensity, like the Symbolists of the nineteenth century, there is in the art she creates a transcending of the everyday, and an opening up into the marvellous realms of the mind.

Butterflies have long fascinated Edenmont, she recalls early memories of chasing but never catching them as a small child, wanting to gaze on their elusive beauty close up, conjuring up an image in my mind of *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly* (1756) by Thomas Gainsborough. I recall Edenmont's simpler butterfly compositions such as *Self Portrait (Wheat Stalk)* (2005) or *End* (2006) delicate wings attached to a rope or a stalk, allegories of life and portraiture against plain backgrounds.

Nature has always pulsed its way through Edenmont's photographic artworks, entangled with symbolic threads of memory, but now there is a transformation in her intricate new works, a metamorphosis, as if the complexity of her thoughts and practice have become inhabited by new worlds and vistas of extraordinary inventiveness. Her current creations are still wrought from nature, fashioned from

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hundreds of delicate and sumptuous butterfly wings into intoxicating patterns in glorious and strange assemblages. She seems to have the ability to transport us through the corridors of art history, from the symbolic vanitas paintings of butterflies to those of Van Gogh, Odilon Redon, Jean Dubuffet and Damien Hirst, but the subject matter of her art is always stamped with her distinctive aesthetic signature. The magnified, multicoloured and magnificent wings and tails of her selected insects glowing with light, are transported from her original collages to her huge photographic prints on the wall, nature caught, mirrored and revived from its slumbering death, a simulacra of life.

The symbolist artist Redon suggested when speaking of his painting *Butterflies* from 1910 said that one should do as nature does, 'with its gift of delicious sensuality, create diamonds, gold, sapphires, agates, precious metal, silk, flesh...' Edenmont uses the wings of her ephemeral insects as a jewelled palette of pigments. She has always been attracted to the multi-layered symbolism and allegorical meanings imbued in these ephemeral insects: Historically the Greek goddess of the soul Psyche has butterfly wings, in classical antiquity the soul leaves the body in the shape of a butterfly: They evoke beauty, fragility, purity and sexuality, birth and resurrection and are both a symbol of a wandering spirit and reminders of our own capabilities to transform and change. The Bengali poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore described the butterfly as counting not 'months but moments and has time enough' their lifespan on average is two weeks.

Butterflies then, are fitting symbols for Edenmont's work where themes of nature weave their way through her complex compositions, entangled with symbolic threads of memory, of births and deaths, of traumas and visions. The butterfly wings are Edenmont's important symbolic artistic material, but there are other influences at work that inform her intense and magical photographs. When she was ten years of age Edenmont's mother took her to the Yalta Historic and Literature Museum where in one room, to her delight, she peeped through a hole into a kaleidoscope and was entranced with the magical effect of the fragmented mirroring, a strange multi-coloured and surreally seductive world that she glimpsed

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inside. This magical realm that she spied stayed lodged in her mind, emerging in her recent compositions. Most of the butterfly collages were created during Edenmont's lockdown in Sweden where she has lived for decades and latterly during the tensions of the war in Ukraine, [she was born in Yalta] making the tortuous discipline with which she escapes into her work even more poignant; somehow the uncertainty of life has accelerated her intuitive responses so she feels somehow more sensitised and effective than before. Henry de Groux the nineteenth century Belgium Symbolist artist talks of the kind of work ethic that Edenmont embraces, when he describes the act of making work as an 'awe-inspiring commitment [a] sort of silent, solemn duel in which the mind has to be concentrated in a fearless discipline'.

Edenmont often sees her works realised in her dreams, waking and dashing to get her ideas down before they drift away. She only starts the gluing of the butterflies when she is tired, as she needs to override her restless brain which otherwise 'would think too much and put obstacles in [her] way'.

She describes the sensation of creating her collages as 'I feel like somebody's using me. (...) And I learned as long as I'm not falling down with tiredness I can create otherwise, if [I am not tired] my brain says "Oh, no, all these boxes [of butterflies] all these wings, all these chemicals, and putting them together? Come on. Don't even think about it". So many times I tried to start working earlier in the day, so that I can do more and my brain says "no". So I need to catch myself and force myself to that room and then need to be quite tired. And then I stay there until I need to fall down and sleep'.

In this state she is the artist as divining clairvoyant, her collages created on a table with the edge of her work close to her stomach, connecting with her body, this is the edge that she mirrors and the one that seems to naturally work. Sometimes the layering of the wings rise to two centimetres which lends the definition to her final magnified art works, their scale allowing the viewer to be drawn into their uncanny vistas. Edenmont suggests that with the mirroring she just 'knows there is something special there but when I turn them [to mirror for the final art works] I'm always

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right'. She never knows how many times she will mirror, and completes this stage '...almost in a trance otherwise my brain is an enemy'.

One such revelation emerged during the session when she photographed and mirrored *Zhiviete* (2022) and was surprised to see the first Cyrillic letter appear for *жінка*, or woman or *ЖИВИТЕ* (*Zhiviete*) 'to live'. She was equally amazed to clearly see the hybrid form that emerged from the intricate layering of different sizes of wings, a mythical female with the head of a bird, a strange Chimera with breasts and reproductive organs which she likened to an unexpected self-portrait. Echoes of the legend of Alkonost also seem to whisper their presence, the female headed bird of Slavic folklore, who makes the most beautiful noise so that those who hear her 'forget everything they know and never want anything again'. Edenmont intimates that during the 'act of gluing the dead butterflies, I was always thinking "life, life"' and now they live in a new metamorphosis, somehow birthed from her consciousness. Sometimes she suggests people question her, asking if she has some kind of sketch for her designs, but her response is 'no', she sometimes writes down the Latin names of the butterflies, if she wants to use them extensively in the same artwork.

Edenmont's intuitive method results in composition's such as *In the Deep* (2022) the surface appearing ambiguously like an strange underwater scene, a delirium of sweeping shapes, of hallucinatory flowers and leaves, all fashioned from layer upon layer of overlapping butterfly wings from different species. The shoals of butterfly tails are like luminescent tropical fish, a transmutation that fills the huge artwork with life and movement. Yet looking closely the work becomes almost like a psychological Rorschach test as one begins to see strange visions, two monkeys appear and a winged devil. It is as if Edenmont has created her own hallucination, a mystical underwater land of restless myth and legend. She had been studying the tails of the *Papillio Blumei* for ten years but she had rejected the butterfly as being too big to use advising herself 'don't touch it – don't buy it'. But suddenly when she stopped thinking, her hand suggested a solution as she glued them on top of each

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other with just the tails showing, providing a luscious three dimensionality to the image. One of the characteristics of butterflies is camouflage and mimicry and Edenmont plays with this, the panels of the huge photographs become arranged into strange visual narratives. The scale of the works is enormous compared to the original size of the wings, so we are able to see markings that would not usually be discernible, the juxtaposition of complementary colours, the red and greens, yellow and blues playing off each other in a shimmering dance.

Some of the images are almost alarming for example *Under the Surface* (2022) as if one has entered into the thorax of a mythical and uncanny insect, the powdery surface of the wings presented in mesmerising detail. It is as if the viewer is caught in an enveloping surreal embrace as our eyes rove restlessly over the patina of this magnificent and exotic insect conjured from Edenmont's fertile imagination.

As we examine each image in turn from *Big Bang* (2022) with its cosmic vortex at its centre to *Freak* (2020) with its dominance of golds and reds we begin to see more, the photographs seducing us with their strange narratives. As we study details, we are forming from our own imagination our personal lexicon of bizarre and energised hybrid animals, birds and insects. In *From Dusk to Dawn* (2022) we are in a world of curious fruits for example. We recognise in her works familiar insects and bugs from the natural world given unexpected visual twists, as in a dream or fairy tale, all is not as it seems.

Finally in *Eternal Seduction* (2022) Edenmont's work reaches a pinnacle of visual excess. This is a work that she began in 2012 when she discovered her new way of working, but did not want to tell anyone, and this is an image she finds endlessly fascinating. Partly because right at the centre is a symbolic Faberge egg, partly because it was an image she dreamt about and hastened to complete, and because many of the colours of former works reside there; the yellow of her mother's dress, strange blooms that she has fashioned gowns from, the red of her miscarriage blood, all conceived from hundreds of different wings, an orchestra of colour. Butterflies become flowers or insects, animals or jewels tantalising and teasing us to penetrate the surface of the photographic print and delve into new territories.

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Edenmont's compositions are created in endless hours, bending over, painstakingly gluing, creating an almost automatic rhythm in her body, as tiredness invades her mind. Often she has pain from the repetitions of the actions she is performing 'it looks easy but it is so difficult, they are like psychological puzzles'. She subconsciously draws the work out, expelling it from herself creating her own luminous nirvanas. Having fashioned much of her art out of nature whether flowers leaves or butterflies she is often amazed at how nature can create such extraordinary beauty in an insect or the structure of a wing.

Ultimately the symphony of colours and compositions, the seductive mythological landscapes, ephemerality caught and fixed by the camera, produces a magical and supernatural hyperreality. Edenmont's beautiful visual score of hope and survival and metamorphosis.

Jean Wainwright

2022