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MOTHER

Nathalia Edenmont

Nathalia Edenmont constantly propels herself towards new artistic frontiers. Her photographs are always visually seductive, but in her new series of works *Eggs*, something exceptional and beautiful has happened: a cathartic, transformative journey which is both artistic and also very personal. Enduring strength, beauty and hope but also trauma, loss, and suffering are all captured in essential material form: that of empty and carefully cracked goose eggs. These powerful images are not just magnificent, monolithic sculptural structures, but a river of emotional evocation, moving from the disgusting, shocking ugliness of things considered rejects and worthless, to artworks of great beauty and purity: a metaphorical journey from trauma, loss and unbearable pain to a sense of peace and resolution.

In 2012, Edenmont received the devastating news that her own eggs would not be able to produce a child. The shocking finality of these words, which followed a distressing series of miscarriages and tests, was so intense that it caused her to faint. This harrowing and traumatic event was, however, to become the wellspring of her new *Eggs* series. Deciding that if she could not produce life with her own eggs, she would create exquisite art out of birds' eggs, Edenmont identified a farmer who bred beautiful rare geese. Visiting his farm, the farmer was captivated by her creative idea, and subsequently sent her boxes containing hundreds of eggs, surprisingly refusing any payment, despite her protestations. On excitedly examining them Edenmont found that although they looked normal on the outside, inside the contents were putrid and sulfuric. Poignantly, she recalls how it had not crossed her mind that the eggs available to her would be what she describes as the 'rejected eggs', which could not produce viable geese, the farmer's refusal of payment signifying their worthlessness. Nevertheless, demonstrating sensitivity and resilience, Edenmont felt that rather than discarding them, she should 'cleanse' the eggs of their putrid contents. The process of

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draining them for storing was gruesome, since not only did the drilled hole release an overwhelming, sickening smell of death, but the contents were full of yolk, bacteria, and blood, some containing partially formed feathers and debris. Emptying them was a horrible and disgusting task that she and her assistant undertook by hand. She had to discard some of the eggs as the contents were too difficult to extract, but the process of emptying them brought the realisation that the unfertilised eggs were a metaphor for her own traumatic experiences and that she was expelling the death from the eggs in order to give them life. However, she was finding the reminder of her own autobiographical sufferings too distressing, so at that point abandoned the artistic project and instead proceeded with other series of works.

As often happens in Edenmont's oeuvre, she found meaning in the 'beautiful objects' many years later. She had been creating artworks with beautiful, empty, rare coloured shells of tree snails, attempting to create a new species of hybrid flower by combining the shells with wings of butterflies. Although she had used eggs in her artworks for many years - both the yolks and sometimes the eggs themselves - it was only when working with these snail shells that she was startlingly reminded of her stored goose eggs. In feverish excitement, she set her tree snail compositions aside and began working on *Eggs*. In a transformative act, her decades of delicate skill working with the extreme fragility of butterfly wings was transferred to a completely different technique: that of using the range of power in her hands to crack the resilient goose shells. The now 'beautiful objects' set in train an explosive trail of creativity, the resulting *Eggs* seeming to represent a kind of cathartic expulsion and resolution of the trauma of her infertility, transforming unbearable pain and loss into beauty, acceptance, and a quiet strength, which cast a new perspective on her suffering. Edenmont likened the reimagining of her artistic material to the process of 'sitting on [the eggs] like a bird', conceiving herself as 'a woman...embarking on a journey, departing away from the past to a new, magical, and symbolic beginning'. This is Edenmont's gift: her ability to use her artistic imagination to transform and resolve personal suffering through the creation of powerfully evocative compositions. She speaks poignantly about the *Eggs* series and the personal meaning they have for her; of how although she was told that her eggs 'were not good enough to create a beautiful life', this is what she has now succeeded in creating. She continues, 'I was

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holding onto the hope that the universe would send me the possibility to be a mother, I have never given up that hope, but with time I just accepted the absence of this possibility'. The *Eggs*, she explains, 'bubbled up inside me': they are 'not just eggs, because each egg, glowing in the bright light, is a portrait'.

To create her 'portraits', Edenmont moves her fingers and palms around the tough goose eggshells in a circular motion as one might caress a womb carrying a child, but then she presses with her fingers and thumb in order to crack the shell, the careful action of her hand working to produce different depths and amounts of cracks. Her working method is totally immersive, intense, time-consuming, and at times frustrating, since she does not have the same control over the process that she had in her other series, there being far more elements of trial and error. Many of the experiments did not work, the formation of the cracks, the fault lines in the shells, not aesthetically pleasing to her. But she persevered, trying again and again to tap and press the shells to achieve a balance between destruction and creation, retaining just a precious few to photograph and losing several hundred eggs in the process. The activity is relentless: Once the crack has started 'you cannot halt it, it will run its course'. The resulting artworks, where each shell appears to be suspended in an infinite black universe, is a potent evocation of life and loss.

Edenmont's work has always contained resonances of art history, like the suspended egg in Piero della Francesca's painting *The Brera Madonna* (1472-1474), a symbol of birth and fertility; or perhaps our thoughts drift to the cracked egg with the emerging narcissus flower in Salvador Dali's 1937 *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. We have the sculptural form of Constantin Brancusi's *The Beginning of the World* (1924), representing the mystery of human life and perfect beauty, Andy Warhol's screened multi-coloured eggs of 1982, or Jeff Koons's *Cracked Egg (Blue)* (1994-2006). Edenmont's *Eggs* are, however, entirely unique, her process informed and deeply imbued with her feminine experiences and suffering; of being a woman unable to bring a child to life. Her *Eggs* were achieved by a circuitous route, reinventing and transforming a genre she dealt with for many years in early works, such as her surreal *Happy* (2003) with mice emerging from eggs, *Kira* (2003), where the yolk of an egg

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replaces the yellow disc florets of a daisy, or *Beginnings* (2004), where a prosthetic eye stares out at us from a cracked white egg. But now the backgrounds of these earlier works are replaced by what she describes as 'black holes', and there are delicate crevices and deep fractures in the shells' surfaces revealing an absence at the core, the contents already hatched or never there. She relates how the haunting photographs 'gave me goose bumps'.

Edenmont's work has always been compellingly dynamic, her autobiographical compositions and assemblages conveying powerful countering forces of purity and suffering. In *Out of Golden Rays of a Fertile Summer Sun* (2024) the simplicity of the dual egg image belies the hours of painstaking labour involved in its creation. The form and contours of the image also appear to echo Edenmont's earlier work, *Mother* (2008), both metaphorically and abstractly mirroring the innocent virgin protectively holding her baby surrounded by an elliptical mandorla of pink ruched material, like a large pink egg. The sculptural cracks and jagged edges in *Out of Golden Rays of a Fertile Summer Sun*, partly illuminated with shards a golden light, both reveal and protectively 'cradle' a perfect, pristine hen's egg, an image of strength but at the same time exquisitely delicate and pure. There is something achingly poignant about the piece of cracked shell wrapped around the bottom of the egg, like an arm protecting an infant. The fertile egg suggests hope born from Edenmont's suffering, but also conveys metaphoric significance: the goose could never lay the smaller hen's egg, an echo of the virgin birth and the complexities of infertility.

If *Out of Golden Rays of a Fertile Summer Sun* reveals sections of the eggshell almost impossibly folded back on itself, with sharp jagged edges like the protective thorny roses surrounding the fairytale Sleeping Beauty, then *Out of Beauty* (2023) is the opposite: Here, the egg's casing has been repeatedly pressed until the force of the artist's thumbs and fingers have created cracks and fissures imploding in on themselves. The fault lines and deep crevices could also be read as mirroring the life lines on Edenmont's hands. There is no doubt here that life has been extinguished within the crumpled, crushed, but still intact form. We read the two works in opposition to each other: in one, life, in the other, loss.

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Out of Hell (2024) also contains reverberations of Edenmont's previous works, such as *Lucifer* (2004) and *Burned* (2005): Her darkest moments of realisation that she will be childless are now compressed, processed, and emotionally distilled into a black egg suspended against the impenetrable darkness of space. The egg is emerging as if weightless out of a background Edenmont describes as a 'black hole', an astronomical phenomenon where the pull of gravity is so strong that even light cannot get out, also a symbol of despair. The inertness of the egg is mesmerising but also evokes a nameless dread, an uncanny unease in the spreading cracks. The fortuitous positioning and careful lighting convey the sense that a form will emerge from the central womb of the egg, yet some of the cracks appear sealed making it difficult for that to happen. Edenmont had wanted to create a black egg because she needed to express something that was 'coming from my gut', from deep inside. The haunting image evokes the chronic feelings of emptiness brought about by her traumatic life. In order to achieve its particular shade of black, the egg itself has undergone a transformative process. It gains its chromatic colouring by being placed in natural Onsen water from the hot springs in Japan, the black coating on the shell achieved by the mixture of minerals that are present in the water.

While there is an uneasy stasis in Edenmont's *Out of Hell*, in contrast *Out of Youth* (2024) is a cry for perfection: The egg almost seems carved from white marble, suspended in the contrasting black, the lighting from the side making it appear pure and beautiful yet simultaneously *unheimlich* - both familiar and surreal. Recalling Edenmont's *Obsession* (2008), with its two eggs anchored against a light grey background attached by a shadow, *Out of Youth* performs a transformative act with the egg, newly conceived as a sculptural white monolith. However, in the poignant and perhaps enigmatic title we also find a parallel emotional journey. When Edenmont tried to adopt a child, she was told she was too old, but now, as an artist, she has adopted the perfect egg, her photograph fixing it in time, suspended between hope and rebirth.

In *Out of Comfort Zone* (2024) the egg now has two large cracks on its surface, one at the top the other round the middle. For Edenmont, this is an important work that

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links to one of her other self-portraits, *Wheat Stalk* (2005), and is a poignant reminder of her resilience in a life that has brought loss in many forms, not least losing her parents as a young teenager, having to leave her birth country behind, multiple fetal losses, and her infertility. The egg is broken but still standing, the cracks symbolic of the trauma and terrible emotional wounds she has suffered.

If *Out of Comfort Zone* represents the enduring themes of trauma, loss, fragility and resilience that connect Edenmont's work over time, then *Inside Out* (2024) is at the other dynamic edge. Both *Inside Out* and *Piss Off* (2024) are more challenging than Edenmont's other eggs, not only in their titles but in the implicated subject matter. In *Inside Out* (2024) we have infertility, fetal loss, and disturbing reminders of her self-portrait *Only Child* (2012) and her triptych *Holy Ghost, Conscious Mind and Lost Soul* (2015). The defiant Edenmont in a bloodied raiment holding a bundle of raw meat covered in maggots to her breast in *Only Child* and the cradled forms of babies saturated in blood in *Holy Ghost, Conscious Mind and Lost Soul* have now transmogrified into a blood-stained and cracked egg. Initially Edenmont was not sure that the egg could evoke the overwhelming emotions that she wished for, but the process she developed of taking her own blood, mixing it with urine, and boiling the already cracked egg in it, produced an extraordinary effect. She also realised that the completion of the work on 20th August 2024 corresponded to the exact day she had undergone surgery twelve years previously following a miscarriage, when she had been 'scraped and cleaned' in a similar way to her rotten egg cleansing. What then do we see as viewers? Our eyes are drawn to the spider's web of cracks: There are fissures and darkness, the cracks filled with congealed and clotted blood. A centrifugal force drags us into the core of the image where there are shadowy suggestions of presence and absence, the eye inexorably drawn to the centre of the egg where there is a visual sense of looking down on a tightly furled rosebud that has failed to bloom. Yet in amongst this scene of death and despair, the highlighted gold edges, an unexpected result of the boiling, bring to mind the Japanese tradition of *Kintsugi* (golden repair), where the cracks and breaks in ceramics are mended with Urushi lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, embracing the flawed or broken to create a renewed, beautiful life.

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Piss Off (2024) bears similarities to *Inside Out* with its extraordinary presence. However, although it appears to be an angry work, in the context of the series as a whole there is also a sense of resolution, of a desire to put an end to years of emptiness and pain by finding new meaning in the creation of life, beauty, and hope through art. Edenmont was surprised by the emotions that emerged in its creation: 'It has been many years [since discovering my infertility] and I was surprised to find it still in my work, I did not plan it this way, it just emerged'. The egg was coated in urine to create its colour, an effect which once again took her years to achieve. Some of the edges appear as if etched in gold, but our eyes are drawn to where the shell is missing, and we glimpse disturbing, shadowy areas that seem to resemble veins and dried specks of splattered blood. Edenmont has often favoured an earthy palette of browns and greens and there seem to be allusions to earlier self-portraits such as *Motherland*, *Propaganda* and *Full of Life*, all from 2016, in the urine-coated shell. The marbled patina is also a reminder of ancient bronzes, such as the decorated ostrich egg from the 7th century BC found in the Isis Tomb in Italy. However it is the texture and colour of *Piss Off*, the suggestions of decomposition and time passed, which create the startling effect. The egg seems almost alive, an uncanny hovering relic, with Edenmont's strong and assertive title unleashing the tethers of her reproductive traumas.

The perspective of *Out of the Hole* (2024) is significantly different from both *Piss Off* and other works in the series. Edenmont has always looked at the specimens she has worked with, such as butterflies and snails, from unusual perspectives, creating hyper-real images from surreal viewpoints which produce strange metamorphoses. Her other eggs have had identifiable ovoid shapes, but *Out of the Hole* is photographed from the underside, which alters its shape and the way that we view it. As we stare into the centre of the shell, with its glowing yellow iris, we again experience both recognition and a marvellous sense of simultaneously seeing and shifting our perspective. The shape of the disrupted shell with its softly glowing centre appears to be a strange echo of earlier works such as *Kira* (2003), whose soft, natural white daisy petals surrounding a healthy, shining egg yolk are now transformed, the petals sharp and torn, the central disc floret ripped out, leaving only an empty glowing shadow. The strategically placed lighting producing the inner glow suggests the practice of 'candling', where a strong

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light is shone through an egg to determine the healthy development of an embryo and reveal any cracks in the shell: if imperfect, the egg is destroyed. There is something alluringly magnetic about the composition in the way it draws the eye through the egg's dangerous edges to the light, making the destroyed, cracked shell beautiful again. It is as if Edenmont is moving round her subject matter in psychological ways, evolving and discovering different perspectives. She is searching for something extraordinary, honing in then stepping back to enact a magical creation. Like *Out of the Hole, Out of Shape* (2024) is photographed from another portentous viewpoint, its lower half smashed and its contents drained out and expelled.

As I look at this series, breaths and whispers of past works drift into my consciousness, which I cannot escape. In *Out of Energy* (2024) I seem to glimpse *Madonna* (2006), where Edenmont's model Carolina innocently cradles a swaddled child in a christening robe, now a hollow plaster sarcophagus. In *Out of Energy* the centre of the egg is a void through which we see only startling darkness framed by razor sharp edges. The image evokes the vestiges of mortality lingering at the edge of vulnerability, the hold on life sometimes so fragile. The title reminds us of the energy needed to create, and of Edenmont's drive to push herself to her limits. There is no glow now just a gaping emptiness.

Many of the eggs do radiate hope from the inner glow in the cavity recesses, however. *Out of Wishes* (2024), with its sweeping curved cracks, hides an inner luminous core. Edenmont has always recognised that you can find new life where none previously existed: that is part of her creative dynamic, to create and communicate something meaningful. For her, the very act of caressing the eggs until they crack makes them 'more alive and beautiful to me'. There is also something enigmatic in *Out of Wishes*: It is perfectly still, the cracks resting in equilibrium, hovering like wishes on the edges of action.

Standing in front of Edenmont's work looking at these exquisite images, each one with its own personality, I think of the journey and the way that her ideas are given life in

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this series. With their cracks and folds, their fissures and their fractures, their jagged sharp edges, the glimpses of an inner golden light, and their bright sculptural highlights, the eggs convey both strength and fragility. Forged from Edenmont's fearless discipline and captured with her large format camera, their 'beautiful life' has been achieved through an extraordinary gestation.

As I part from Edenmont's work I am reminded of the Greek legend of the Minotaur imprisoned in the dark underground labyrinth on Crete. Like Theseus, the *Eggs* have been a way for Edenmont to 'kill the monster' and be led by a golden thread out of the cave of her past loss to create something new and alive. As Henry David Thoreau, the naturalist and philosopher, expressed, 'Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it will come and sit softly on your shoulder'. Edenmont's *Eggs* are a rebirth, they are life emerging from the catharsis of her thoughts and dreams, bringing release and freedom: She has reimagined hope.

Dr Jean Wainwright, 2024.

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