



Treasures of a Drifter

IDA EKBLAD

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INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

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There is no surer welcome for a graffiti artist than the humble iron gate: ornamental, industrial, and imposing, these barred portals present irresistible frontiers that invite as much as they repel. For Norwegian artist Ida Ekblad the fence circling a bus depot in Oslo was once an oblique point of entry, a place into which she could drift and paint murals on the walls and roof, leave her mark, and turn a municipal complex into a summer hideout with her peers. Ekblad has carried this dauntless free spirit into adulthood, creating paintings, sculptures, and installations, as well as building communities that are improvisational, nonhierarchical, collaged, and coltish. Staying true to her industrial-inspired roots, Ekblad's artistic process often includes foraging discarded materials during *dérives* ("drifts"), a foundational term in psychogeography for unplanned journeys through urban environments.

In this sense, Ekblad is indebted to Guy Debord, who led a radical group of Marxist artists and academics in Paris during the late 1950s known as the Situationist International. The Situationists harbored a complicated and often contradictory relationship with the concept of the spectacle, which they defined

as social ties having been contained in objects of capitalism. For Ekblad, however, foraging is more animistic than political: "Everything's so full of promise when it's new, like any new commodity," she told *Frieze* in 2015. "But you're so aware of the passing of life when you're in a scrapyard. Sometimes, I'm drawn to just walking around graveyards and looking at the names and thinking that life's about passing away. But it's more brutal in a scrapyard because you actually see the corpses of things." Drifter-artists favor the *dérive* as a means of connecting to their immediate surroundings outside of direct capitalist consumption. After all, walking around a city with intentional aimlessness is as much an act of rebellion as it is a ramble. The drift can be considered a ritual for sparking the senses, which are ordinarily dulled by the routine of living in what Debord defined as "the society of the spectacle," the dominant framework of civilization today.

When on a *dérive*, one's eyes and hands (one's entire sensorial infrastructure, in fact) must remain open to catching anything and everything, and many of Ekblad's assemblages are the culmination of such



Opposite page: **IDA EKBLAD**, *A Deadly Slumber of All Forces*, 2021, bronze, paint, stainless steel, 703 × 101 × 500 cm. Photo by Vegard Kleven. Courtesy Kistefos Museum. © Ida Ekblad / BONO 2023.

Portrait of **IDA EKBLAD** by Jacqueline Landvik, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Peder Lund. © Ida Ekblad / BONO 2023.

journeys, including destinations such as Freetown Christiania in Copenhagen or the fast-gentrifying London suburb of Clapham. Capitalism often leaves us with literal heaps of inspiration to wade through on a *dérive*, where the pedestrian can quickly pass from “ambiance to ambiance” within a few dense urban blocks. There is rarely a paucity of material, and Ekblad’s evocative shopping cart, a symbol of capitalist excess and stockpiling, transports these objects from states of rubbish to valued artwork and commodity. Her *Track Paintings* (2013)—made by running shopping carts weighed down by varying amounts of scrap metal over the canvas-lined floor in jagged lines and loops (with their wheels engraved with lines of her poetry)—connected her found materials with performance, resulting in abstracted paintings and sculptures.

In the latent spirit of psychogeography and its errant urban wanderings, everything is connected, everything has a through-line. The iron gates that tried to keep Ekblad out of the forbidden spaces of her youth eventually became the hinges connecting other points of her work later on. *Sun-bewildered Tempered Tantrummed (Kons) (Constellations)* (2015) is a fence so abstract and porous that it better serves as a framing device for a grand, contorted entrance: a simple white frame is topped with a geometric staircase of sharp squares for walking up to the top and down again, with the letters of KONS written in fanciful script above that. The gate itself is a loose crochet work of gnarled, loosened metal parts and wires in crayon-bright colors, including a flattened cherry-red door, giving the impression that if we walk through them we might enter a destabilizing, risky

Turn Your Eyes to Sleep, 2019, cast bronze, 255×240×110 cm. Photo by Nelly Rodriguez. Courtesy the artist and Kunsthalle Zürich. © Ida Ekblad / BONO 2023.





Future of Female Form, 2020, oil on linen, 185 × 144.5 × 5.5 cm.
Photo by Flavio Karrer. Courtesy the artist and Karma International. © Ida Ekblad / BONO 2023.

dimension not yet visible from the sunny side of the fence. The dainty charm of *Filles Interdites (Gate)* (2017)—a haphazard parade of wiry metallic critters, an elegant hand in *mudra* position, trippy magical mushrooms, and flowers crawling over a golden-bronze gate made of swerving plumbing pipes holding up a gigantic pair of verdigris cartoonish bug eyes—are all tied together with a bow at its center. Meanwhile, *Turn Your Eyes to Sleep* (2019) is something like the second set of gates that follow *Filles Interdites* on our way further down the rabbit hole. Here, the critters walking the ledge are larger, thornier, and more menacing, the cartoon pupils more contracted, anxious, and yellow. It is a hesitant hospitality, a jittery point of reception more warning sign than grand entrance, a last chance to turn back before descending down the spiral.

For her sculpture *Madam is Fucking Madame, Sir* (2015), Ekblad quilted various scraps of fencing into a rusty, grayscale collage draped with found fabric scraps that were bleached by Los Angeles's relentless summer sun. Lacy, white, wrought iron intersects with what appears to be a twin-sized bed frame on its hind

legs and the carcass of a bicycle frame stripped of its more valuable parts, are decorated with corners of a car fender crumpled after a collision. The structure is softened by its one nonmetallic element: a cartoon-adorned T-shirt that Ekblad has painted in her signature style. The titular piece of her 2022 exhibition at Karma International Gallery was made on the fly, in town. The works she produced in her Oslo studio, meanwhile, did not clear customs in time for the opening, so she spent the days leading up to it combing through junkyards for raw material. She returns to heavy metals often, as if the materials are a grounding force for the airy elements in her compositions. She finds metal in places ranging from New York's Rockaway Beach to the municipal scrapyards in Oslo, where she staged her 2009 film *In Exile from the Mineral Kingdom*. In this film, Ekblad clanged metals to chime against one another before scaling the landfill mountain, while a voiceover of the artist reading her poetry played. The razor-edged crags proved to be a rich source for fishing for metal scraps with which to weld her gates, carnival-themed

park benches, and installations; the resulting work is a culmination of the trek as much as it is *the* trek.

Two-dimensional works on canvas take on a new physicality in her painting-sculptures. *A Deadly Slumber of All Forces* (2021), a ten-meter-high sculpture of four intersecting painting planes situated in a forest outside the Kistefos Museum in Jevnaker, Norway, is nauseatingly turbulent in its abstraction: brusque blue-and-white Breton stripes are thrown against a red-and-white checkerboard and muddled green plaids and landscapes, each roughly carved side bursting out from one of her previous paintings to veer in their own direction in a combustion of cheerful flatness. This psychedelic mirage among the trees is a multidimensional collage that proliferates perspectives from any given point, laying out her abstract images using a Cubist format. She borrows the blue-and-white-striped hurricane forms, sly yellow slivers, and pulsing blood-red spills that make up the work's spine from her own emotional painting *A grain of sulphur in the blood* (2018), while blunt lines in verdant greens

and uncontaminated whites and reds press up against each other in other corners to form intersections of color-blocking.

UTSIKT FRA DET UTILGJENDELIGE (2020), a six-meter-tall bronze painted sculpture that she parked outside the Kunstneres Hus in Oslo for a year, echoed Ekblad's chimerical ovens that were lined up inside. The 2021 exhibition "Girl Fires Up Stove," titled after fellow-Norwegian Edvard Munch's 1883 painting of the same name, was a survey in which sculptures were the stanzas and metals its rhyming words. The humble, soot-black appliance is an emblem of home for many Norwegians: the oven, known for its tall, chimney-like tube that offers more surface area (and therefore more heat) from the fireplace, animates the Scandinavian concept of *kos*—a wood-burning fire symbolizes optimism, a way of envisioning an end to the brutally long winter, as many apartments in Norwegian cities run on a wood-burning iron heater. Just like traditional 19th-century models and following the country's long tradition of crafting iron, Ekblad's ornate line of stoves



Madam is Fucking Madame, Sir, 2015, welded metal, bicycle frame and chain, T-shirts, puff paint, 188 x 152.5 x 137.25 cm. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy the artist and Karma International. © Ida Ekblad / BONO 2023.



The Real Flesh-Eater, 2021, oil on canvas, 160 × 125 cm. Photo by Uli Holz. Courtesy the artist and Peder Lund. © Ida Ekblad / BONO 2023.

are covered in figure reliefs, coral, lines of her own poetry, headless figures, and fabled underwater sea creatures. At Kunsternes Hus, the ovens were lined up in a cavernous hall, rhyming but not identical; each one was a hearth for the modern dream home.

Her paintings both expand into sensorial dimensions and glow in their severe, graphic flatness. Incorporating drawing techniques that make use of her now-signature puff paint, a playful texture and method she borrowed from industrial-level textile production (as well as her own style of dressing up cloth in the screen-printing studio she set up in her home as a teenager), most often seen on airbrushed T-shirts, readymade images, textures, and objects. A paintbrush could be anything from hosiery to a plastic bag with a corner cut off, while her palette can appear lifted from the sky. “I have thought that the twilight sometimes feels longer than the totality of the day. That during dusk, the movement from sunlight to blue and from blue to blackness holds the colors hostage. Transitional light clouds the hues and dims them. Calms them. Colors are greyed and put to sleep,” she wrote in her statement for “Flyable, Rideable,” her 2022 exhibition at Karma International in Zurich. “They are paintings from that other place.” Ekblad employs everything

from park benches, impossible natural figures and beings, technological biosystems, or lace curtains hanging in her grandmother’s house. Meanwhile, the window of a church in Italy, manga characters, and 1970s wood paneling on plywood, as well as the art history she absorbed as a student, develop into visual references recalling the work of Abstract Expressionist or CoBrA artists, making her open-source paintings better suited to the open field than the white wall. “I like that kind of choppy, clumsy, thick surface,” she remarked during a 2019 talk at Kunsthalle Zurich.

Paintings titled after lines of Ekblad’s own prose stand as concrete, material poetry of their own. In a recent interview with Louisiana Channel (part of Denmark’s Louisiana Museum of Modern Art), Ekblad explained: “When I leave the studio, I’m kind of manic. Everything I see is processed in the same way that I’m processing when I’m in the studio. The negative spaces between leaves and branches become a stroke, and the pattern that a car has made in the water when it’s raining becomes part of a painting. I’m finding my own paintings out in the world.” The same could be said of Ekblad’s carnal, auspicious work, in any realm—it comes together from what is cleared out and brushed away.