

You are about to see the latest paintings by Agneta Ekholm.

Put aside your phone. Don't be anxious. Social media won't shut down. Facebook will still be there for you later.

These paintings are worth the effort. I assure you, they are.

Yes, they're different to what you are used to. Very different. They force no tangled theories. Ekholm doesn't follow that trend line. She quite consciously makes jargon-free paintings.

Nor is Ekholm one of those insistent people who will push a topical issue. This exhibition is agenda free. There is no urgent message buried within any of her compositions.

You may be puzzled by this. How can a painter not do these things? Nowadays shows by living artists customarily want you to get anxious over a potential danger. Climate change, say, or too many plastic bags, or whether a comet will vaporise the earth next Tuesday.

Instead, Ekholm is one of those artists like Matisse or Vermeer who strive to offer you food for the soul. She is unashamed about this. For her, the entire point of being a painter is to follow her own creative course, always digging deeper into herself. She is not puffed up with self-importance; and this clarity, of her being down to earth, shows in her art.

The source of these paintings is a simple pleasure you will know: the joy, the tranquillity that can fill you when outdoors encountering the natural world.

Childhood memories of snow and wintry ice does fuel Ekholm's work, although mixed in with this are the sand dunes and surf waves near her current home, as well as the adjacent wetlands and river estuary she often roams.

From these modest personal experiences, these moments of inward joy communing with the world as it pulses, the artist extracts her evocative visual forms. They carry the suggestion of ebbing liquids, melting snows, sliding sands, interiors of sea shells, that is, of everyday things in nature that unceasingly flow and change and move.

As you become attuned to these paintings, and if you filter out the madding crowd, you see how they flow so gracefully, how they hook on that pervasive rhythm of natural things. But we are getting ahead here.

Ekholm's rather reductive compositions are elusive, because they do not portray anything. Not even squares, circles, oblongs. There are no clear shapes or contours of forms here, things you can fix on to visually like a tangible entity in pictorial space.

Instead, there are layers of semi-translucent pigment, a sequence of them, which have accumulated one upon another. These are never gathered as regular forms or firm patterns. They are not ordered.

Much is conveyed by the edges of these layers, which describe long slithering curves, poised arcs, sometimes discreet parabolas, always drawing your eye along in fluid rhythms.

In setting down these layers, the artist prefers to work with gradated tones, contrasting a black area with several degrees of off-white which, if you stop and contemplate a composition, can suggest a calm pearlescence. This is emphasised in the works where she has inserted a single pool-like layer of a colour: Veneto yellow, say, or teak brown, or Nordic blue (an echo of an ionised aurora shimmering in the upper atmosphere, perhaps).

By some uncanny perceptual means the visual outcome stirs the viewer inwardly. If you give yourself up to them, the steady authority of her paintings can slowly overwhelm you. It's that perennial puzzle of genuine art, how something as directly physical as a canvas covered with paint reaches across to the soul; how it has emotional content. You find yourself encountering this solitary transport, primed with mood and unspoken meaning.

Ekholm's compositions exude a cool animation that casts you into depths of feeling, like a laid

back passage of jazz by Miles Davis. Stand before her work in a quiet moment, with a recording of his quintet playing something low and moody, and you will experience this. (It's even better for a hopeless case like me if, as I do this, I am allowed to sip a Gimlet, a crisp one with decent gin. That is indulgent pleasure.)

These paintings amount to serenity made visible, a quality few artists have accomplished. Very few. It's rare.

I have been savouring Ekholm's evolving work for nearly two decades, so I do know her paintings are not rushed. If anything, they are taking longer now to make, especially since her work has become more reductive. Because as she matures, and gets steadily better, Ekholm has become a hard taskmaster who demands more of herself. She will not take the easy way; in fact, she never repeats or attempts variations of a successful composition.

If you can look back over Agneta Ekholm's paintings in sequence, you will see how, for her, being creative means keeping it new, means refusing to settle, means constantly giving yourself a fresh challenge.

—Dr Christopher Heathcote