

from top:
Fish Balls in Lobster Sauce,
 1968, silk collage, 121 x 174 cm;
A Painting, 1970, acrylic on board,
 16 x 22 cm; *The Painting School*,
 1970, gouache on silk, 72 x 103
 cm; Marie-Louise Ekman posing
 for the art publication *Paletten*
 issue #1, 1969, photo: Carl Johan
 de Geer

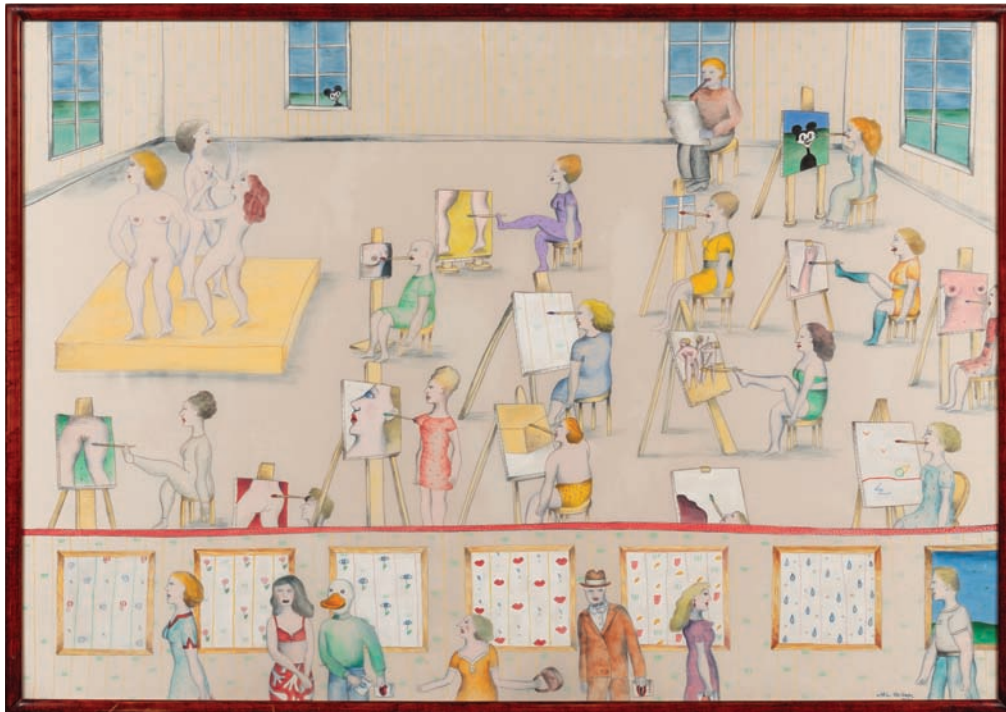
The fundamental metaphor in Marie-Louise Ekman's paintings, objects and films is theatre – roleplay, masks, cross-dressing and set design. This should come as no surprise: she is, after all, the current head of Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre and, since the mid-1970s, has directed a dozen films and three television series. But even in her narrative paintings from 40 years ago, the compositions are theatrical, often involving a scene with characters, be they people or objects, whose bodies are both sexual and intellectual. Most of the time the characters are engaged in relationships in which unexpected, even remarkable, things happen: a naked woman in a house encircled by the extended penis of the naked man next to her, a painting studio full of artists wielding brushes with their mouths, feet and breasts, or a little crying girl standing under a palm tree surrounded by lions making 'fart bubbles'.

Since her debut exhibition, at Galleri Karlsson in Stockholm in 1968, Ekman has responded to the popular culture of Sweden's postwar social democratic society, centred on the so-called people's home. She did so from both the perspective of a young woman and of a child. Even at this early stage, her repertoire was wide: her art – a unique mix of naive and Pop art, combined with surrealist elements – drew from labels on jars, comics, satirical political drawings



and fashion accessories. She elevated the styles and colours of a girl's bedroom to an aesthetic and made tinkering a method, like the Plexiglas box *Minnie Sees Food* (1967) and *Cupboard II* (1971). When, in 1968, Pontus Hultén bought her newly finished *Fish Balls in Lobster Sauce* (1968) for the Moderna Museet's collection, a modern working-class dish rendered in silk appliqué became a local pop icon with a feminist touch. Today Ekman is a 'public artist', a national celebrity, even, and someone whose voice is taken seriously in public debates. Internationally, however, she is almost unknown.

Born in Stockholm in 1944, Ekman was a leading protagonist among a group of artists and writers who had gathered around the radical and satirical underground magazine *Puss* (1968–74) in the Swedish capital. From the beginning Ekman used herself in her work, often in the nude. For a 1969 questionnaire in the art magazine *Paletten* about the social and economic conditions of



Marie-Louise Ekman

By Maria Lind

The melancholic carnival of a proto bad-girl

artists, she submitted 13 photographs showing all aspects of her life. She is seen both outdoors and indoors with friends, their children and her husband, working on a painting, having sex and posing like a *Playboy* Playmate surrounded by her art. 'Privileged parasite or small business man on the verge of bankruptcy?' was the headline of the special issue, and Ekman's contribution stands out as a tongue-in-cheek response to a politically regimented and male-dominated art scene. *Playmate* happens to also be the title of her 1973 pink silk and fake fur 'book', the pages of which open up to reveal tenderly crafted vaginas.

In 1969 she played herself in her friend Öyvind Fahlström's film *Du Gamla, du Fria* (*Provocation*), which revolves around an activist theatre group playing in factories and public squares across Sweden. And then, in 1976, she played herself once again, this time in her own debut as a filmmaker: *Hallo Baby* is an autobiographical work about a young

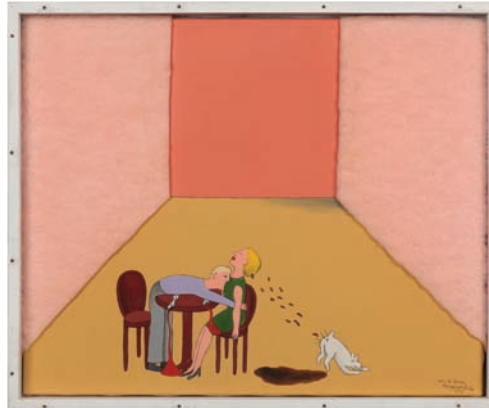
woman growing up in a city, her pathway to adulthood through, among other things, exploring her Jewish identity, marrying an eccentric photographer and becoming an artist. Ekman later became the first female professor at Stockholm's Royal Institute of Art, where she set up the first video department in the Nordic countries, affecting several generations of students, like Carin Ellberg, Ann-Sofi Sidén and Charlotte Gyllenhammar. Eventually she also became the school's first female dean. Her frequent, entertaining and highly topical drawings, columns and other articles – including one where she outlined her programme were she to become the first female prime minister of Sweden – reached a wide audience through their publication in the evening newspaper *Aftonbladet* during the 1980s.

Given the amount of contemporary art within the theatrical turn that I've encountered over the past decade, for example the work of Catherine Sullivan, Ryan Trecartin and Mika Rottenberg, I've often had cause to think about the uniqueness of Ekman's oeuvre. It's not only the range of disciplines and subject matter she covers that goes beyond the norm, it's also the way in which her moving-image work and theatre plays deviate from established genres and approaches. They generally lack linear dramaturgy, take place within a cramped, doll's house-like space and use very long takes. Along the way Ekman reveals constructions and cultivates excesses and artificiality. Shifts in language and its meaning, for example, place the viewer in a condition of stimulating insecurity: halfway through the carnivalesque film *Stilleben* (*Still Life*) (1985), ordinary language collapses and the male actors, dressed in female rococo dresses, begin talking a lively pretend language, as if nothing has happened. The effect is humorous and unsettling at the same time.



this page, from top:
Playmate, 1973, pink fake fur,
 mixed media, 10 x 15 cm; two
 stills from *Mamma, Pappa, Barn*
 (*Mommy, Daddy, Kids*), 1977, film,
 30 min

this page, from top:
Home at a Lady I-VI, 1973,
 oil and mixed media on canvas,
 50 x 60 cm; *Cupboard II*, 1971,
 mixed media, 24 x 32 x 13 cm



“You get to do what you want” is a phrase that’s repeated several times by the little girl in Ekman’s short and melancholic film *Mamma, Pappa, Barn* (*Mommy, Daddy, Kids*) (1977) when she’s had enough of her distracted parents and her frustrated grandmother. The film covers 24 hours in a family’s life as seen from the position of that girl, whose strong will is pitted against a tired mother and a father who drinks on the sly. There is also a quiet sadness in *Moderna Människor* (*Modern People*) (1983), which concerns a very short mute girl with a young child, who lives in a flat with her unhappy sister. The film follows the sisters’ preparations for Christmas dinner. The set resembles a theatre and the film involves long takes. *Den Hemliga Vännen* (*The Secret Friend*) (1990) plays with roles and identities, where the actors Margaretha Krook, Ernst-Hugo Järegård and Gösta Ekman – all of them domestic stars – appear as a wife, a husband and a friend who dress up in each other’s clothes and wittily and drastically act out each other’s roles in a loft apartment. Absurdity, banality and ambiguity reach even higher levels in *The Painting School* (1990). Long before the art context became attractive for different forms of reality media (prominent among them in the US, Bravo’s *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*, 2010–), Ekman wrote and directed this as a ten-part series for Swedish television, based on her experience at the Royal Institute of Art and revolving around the lives of eccentric students and teachers – all men – at an unnamed art school, each episode ending with a song written by Abba’s Benny Andersson. It is plainly hilarious and possibly one of the most unconventional programmes ever shown on Swedish television.

Another kind of stage in her work is the miniature Plexiglas box, a cross between a



vitrine and a doll’s house in which scenes are arranged with toys and figures (among them Minnie Mouse). The series *Home at a Lady* (1973) presents the home itself as a stage. The (blonde) lady, a character that also appears in many other of Ekman’s paintings, is seen here in a sparsely furnished living room in which two of the three pink walls are made of fake fur. This prim character is accompanied by a television, a man and a dog who are engaged in different more-or-less bodily activities – such as eating, peeing, vomiting and having sex. Such work was not accepted by Sweden’s modernist establishment, nor by the women’s movement, who found Ekman’s representations of women too passive and prone to the consumption of commercial culture or to immersing themselves in sexual fantasies, and during the 1970s her work was also provocative in political cultural circles. Her posters – one, for example, showing a woman daydreaming about oral sex – were banned from the bookshop Oktober for not being helpful enough in the struggle against capitalism. In the world of Ekman, things are calmly but

firmly topsy-turvy, and yet they are made to appear wholly comprehensible, even self-evident. Borders are crossed and identity is expanded, but even more importantly, the very notion of ‘normality’ is challenged. Like a proto bad-girl who does what she wants, Ekman is even able to claim that the work actually is documentary – this is exactly how she experiences life.✿

The exhibition Do As You Like: Marie-Louise Ekman accompanied by Sister Corita Kent, Mladen Stilinovic and Martha Wilson can be seen at the Henie Onstad Art Center in Oslo through 23 June