



# Mamma Andersson

Camden Arts Centre / October — November 2007  
File Note #24 **Mamma Andersson**

Jeffrey Dennis

# No Place Like Home

In front of Karin Mamma Andersson's *Travelling in the Family*, we seem to be the unexpected guest, standing on the threshold. Certain information is unclear: we have perhaps just come in from the sunlight, and it will take a while for our eyes to adjust. The six figures gathered around a dining table have yet to notice our presence. Maybe an inner glass door prevents them from hearing our approach, so that we can unobtrusively stand and observe this family. Perhaps they are complicit in ignoring our presence, like actors in character at a small theatre performance.

The grey-haired matriarch sits at the head of the table, flanked by younger women. An almost comic suggestion of dysfunction hovers above them: a black cloud of sprayed paint, like a terrible stink that, with downcast eyes, they studiously ignore. The one male (a visiting boyfriend on his best behaviour?) passes the teapot to his opposite number. She, her slender fingers cradling a bowl, seems to sniff, and silently ask him: 'Was that you?'. Another female looks on, apparently banished to an adjoining room. The lampshade beside her—which refuses to comply with any perspective, obstinately remaining a flat, drawn diagram—suggests instead that she is part of a large painting on the wall of the room; or is it a mirror reflecting the eighth figure, a seated silhouette on the opposite edge of the painting?

The fluid, drifting structure of the painting enhances the doubt. As is her habit, the artist has left her first sketched lines clearly visible through the paint. Some of the objects on the table have a transparency suggestive of photographs taken with a very slow shutter speed, where anything moved during the exposure is rendered ghost-like. Everywhere, images of objects and figures are set down with an economy that refuses to insist on what is depicted: the result is that every painted thing appears threatened with its own effacement.

Edges of furniture and figures conform to the under-drawing but within and between these, paint froths, spills and spreads like stains on laundry. The dark floor defines the shape of the room but the walls are a permeable membrane of thin grey and green wash, offering a vista of distant hills and estuary. This is the crucial, interpretive transaction that the artist offers us: should we attempt to read these 'landscape walls' as the painted frieze one might find in a bohemian household? Is the room, contrary to what is suggested by the traditional furniture, actually surrounded by modernist glass walls, overlooking the countryside or are we seeing the collective, projected memory of the seated family, their hinterland? We are perhaps invited to draw on our experience of the devices of improvised theatre or the privileged viewpoints of film, or both, as in *Dogville* where the director Lars von Trier forces us to set aside our expectations of the illusionistic envelope of cinema. We watch the actors, sometimes from directly above, walk through an imagined street, through imagined doors, guided only by chalk lines on the bare timber floor of a dark rehearsal space. The audience oversees both inside and outside, traveller and destination, just as in another of Andersson's paintings, *Coming Home*, we are actively recruited to make the picture viable, and by this strategy become the artist's partners, assistants, perhaps.

*Travelling in the Family* 2003  
Acrylic on oil on panel / 92 x 122 cm / © the artist /  
courtesy of Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm; Stephen  
Friedman Gallery, London; and David Zwirner, New York





Given the importance she has ascribed to joining a local film club at the age of twelve, let's risk another filmic allusion. I have a photograph of the director Ingmar Bergman at work on his film *The Hour of the Wolf*, set on a remote island in the house of a reclusive artist. The enclosing walls and low ceiling, hung with the artist's palettes, barely accommodate the huge studio camera that Bergman pushes towards Liv Ullman, spotlight against the wall. The rupturing intrusion of the mechanics of art-making into the fictional space of the scene would seem to parallel something in Mamma Andersson's work. She is immersed in painting—its history; her kindred spirits amongst contemporary and historical artists; the museums that hold their work; the special clutter of the studio, and paint itself. All of these appear as protagonists within the paintings. For her to demonstrate the business of putting the painting together, to reveal the seams, is more important than maintenance of traditional pictorial coherence.



Ingmar Bergman filming on the set of *The Hour of the Wolf* possibly by Roland Lundin (1966): taken from James Monaco's 1977 book, 'How to Read a Film', Oxford University Press, New York

*Touched by Gods* seems to be based on an image of a museum bookshop. But with its multi-layered, 'open-weave' structure it also becomes a trap, like a moth-hunter's net, to catch and display her pantheon of influences and heroes. Reproductions of other artists' work line the walls, interspersed with blanks not yet filled. Insubstantial visitors browse the displays, but compete for the space with other painted phantasms seeping through the floor. Within this painting—a metaphysical extension of the bulletin boards that many artists keep in their studios, filled with a changing display of significant postcards and photographs—she uniquely conveys the excitement of wanting to be painter, how every museum and gallery may become a sacred place of nourishment and inspiration, sustaining the painter's confidence that they themselves may have the capacity for a special relationship to all those other artists.



*Touched by Gods* 2002

Oil on panel / 122 X 152 cm / © the artist / courtesy of Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; and David Zwirner, New York



*Gone for Good* 2006

Acrylic on oil on panel / 122 X 160 cm / © the artist / courtesy of Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; and David Zwirner, New York

Throughout Andersson's work, the familiar fixtures of house, school or office are painted as wrecked, abandoned, or violated by irreconcilable pictorial intrusions; blotched and scratched, encroachments of paint rising like a flood-tide from the marsh. There is an implied threat both to the stability of the painting and to the depicted scene of settled domesticity or the established rituals of work, social life, education and childcare. In *Gone for Good* we watch a conflagration consume a sitting room, like those alarming demonstrations staged by the fire service to show how carelessness results in catastrophe. Are we in immediate peril, or, as with the fire-prevention films, contemplating potential disaster from behind the safety barrier? That sense of anticipated traumas, endlessly rehearsed—familiar to every parent or householder—pervades Andersson's work. In Kvart puddles of drying paint have been allowed to shrink and crust over the chaos of emptied cupboards, upturned cabinet draws and stripped mattresses; the apparent aftermath of burglary or eviction. The window is ajar but we glimpse a strip of sunny yellow, suggesting that the breeze that lifts the curtains would be warm. Upon reflection these may be merely lodgings hastily vacated by carefree students at the end of summer term.

So do the paintings offer nightmares from which we are allowed to awake? An alternative interpretation might be that they are disasters mitigated by familiarity. In *My Life as a Dog*, Lasse Hallström's 1985 film, the young hero faces a succession of losses, challenges and setbacks that are, ultimately, more bearable and given significance by their occurrence within the small, consoling community of his eccentric relations and school friends. The myth about how to become an artist has been, in recent times, that they must run away to join the urban circus of fellow avant-gardists. Mamma Andersson offers us an alternative journey. Despite the international audience for her work, she sets her curious light on the values of locality and belonging; leads us through family mysteries, disturbing revelations and conundrums of visual experience, still identifiably rooted within a place very close to home.

Jeffrey Dennis is an artist based in London

### Karin Mamma Andersson

was born in 1962 in Luleå, a small town in the far north of Sweden and currently lives and works in Stockholm.

She studied for nine years at the Royal University College of Fine Arts and during her time there her distinctive middle name Mamma was added so that her fellow students could tell her apart from another person with the same name. Andersson comes from a place of sharp contrasts, between dark and light, sounds and silence and many of her paintings contain landscapes which evoke the unmistakable character of Northern Sweden.

As one of Sweden's most internationally renowned artists Andersson won the Carnegie Art Award for Nordic Art in 2006 and represented Sweden in the 50th Venice Biennale, 2003. She has had recent solo exhibitions at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Helsingin Taidehalli, Helsinki, David Zwirner, New York, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm.

This is Andersson's first one-person exhibition in a public space in the UK.

Mamma Anderson is represented by Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and David Zwirner, New York.

---

### Reading List

'In a year I usually read about five books, I do not like Swedish detective stories, I don't look on books as a tool to make time pass more quickly, I want the book to leave an impression that lasts. Therefore I mainly read classics. Some books that have made an impression on me during the later years are:

- Marguerite Dumas *Summer Rain* (1990)
- Albert Camus *The Stranger* (1941)
- W.G Sebald *The Emigrants* (1992)
- J.M.Coetzee *Boyhood* (1997)
- Joseph Conrad *The Heart of Darkness* (1899)'

---

### Viewing List

'When it comes to film I'm a lot more open, I see everything from Jackie Chan, *Shanghai Knights* (2003) to Werner Herzog's, *Aguirre: the Wrath of God* (1972). Film has always been important in my life, in general I watch three or four a week. Lately Claude Chabrol interests me. Both the early films like *La femme infidèle* (1969) and *La Cérémonie* (1995).'

---

**Published to accompany the exhibition *Mamma Andersson*  
at Camden Arts Centre 28 September–25 November 2007**


---

ISBN 9781 900470 73 5

‘I was born in the Zodiac  
sign of Pisces and I  
change my mind all the  
time. A thing that I  
praise to the sky one  
day I reject the next.’  
—Karin Mamma Andersson

*Mamma Andersson* is organised by Moderna Museet, Stockholm  
in collaboration with Camden Arts Centre and Helsingin  
Taidehalli, Helsinki.

Exhibition supported by **Bloomberg**




Arkwright Road  
London  
NW3 6DG  
T +44 (0)20 7472 5500  
F +44 (0)20 7472 5501

**Camden**  
arts centre


info@camdenartscentre.org  
www.camdenartscentre.org

on  
ts Centre events  
from other  
is information  
provide will  
is form to the  
ress overleaf.


Registered charity 1065829 Registered Company 2947191 VAT Reg No 586 9041 03



ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND



**Camden**  
Funded by Camden Council



clare duffield foundation