

Cecilia Hillstrom Gallery:

Text for Leif Engström's exhibition catalogue

In my childhood I spent a lot of time in the recreational forests next to the Stockholm suburb where I grew up. I often went there at dusk when the school day was over and I had a few more hours to kill before bedtime. I put on my jacket and shoes and took the short walk between the apartment blocks to where the asphalted pavement was replaced by dirt paths. There was a highway right at the border between the residential areas and the forest, and there was a narrow tunnel that connected the two sides. I remember the feeling which used to come over me as I entered that tunnel. The local kids always smashed the lights in it, so it was almost always completely dark and this gave rise to a feeling of being almost invisible. In the compact darkness I couldn't see my own hands or the tip of my nose at the edge of my field of vision, and it created a sense of becoming a shadow for a little while, some kind of free-floating ghost, an invisible observer.

Then, when I looked at the forest where it began at the end of the tunnel, I saw the warm yellow glow of the highway lights making the outermost trees stand out against the darkness. And, if I turned the other way, I could see the suburban apartment blocks, their lighted windows, and the quiet shining of streetlamps on empty concrete roads, framed by lined up trees and well-planned streaks of grass. From the tunnel, I could observe this – the most familiar of all places – as if it was a painting framed by the concrete that formed the mouth of the tunnel. And I looked at it as if I was an outsider, someone who did not really belong there.

Leif Engström's paintings throw me back to the quiet intensity that marked those late-night expeditions. As I understand his work, it is about exploring the borderland. The boundary theme is present in almost all of Engström's paintings, in many differing ways: his scenes are often set in twilight, at the border between day and night, light and darkness; many show places between the forest and the city, and the imagined observer is one who – like me in the tunnel – is positioned between the solitude of the bystander and the community of the environments being observed.

Another border that Engström explores, therefore, is the one between commonplaceness – represented by the familiar motifs from the Swedish welfare state – and the almost foreboding sense of enchantment that comes with the deep twilight colours, the play with contrasting lights and the stillness of the sceneries. It is as if his paintings suggest that there is something more to all of this than what meets the eye, something profound which seems mundane and recognisable, something subtle, almost unnoticeable, like a hidden gate.

And it is as if all these boundaries heighten, enforce and cross-fertilize each other in Engström's work. As if each boundary points to the importance of the others in what becomes an inobtrusive celebration of that enchanted and volatile experience of being at the borderland.

David Thurfjell