



Thielska Galleriet, Stockholm 1892

Edvard Munch's harrowing "Sick Mood at Sunset: Despair" (1892) is on display for the first time in the U.S.

Munch's mournful majesty

Anguish abounds in SFMOMA's rare exhibition of sensitive soul

By Charles Desmarais

"I was born dying," the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944) is said to have announced near the end of his reasonably long life.

A rare Munch exhibition opening this week of 44 mournful paintings will convince you of one thing above all: He hardly needed to tell us that. But you will also leave astounded that dollops and smears of paint might contain, suspended among their component oils and pigments, the tears and passions of a romantic who built his existence around sickness, loss, repression and despair.

The exhibition "Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed" opens Saturday, June 24, at

Desmarais continues on E2

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

SFMOMA bares Munch’s sensitive soul

Desmarais from page E1

the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and runs through Oct. 9. It surveys a career of some 60 years, revolving around a late (1940-43) self-portrait, the title of which lends its name to the show.

“Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed” is a reasonably interesting picture in the context of the art of its time, with its indeterminate space and light, and its stark contrasts — of abstract flatness and illusionistic depth; of complementary colors; of clothed and naked, male and female figures. Norway was under German occupation at this time (a fact barely mentioned in exhibition materials), which lends an odd poignancy to the artist’s old-soldier stance of feeble attention.

But I suspect it would not be the central work in the exhibition were it not for the strong relationship to a famous series of paintings and prints by Jasper Johns that echoed the hatch-mark design Munch used to represent a bedspread. The exhibition catalog, in particular, makes a point of Munch’s place among key artists of the 20th century, downplaying his reputation as a moody Symbolist romantic.

That the artist had a foot in each of two centuries is certain, but it is difficult to see him as a disinterested formalist. After all, this is the man who envisioned “The Scream,” surely the world’s most famous icon of existential angst and agony.

Neither of the two fragile versions of that painting were allowed to leave their home museums in Norway, but anguish abounds here all the same. Two variants of “The Sick Child” (1896 and 1907), along with the identically themed “At the Deathbed” (1895), “Death Struggle” (1915), “Death in the Sick Room” (1893) and “The Smell of Death” (1895) all deal directly, oppressively, with the artist’s youthful experience of the loss of his sister.

“Inheritance” (1897-99) depicts a red-faced woman, handkerchief to her mouth. A green-tinged baby, chest spotted with red, doesn’t so much rest upon as float above her lap on a womb-like cloud. An army of black, insect-like forms patterns the woman’s skirt. Munch nicknamed the work “the syphilitic child,” a wall text tells us.

In “Ashes” (1925), a tale of sexual repression and frustration, a man cringes at the bottom of an image of a long-haired woman in a forest clearing. Her arms are high behind her head. Her modest white dress is open to the waist, revealing a sanguine slip. She could almost be a gutted lamb.

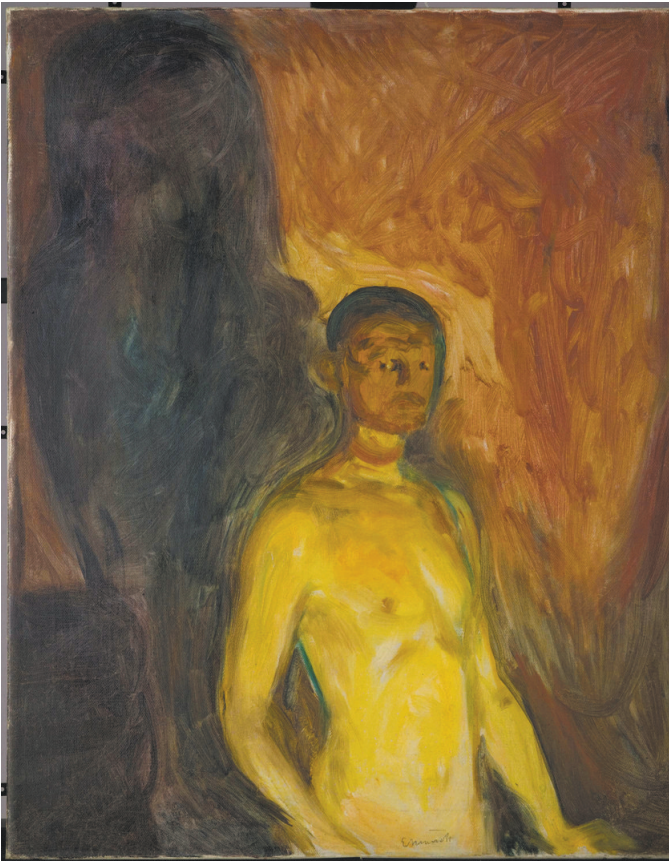
Even a work with the joyous title “The Dance of Life” (1925) is peopled by somnambulists and stumbling cadavers.

This is not to say that Munch is not a master of color and form. That very virtuosity gives his art a kind of lurid authenticity. It convinces us that the sentiments are honest and real, the despondency earned. It is the reason these pictures don’t work in reproduction: The image, all by



Munch Museum, Oslo 1925

Edvard Munch’s “Ashes” (1925), a tale of sexual repression and frustration, is on display at the S.F. Museum of Modern Art.



Munch Museum, Oslo 1903

“Self-Portrait in Hell” (1903) captures Munch’s anguish.



Tate Modern, London 1907

“The Sick Child” (1907) deals with the death of Munch’s sister.

Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fridays-Tuesdays; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursdays. Saturday, June 24, through Oct. 9. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org

itself, is cheap. That’s why “The Scream” is such an easy target of satire and commercialism, with “Scream” wide ties, “Scream” inflatable dolls, “Scream” bandages, “Scream” hemorrhoid cushions.

I have seen neither of the two original paintings. However, an earlier, closely related picture in the show, the harrowing “Sick Mood at Sunset: Despair” (1892) — shown here for the first time in the U.S. — gives a likely sense of the better-known canvases.

A lone figure looks into not a void, but a blue-black hardness — a region not exactly empty, but unnamed. The area where sky should be is an inferno of color, but it, too, is a substance, something beyond flame, as if laid down by brushes loaded with magma.

Try getting that out of a glossy halftone on the printed page.

The point is that Munch’s significance lies neither in his oversensitive soul or his painterly inventiveness, but in his unique ability to combine the two. He returned again and again to the same themes, and often to the same image. One could argue that makes him a formal experimenter — testing and revising art for art’s sake — or that his romantic heart could not bear to leave behind loves and moments that might die without continual regeneration. He did not have to choose.

It is perhaps telling, though, that in the late 19th century he arranged and rearranged key paintings into a series he called “The Frieze of Life.” He lived his final years in a house full

of his own works. And, though his pictures once had a lively market, in the end he left to the city of Oslo the vast majority of his output as an intact collection.

Of the 44 works in the exhibition, 17 are identified as self-portraits, and several others surely represent the artist. Tracing Munch’s variations on self-depiction is a study in changing techniques and styles, as well as his own personal and psychological shifts. The earliest work in the exhibition, a self-portrait from 1886, is nearly a mosaic of tiny broken plates of burnished paint.

There are ghostly pictures like a “Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu” (1919), ominously psychosexual ones like his hovering presence in “The Artist and His Model” (1919-20), and a cartoonish throw-away that could be a magazine liquor ad, “Self-Portrait With Bottles” (circa 1938).

None of them compares to “Self-Portrait in Hell” (1903), however, for equipoise of painterly form and emotional content. From out of a blazing scarlet fire, trailing billows of smoke, a figure emerges, its color marking the spectrum of increasing heat — from head of red, to torso of yellow, to white-hot pelvis where our eye is stopped by the picture’s bottom edge. The self is not afflicted by the heat: The self is its source.

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