THE EXPERIMENTAL SELF: EDVARD MUNCH’S PHOTOGRAPHY

An exhibition of photographs, prints, and film by the master painter and printmaker, on view at Scandinavia House through April 7, 2018, provides a new perspective into his experimentalism.

The Experimental Self: Edvard Munch’s Photography at Scandinavia House: The Nordic Center in America brings the photographic work of the master painter to NYC for its first showing in the U.S. Internationally celebrated for his paintings, prints, and watercolors, Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863–1944) also took photographs. This exhibition of photographs, prints, and films by Edvard Munch emphasizes the artist’s experimentalism, examining his exploration of the camera as an expressive medium. By probing and exploiting the dynamics of “faulty” practice, such as distortion, blurred motion, eccentric camera angles, and other photographic “mistakes,” Munch photographed himself and his immediate environment in ways that rendered them poetic. In both still images and in his few forays with a hand-held moving-picture camera, Munch not only archived images, but invented them.

On loan from the Munch Museum in Oslo, Norway, the 46 copy prints in the exhibition and the continuous screening of the DVD containing Munch’s films are accompanied by a small selection of prints from private collections, as well as contextualizing panels and others that examine Munch’s photographic exploration. Similar to the ways in which the artist invented techniques and approaches to painting and graphic art, Munch’s informal photography both honored the material before his lens and transmuted it into uncommon motifs.

The exhibition opened on November 21 to critical acclaim. Jason Farago wrote in The New York Times, “As much as the painted portraits, these photographic images of the artist rise to the level of what Munch called ‘self-scrutinies’: emotional but hard-edged, and pierced with a dread of modern life that has outlived the Modernist era.” In a review of the Wall Street Journal, Richard B. Woodward wrote, “Hung or projected in four small rooms against dark walls, the modest black-and-white images oscillate in mood between tentative and bold, prosaic and fantastic as Munch was deciding what photography could and couldn’t do for his art.” In Hyperallergic, Julia Friedman wrote, “Munch seems more aware of the power of the camera to create a ‘self’ than one might imagine an individual born in the mid-19th century to be.”

Programming includes the lecture “Edvard Munch, August Strindberg, and Photographic Self-Representation” on Thursday, January 25, with Linda Rugg; an Armory Show VIP Guided Breakfast Tour and panel, “Experimental Lens,” moderated by curator Dr. Patricia Berman with speakers Lori Nix, Torbjørn Redland, and Pekka & Teija Isorättätä; on Saturday, March 10; screenings of the Peter Watkins documentary Edvard Munch on Tuesdays March 20 and March 27; and ongoing guided tours and arts workshops for kids. This exhibition has been organized by the American-Scandinavian Foundation in partnership with the Munch Museum in Oslo, Norway.
EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Edvard Munch (1863–1944) seems to have been one of the first artists in history to take “selfies.” Like his paintings, prints, and writings, the most consistent theme in Munch’s photography was self-portraiture. In his self-images, produced in a variety of media, Munch assumed a range of intimate, as well as performative, personae. As an amateur photographer, Munch exploited the expressive potential of photographic “mistakes,” such as “faulty” focus, distorted and funneling perspectives, eccentric camera angles, and in particular, movement, during long exposure times that resulted in the ghosting of his own body. Such challenges to the camera’s capacity—to record an aspect of reality—were replicated by Munch in other media. He did not exhibit his photographs.

Munch’s photographs have been dated to two periods, 1902 to 1910 and 1927 to the mid-1930s. Munch took up photography in 1902, the year in which he and his lover Tulla Larsen ended a multi-year relationship, following a confrontation with a pistol shot that mutilated one of the artist’s fingers. This event, and an accelerated career, triggered a period of increasing emotional turmoil that culminated in a rest cure in the private Copenhagen clinic of Dr. Daniel Jacobson from 1908 to 1909. The second period of activity, from 1927 into the mid-1930s, was bracketed by triumphant retrospective exhibitions in Berlin and Oslo and by a hemorrhage in Munch’s right eye, which temporarily impaired his vision. This was also the time that Munch tried his hand at home movies.

Exploring the dynamics of layered imagery, undefined form, and shadows that replace living bodies, Munch pursued photography as an experimental medium and himself as an experimental subject.

“I have an old camera with which I have taken countless pictures of myself, often with amazing results,” Edvard Munch stated in 1930. “Some day when I am old, and I have nothing better to do than write my autobiography, all my self-portraits will see the light of day again.”

EXHIBITION-RELATED PROGRAMS

The Experimental Self is accompanied by artist talks and lectures, including “Head to Head: Edvard Munch, August Strindberg, and Photographic Self-Representation” with Linda Rugg (UC Berkeley) on January 25, 2018; the panel “Experimental Lens,” moderated by curator Dr. Patricia Berman with speakers Lori Nix, Torbjørn Rødland, and Pekka & Teija Isorättyä, on March 10, 2018; and a screening of the documentary Edvard Munch by Peter Watkins in early March. Kid-friendly exhibition-related arts workshops, led by art educators, take place on Saturdays. Gallery tours take place on Wednesdays at 5:30 PM.

CURATORIAL CREDIT

The exhibition curator is Dr. Patricia Berman. A professor of art history at Wellesley College, Dr. Berman is a leading specialist in early modern Scandinavian art and the author of numerous important scholarly publications in the field. From 2010–2015, she held a faculty position at the University of Oslo, Norway, where she continues to be part of a research project entitled “Edvard Munch, Modernism, and Modernity.” Her curatorial work has included Munch|Warhol and the Multiple Print (2013, New York and Ankara, Turkey); Luminous Modernism: Scandinavian Art Comes to America, A Centennial Retrospective 1912|2012 (2011, American-Scandinavian Foundation); In Munch’s Laboratory: The Path to the Aula (2011, Munch Museum, Oslo), Edvard Munch and the Modern Life of the Soul (2006, Museum of Modern Art, NY).
SUPPORT
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THE AMERICAN-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATION
The American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF) promotes firsthand exchange of intellectual and creative influence between the United States and the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. A publicly supported American nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, ASF has an extensive program of fellowships, grants, intern/trainee sponsorship, publishing, and cultural activities. Headquartered in New York City, ASF has members throughout the United States, and alumni and donors worldwide.

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SCANDINAVIA HOUSE
Scandinavia House was created by the American-Scandinavian Foundation to promote the artistic and intellectual influence of the Nordic countries. As the leading center for Nordic culture in the United States, Scandinavia House offers enriching programs that illustrate and illuminate the culture and life of the Nordic countries. The diverse programs include exhibitions, film series, concerts and other performances, readings, lectures, language courses, and activities for kids and families.

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HOURS & ADMISSION
The Scandinavia House Gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 12—6 PM (Wednesday until 7 PM). Gallery tours are held on Wednesdays, 5:30 PM. Admission to the Scandinavia House Gallery is free.