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ART REVIEW

## 'The Experimental Self: Edvard Munch's Photography' Review



The painter of 'The Scream' was also an avid experimenter with the camera



Edvard Munch, 'Self-Portrait Wearing Glasses and Seated Before Two Watercolors at Ekely,' c. 1930 PHOTO: EDVARD MUNCH/MUNCH MUSEUM

By Richard B. Woodward

Nov. 29, 2017 4:51 p.m. ET

1 COMMENT

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Edvard Munch, 'Self-Portrait Wearing Glasses and Seated Before Two Watercolors at Ekely,' c. 1930 PHOTO: EDVARD MUNCH/MUNCH MUSEUM

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*New York*

It's not a secret that Edvard Munch (1863-1944) took photographs. A monograph about his fitful output, by the Norwegian art historian Arne Eggum, was published here in 1989. Ten years later, Dorothy Kosinski's "The Artist and the Camera: Degas to Picasso" presented a sample of Munch's photographs—along with those by Bonnard, Gauguin, Rodin, Vuillard and nine other painters or sculptors—in an exhibition and catalog that surveyed the diverse applications of the medium by 19th- and 20th-century artists.

"The Experimental Self: Edvard Munch's Photography" at Scandinavia House will nonetheless be a surprise to many. Timed to supplement "Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed," the traveling retrospective now at the Met Breuer, this show of roughly 40 copy prints and a six-minute home movie, lent by the Munch Museum in Oslo, has charms of its own.

Guest curator Patricia Berman, professor of art history at Wellesley College, has selected examples from two distinct periods: 1902-10 and 1927 to the mid-'30s. 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.

The first period begins in Berlin with the purchase of a [Kodak](#) box camera. As he trained himself in the basics, even developing his own prints, he portrayed friends in the street and documented an exhibition of his paintings in Norway.



Edvard Munch/Munch Museum PHOTO: EDVARD MUNCH, 'SELF-PORTRAIT 'À LA MARAT,' BESIDE A BATHTUB AT DR. JACOBSON'S CLINIC,' 1908-09

At the same time he was also eagerly photographing himself. Almost two-thirds of the show are self-portraits. Two examples from 1902 are seated close-ups, stiffly posed. Another from about the same time, taken as the artist lay in bed, introduces the more familiar anxiously watchful Munch. (He took up photography the same year that his lover, Tulla Larsen, ended their affair with a gunshot that damaged two of the fingers on his right hand.)

His outdoor nude self-portraits, taken at his summer house in the Norwegian coastal village of Åsgårdstrand, are larky rather than fraught. One day he might strike the heroic pose of a Spartan warrior; another day, he saw himself as more flab than sinew. In 1904, after finishing his large painting "Bathing Men," he brought it into his garden and photographed it. Male friends who had served as models were portrayed in snapshots.

Munch never believed that photographs could achieve the psychological or religious intensity he sought for his art. "The camera cannot compete with painting so long as it cannot be used in heaven and hell," he said.

This notion didn't prevent him from trying to override the camera's frank realism with special effects. He was fascinated by "spirit photography" and in 1907 played with multiple exposures of himself and his model Rosa Meissner on the beach. Knowing that movement while the lens was open could blur the body, he made exposures in which background details seemed to merge with a figure by appearing translucently through it.



Edvard Munch/Munch Museum PHOTO: EDVARD MUNCH, 'EDVARD MUNCH AND ROSA MEISSNER IN WARNEMÜNDE,' 1907

Like Degas, Munch was intrigued by the camera's routine ability to force perspective. In several self-portraits in domestic settings, he has placed the lens near to his arm and face so they loom large in the frame. In a 1908-09 study for a painting of himself as the murdered French revolutionary Marat, a half-naked Munch stares grimly from a bathtub, the curve of his bare shoulder and arm extended toward us, his unseen hand pressing the shutter.

This first period of photographic experimentation ended shortly after he had recovered from a nervous breakdown in 1908-09, having entered a clinic to seek an end to violent hallucinations and alcohol abuse. The second period of his photographs (1927 to mid-'30s) reflects the calmer, more solitary existence of his last decades. In a grid of six "selfies" from 1930, he photographs himself at arm's length in various disguises, with and without glasses and hats.

The six-minute home movie from 1927, taken in Dresden, Germany, and in Oslo, is a fragmentary compilation of street scenes: trams, pedestrians, storefronts, a couple on a park bench, two boys looking through a peephole in a fence. The final frames show Munch walking toward the camera.





Edvard Munch, 'Nurse in Black, Jacobson's Clinic,' 1908-09 PHOTO: EDVARD MUNCH/MUNCH MUSEUM

Ms. Kosinski's exhibition included several photographs, made or seen by Munch, that became the basis for paintings. The connections in Ms. Berman's presentation are not as overt. But the spectral figure facing us in "Nurse in Black" (1908-09), her luminous white face and folded hands set against a pitch-black field, resembles women elsewhere in Munch's work, such as "Moonlight I" (1896), one of three woodcuts displayed at Scandinavia House.

That Munch didn't exhibit his photography in his lifetime doesn't mean he wasn't seriously curious about its potential as an art and as a psychological tool to explore his favorite subject: himself.

The Experimental Self:  
Edvard Munch's Photography

Scandinavia House, through March 5, 2018