“Edvard Munch: Between the Clock and the Bed” (through February 4) is an illuminating exhibition that spans the artist’s career and fills the third floor of the Met Breuer. Avoiding his iconic screamer, it is instead built around his last major self-portrait. The exhibition consequently teases out a fresh set of considerations regarding his vision and the lengths to which he pursued it, however unevenly he succeeded. That is how I would have always remembered the show, had I not sought out what the Met’s hierophants-for-hire had to say about it.

I feel that I’m starting to repeat myself as an art critic by protesting about the contents of yet another exhibition catalogue. But this one is egregious. It is a veritable parade of the intellectual mannerisms peculiar to art history.
Allison Morehead invokes feminism against Nietzsche with the reflexive fervor that a superstitious Catholic would cross herself against the devil. Her essay riffs on the word “untimely” until it seems to mean nothing at all. In “The Business of Being Edvard Munch,” Patricia G. Berman “examines the development of his commercial strategies.” She claims not to impugn the integrity of his art, but concludes that the titular painting of the exhibition can “be understood as a depiction of himself as ‘curator’ of his legacy.” Which it can, if you really are that insipid.

Richard Schiff devotes much of his chapter to the derogation of Clement Greenberg for thoughts he committed to *Artforum* in 1967 regarding Munch: “I know of nothing in art that affects me in anything like the way that his ‘literature’ does. Yet the purely pictorial impact of his art (leaving his drawings
and prints aside) remains something else, something less.” Schiff deletes the parenthetical without so much as an ellipsis and sets him up as a modernist extremist, in contrast to the anti-modernist extremism of the Austrian Nazi art historian Hans Sedlmayr, to show how Munch fit into neither camp. Restoring Greenberg’s comment into its context, which I’ll do later, reveals him as the opposite of the sort of fellow that Schiff characterizes, and causes Schiff’s framing to collapse like an untimely soufflé. He concludes by dragging in one of the moment’s art-world darlings, Katharina Grosse, to tell us what Munch means to her. Grosse’s exhibition at Gagosian last year prompts me to suggest that she study him harder.

Saving this volume from cover-to-cover inanity, aside from the astute technical analysis by Mille Stein, is a preface by the noted Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard. He gets it:

Munch was a painter in the extreme: the painting was an object, a thing in itself to be pursued, and therefore he was able to go where only a painting can go, to that which is beyond words, but which is part of our reality.

Imagine the reception of this rather Greenbergian passage had Greenberg written it.

Munch’s attunement to painting as an object was so pronounced that he was prone to leaving them outside to be weathered. Nearly as abusive was his employment of turpentine to thin his oils to watercolor consistency. The results sometimes resemble that of old fresco, complete with the flaking. “Between the Clock and the Bed” has one of the versions of Puberty (1894) and areas of hair around the face show evidence of what conservators ruefully describe as “losses.” But where it works, it works. The skin is translucent. The bedcover flickers. The model’s shadow, shaped into an ominous personage, could not have been painted by another means than solvent by the gallon.
Munch lay such washes over more solid paint in *The Sick Child* (1896). From up close, the painting is a technical horror. The topcoat is greasy. The artist has gouged vertical and horizontal incisions into the surface with a knife, as I will do to the next exhibition catalogue essayist who writes “normative” when he means “normal.” Yet at a distance it coheres beautifully. The slices somehow create an atmosphere that knocks the forms back into space. Munch lost a beloved sister to tuberculosis at a young age. The loss is recorded here not just in the image, not only in the way that the flesh colors burn in the sea of subfusc greens and blues, but in the tormenting of the paint itself.

In the late aughts and teens his handling became less idiosyncratic but lost none of its personality. Still conscious of achieving a watercolor-like effect, the paint became more juicy than washy. *Death of Marat* (1907) foreshadowed the change, with forms built up from an improvisational grid of forceful strokes. The poses reinforce the grid, Munch’s supine form crossing the upright female nude orthogonally. The woman is Talla Larsen, to whom Munch was engaged for a time that ended with a quarrel, a scuffle, and the discharge of a sidearm into Munch’s left hand. There’s an awkward grandiosiy to it, likening his betrayal to that of the Jacobin hero and taking on Jacques-Louis David a
bit ineffectually. This, after all, was a lovers’ spat. Nevertheless, it’s continuous with work that coalesced several years later and thereafter, which grew ever more brushy, bold, and content to let the oil paint look like oil paint and not some tortured concoction.

Brushy and bold didn’t always amount to convincing. As demonstrated by a couple of decades’ worth of pictures of sick rooms and death beds, he could overwork a face into Symbolist oblivion, though many of these canvases (such as *Death Struggle*, 1915) are enormously moving anyway. But underworking the faces didn’t always pan out either. *The Artist and His Model* is dated 1919 to 1921. Unlike in Matisse, where apparently casual passages often lie atop multiple and aggressive revisions, there is so much bare white canvas and dripping oil that bursts of painterly bravado must have been punctuated by dreary months of staring. The artist, stooped and akimbo, tilts at the viewer with menace. The model averts her head and disappears into the furniture. The immediacy of the handling—not really all that immediate, one reckons—is effective, but the effect would not have been injured by more decisiveness about the forms. Another treatment of the same motif from the same time comes to a better balance, the model blocking the artist, her shaded face resembling a ghost made of mud.
Edvard Munch, Sick Mood at Sunset, Despair, 1892, Oil on canvas, Thielska Galleriet, Sweden.
Self-portraits form the backbone of the exhibition. They could be both marvelously painted and a little on the nose, as is *Sleepless Night: Self-Portrait in Inner Turmoil* (1920). The gray-bearded artist grips his lapels and staggers, mouth agape, eyes down. The rendering is somewhat irresolute, but this is one of the most affecting works in the show, bombastic title and all. Greenberg wrote, continuing from where Schiff cuts him off, that

[Munch’s] paintings, as successful as many of them are in their own pictorial terms, do not startle my eyes again and again the way that great paintings do. Compared, say, with Matisse, Munch never looks more than minor. How then does his illustration manage to carry so strongly and convey so intensely?

He leaves the question unanswered, the point made that there is more to the effect of art than form regarded in isolation, and it is the core claim of the essay that this excerpt comes from that one cannot regard it thus.

*Self-Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed* (1940–43) is notable in that compared to Matisse it does not look at all minor. There may be homages: the simplified nude along the right edge, along with the rest of the background, recalls a number of painting-in-a-painting treatments by Matisse. Munch imitates the pose of the grandfather clock, which marks the last hours of the elderly painter, next to the bed where he may take his final rest. Even at the end he never found a trope too obvious. Yet he has ejected death from the picture just as Matisse ejected war from his universe of ease and peace, and like Matisse he has done it through color. The sunny yellow of the rear wall unites the composition, and the darkness of the clock, which at another time in the artist’s career might have been made to stand in for the Reaper, looks warm and varnished. Thus an œuvre built largely on tragedy culminates in something approaching joy.

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