

Anatomy, Mon Amour

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Abstract

In the anatomy theatre of human bodies, contemporary art can be penetrating and distressing, performing its exhibition into haunting pataphysical occurrences, where color, figuration, shapes seep into our imagination like infectious slime. Looking at *The Loneliness of the Soul*, featuring works by Tracey Emin paired with paintings and watercolors by Edvard Munch (shown at Royal Academy of Art, London, and MUNCH Museum, Oslo, in 2021), the authors examine the odd couple focusing on the abjectness of Emin's autobiographical drawings of her seemingly devastated body and seek to trace some tendencies of her female erotic and pornographic self-exposure.

Keywords: Abject body, anatomy, autobiography, illness, psychic torture



Tracey Emin, *Because You Kept Touching Me*, acrylic on canvas, 2019. Press photo: Courtesy of the Royal Academy

This exhibition contains some adult content, we are warned. The Royal Academy of Arts website—after 14 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, one had almost gotten used to seeing virtual exhibitions only, with squinted eyes and reduced expectations—also warns us that capacity in the galleries is greatly reduced; time slots may be fully booked. All the same, one yearns for a real experience, and the pairing of Edvard Munch with Tracey Emin seemed tantalizing, as is the subtitle of this exhibition curated by Kari J. Brandtzæg and Edith Devaney.^[1]



Tracey Emin. Photo: [Wikipedia](#)

The “loneliness of the soul” is precisely what one wants to move out of now, leave behind after the lockdowns and the precarious dance of death in which our societies have partaken. On May 30, when we visit the Royal Academy, the sky is steely blue and early summer beckons, people are seen on busy sidewalks and seated in outdoor cafés, a nearly surreal vista. Munch (1863–1944) once created two paintings, *Dance of Life* and *Death and Life*, with evocative titles that resonate, just as his famous *The Scream* haunted the *fin-de siècle* imagination of expressionist culture in war-ravaged Europe a hundred years ago.

Perhaps anticipating the puzzled question, why pair this existentialist modern painter with Tracy Emin, or, put differently, why couple her with Munch rather than another woman artist or body *agent provocateur* (Carolee Schneemann, Carrie Mae Weems, Marina Abramović, Kara Walker, Jo Spence or, say, Frida Kahlo?), the museum explains that Emin was born exactly a hundred years after Munch and always admired the Norwegian artist as a kindred spirit (“With Munch . . . Always with Munch . . . Never leaving Munch,” Emin is quoted about Munch’s influence on her from early days and her years in art school). This sounds like over-protecting, does it not?



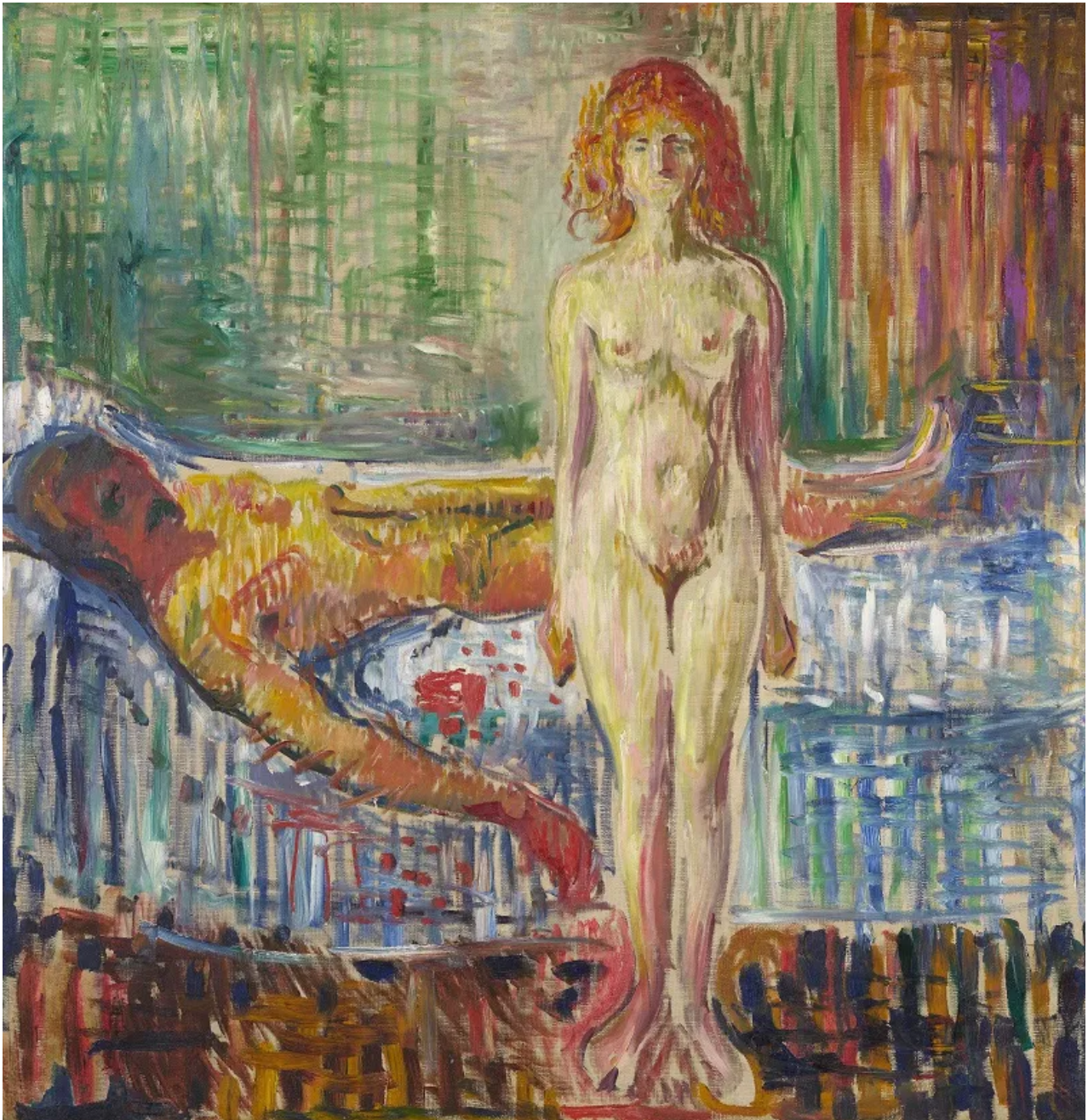
Tracey Emin: “With Munch . . . Always with Munch . . . Never leaving Munch.” Edvard Munch. Photo: [Wikipedia](#)

The exhibition, from the moment one enters the darkened galleries with their purplish walls, returns one to emotional vulnerability, physical torment and a bleakness of the soul that one does not necessarily associate with life drawing, with self-portraits and studies of the nude figure, unless one is attracted to Egon Schiele or Francis Bacon. Munch was taught by teachers who preferred a naturalist realism, but he also knew of van Gogh and

Gauguin's paintings and early on looked inside to express, in painting, what encounters with death (his father and sister died when he was in his twenties), mourning and sexual attraction to others he experienced.

Munch's works, subdued and small in scale, scattered about the corners of the three galleries, do not impress themselves much on the mind initially: *Reclining Female Nude*, *Female Nude*, *Standing Female Nude*—and few more of these life drawings. They are faint watercolors; in some of them the female body is only hinted at. In addition, just a few oil paintings, such as the dour *Women in Hospital* (1897) and the more strikingly colorful, perplexing *The Death of Marat* (1907).

In this *Death* study, the only Munch painting in this show that has a male figure reclining on a bed, the nude female body, presumably of Marat's angel of vengeance Charlotte Corday, stands stiffly in front, gazing out, oddly drawn in a manner that is devoid of erotic danger or dramatic power. The brushstrokes, green, yellow, brown and blue, seem rapidly executed, almost carelessly scattered about horizontally and vertically, a blistering cross-hatching that



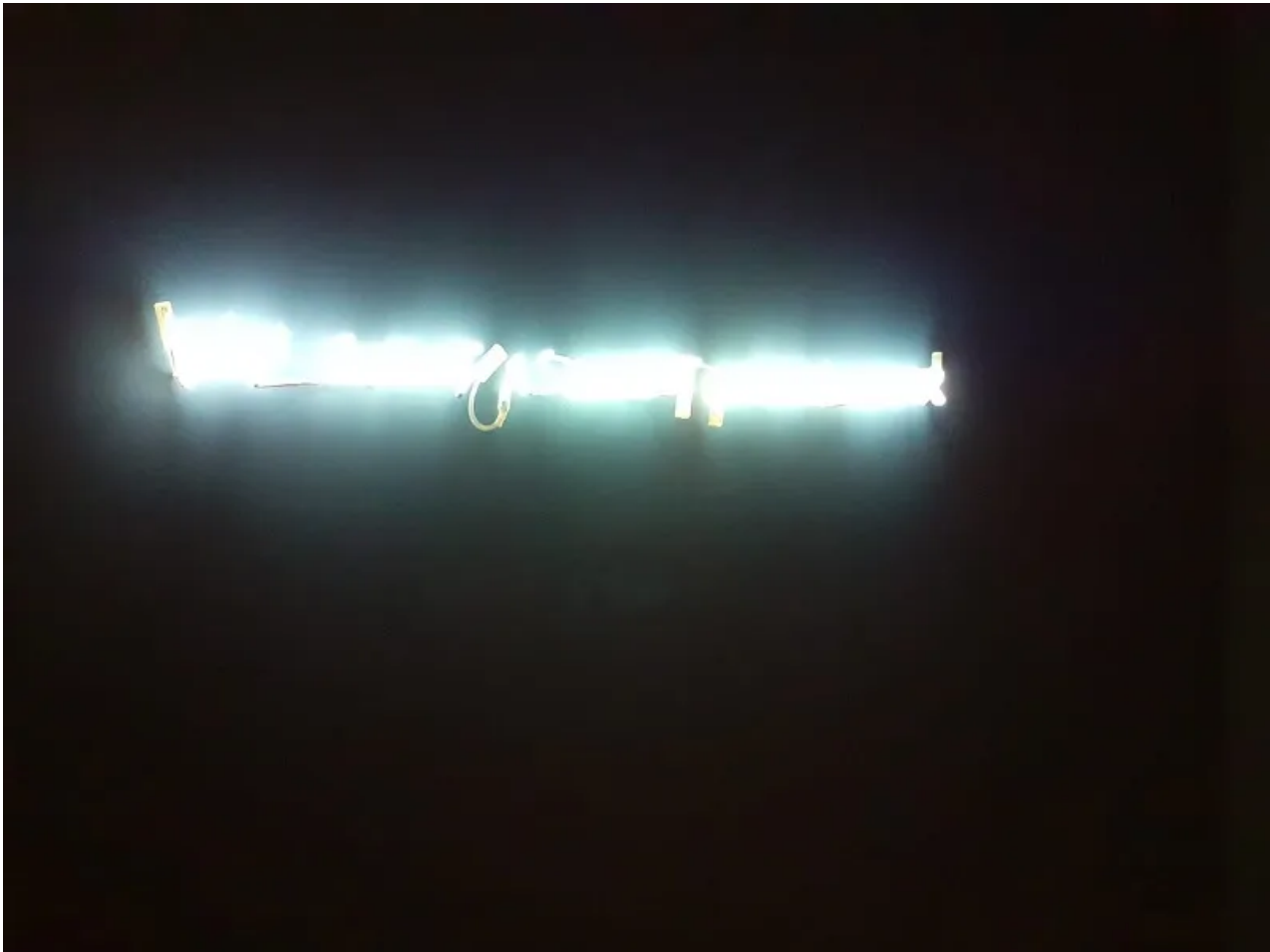
Edvard Munch, *The Death of Marat*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 153 x 149 cm. Munchmuseet. Press photo: Courtesy of the Royal Academy

makes for a nervous flickering scenario. Marat's head is dark red, the female nude rendered a stiff and unreal body that appears to belong to a different world, maybe a resurrection scene in an old biblical tale.



Edvard Munch, *Female Nude*, 1919–24. Watercolour, 95.2 x 60 cm. Munchmuseet. Press photo: Courtesy of the Royal Academy

Yet, the more one tries to remember the beautifully hushed, faint watercolors—for example, a barely recognizable *Reclining Female Nude* (1917–20) where we can only make out the barest intermittent outline of one bent leg and a curve of hair without a face, juxtaposed to the vivid oil painting of *The Death of Marat* or the oddly composed *Model by the Wicker Chair* (the red blotches of which must have attracted Emin's interest)—the more Munch recedes into the background, becoming a less than distinct backdrop for Emin's staging of confessional self-portraiture, texts, neons and tiny white sculptures which are labeled—as all of her paintings—with the most titillating work titles and narrative allusions to her mental states, nightmares and physical ordeals.



Tracey Emin, *MY CUNT IS WET WITH FEAR*, whiteneon, 2020 [installation view with blurred photo].
Photo: Johannes Birringer

The show was initiated by the MUNCH Museet a few years ago. Their curator, Kari Brandtzæg, invited Emin to come to Oslo and select the Munch paintings and watercolors that she felt resonated with her work—thus, the pairing was really planned to be a first major Scandinavian exhibition of Emin’s work, including her notorious *My Bed* installation from 1998. The bed is absent in London, and most of her paintings, with the exception of a few smaller studies and the 2008 *Black Cat*, are of recent date, 2017 to 2019, screaming out or at least, one suspects, jumping at the viewers’ eyes with their implicit or explicit pain and tortured anatomies.

The female erotic body is here splayed out, revealingly abjected, dismal, dejected and reviled. Or, in the first instance, one could merely see it as exposed, willingly and brazenly put up for our inspection of the ageing artist’s self-introspection. All this, however, not so much pornographically explicit but wildly abstracted in a twirling nightmare of tangled lines and color blotches, or to quote from scientist Donna Haraway’s book *Staying with the Trouble*, “tentacular entanglements” amongst human and nonhuman oddkin, creatures, mushrooms, reefs and lichens. The titles of some of these abstractions are more pointed: *Every Part of Me Kept Loving You*. As the painted lines dissolve and trickle downward, blur or become striated, our forensic eyes search for the shades of truth, and what the entrails tell us.



Tracey Emin, *Every Part of Me Kept Loving You*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 205.7 x 279.5 cm. Private collection, UK © Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS 2020

We would then have to begin wondering about the need and direction of such self-exposure, in the knowledge of the artist's biography or the recently published interviews in which she revealingly describes her illness and cancer treatment in 2020; and yet, it is not necessarily easy to speculate on what the viewers may think of such painting of emotional situations and its import? What such self-exposure is meant to trigger, reveal, hide or dramatize? And these are only a few of the many potential layers of meaning and association that accrue—not all, if any, leaving one with a sense of cathartic gain or empathy. What do we learn about drawing pain, or writing emptying out pain?

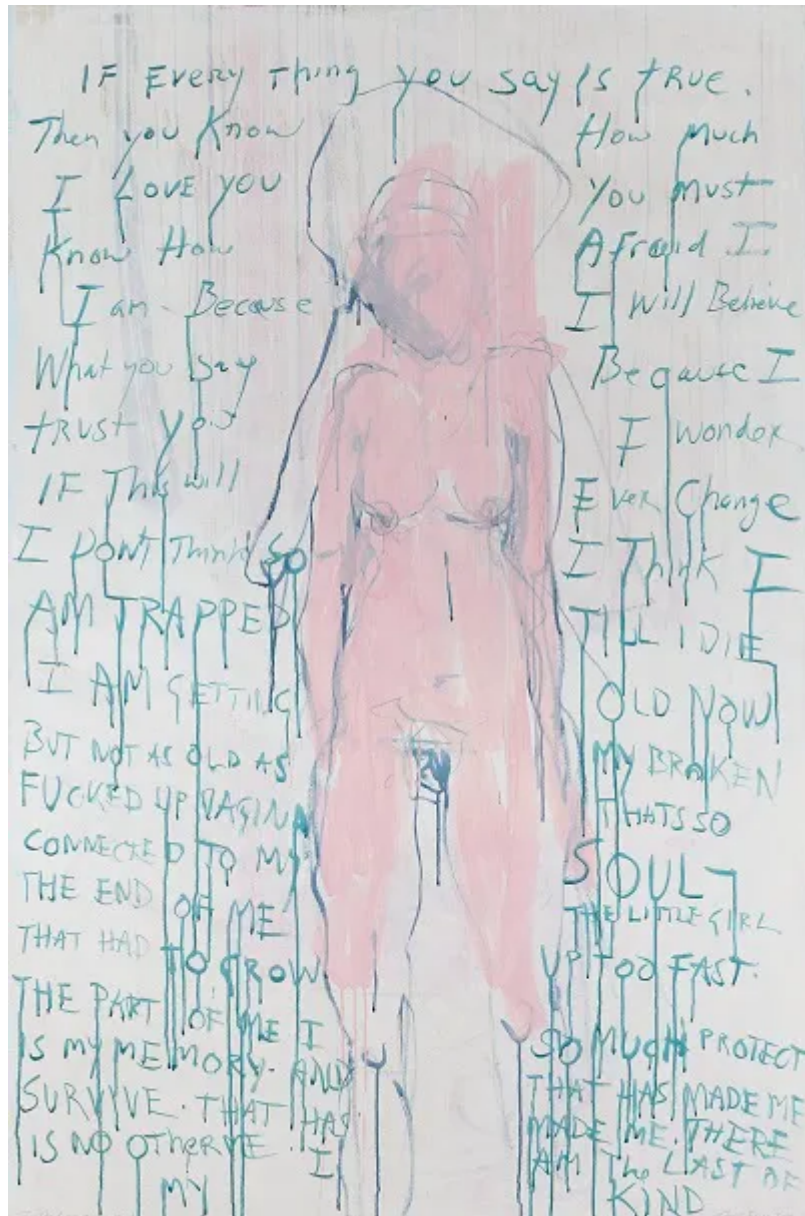
But as Karl Ove Knausgård argues, in a thoughtful interview he gave after curating the exhibition *Edvard Munch* for Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf (2019), we are inevitably affected by human portraits or landscapes due to their iconic impact, if their “emotional charge” resonates with our intuitive grasp of sexual insecurity, melancholia, jealousy, rejection, vulnerability, existential loneliness and pain. Knausgård also addresses the many motifs repeated throughout Munch's career, one of which was that of his sister's deathbed: “His life was very much about death when he grew up. This very act of creating, even when it is something very painful, can be a comfort in itself.”

He looks at the forests Munch paints and imagines them to be “inner forests,” since they are a recurring motif in unpeopled landscapes he painted created after moving out to a cottage at Åsgårdstrand, near the Oslo Fjord.

Not unexpectedly, a writer known for his effusive autobiographical fiction probes with deep fascination the kind of inner turmoils one imagines the painter to have gone through, up to his psychic breakdown (in 1908) and slow recovery afterwards, the retreat into landscape and garden paintings, then looking closely at the late self-portraits where Munch reflects on ageing and decay. The relations of form to the implied content are not obvious, or to use one of Munch's questions he posed during an early visit to Paris in 1889, how would flesh take form? How would color come alive?

The flesh in Emin's confessional artworks is certainly implicit, it is there and yet we rarely see it. Her carnality may be a conceit, as her over-evocative narrative titles for the paintings suggest. Her conceit of off-putting, if one were to expect an artist to carry their work with a little bit more humility or soberness. At the same time, one cannot deny these drawings a tremendous power of line and color that we do not associate with the facetious installations (*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*; *My Bed*) that turned Emin into a prominent member of the Young British Artists (including Damien Hirst and others), her generation rising to critical and commercial success in the London art scene of the 1990s. The facetiousness is gone, and Emin can surely argue, as she did in 2013, that critics are harsher towards her "because I'm a woman."

We wonder, though, whether her own harshness toward herself, her screaming statements, warrant a critical approach that can apply a careful attunement to self-figuration, hand-painted meditations on a wide range of female experiences that include rape and abortion, sexual ecstasy and rejection, insomnia and menopause, ageing, bodily illness. Death, too, is very real. And it can also be an allegorical figure, as we know from Ingmar Bergman films. It appears to the living. The current pandemic has also brought home many other awarenesses; for example, of the depths of isolation and self-isolation, and the deadly effects of the climate crisis.



Tracey Emin, *I Am the Last of My Kind*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 182 x 120 cm. Courtesy: Galleria Lorcan O'Neill © Tracey Emin. All rights reserved, DACS 2020

Emin is not the last of her kind. We would wish to separate the biography from the art, but that may be less possible when the aesthetic sensation, say of the faint but fraught pink of the flesh in *I Am the Last of My Kind*, is very nearly echoing a classic iconography of the tortured, crucified torso, as we recall it in El Greco's emaciated figures of pain, twisted nailed to the cross. That "crucified" or distorted form appears again and again in the large scale Emin paintings, as well as the tiny clay-modelled bronze sculptures (*There Is Nothing Left but You*; *I Whisper to My Past Do I Have Another Choice*; *Humiliated*, all three from 2013) covered with white patina that sit on white slabs—one is hanging on the wall, titled *Crucifixion*, 2014—awkwardly miniscule like the diminutive bronze of a hedgerow bird one nearly overlooks coming halfway up the staircase to the gallery (*The Only Place You Came to Me Was in My Sleep*, 2017).

The naked standing pink figure, head angled as if she's been lynched, is surrounded by Emin's hand-written confessional, about the trapped "little girl who had to grow up too fast," who addresses a "you" as if it were a lover or friend or lost part of herself: "Because I trust you." Who is you? The you is asked to know how afraid she is, and that she is getting old now: "But not as old as My broken fucked up vagina . . . The Part of Me I so Much protect is my memory." Could the "you" also be her own body, her own fracturing anatomy, spiraling out of control, forked out? Could the "you"—if we were to apply a retrospective imaginary—be addressed to an invasive cancer, a lover that would rip out her bladder, womb, ovaries, part of her colon and vagina? It is impossible to tell.

I Came Here for You, says a painting title from 2018. That is what the Reaper would say, no?

The unprotected, scathing memories opened up in these self-portraits spill blood and guts on the floor, and when one looks carefully at the blotched-out faces and the red bleeding genitalia in the figures, one wonders whether her dreams also created the monsters that fearful paranoia can give birth too, monsters of anatomy, body parts, part objects and extractions, losses of the shelter that an organic body may signify as long as one has not encountered painful interventions. The notion of the body as a shelter is probably owed to an older religious and spiritual imaginary, allied to concepts of the sanctuary that we know to have been trespassed all through human history. Thinking of "house"—in poetry and folklore, modern psychology and architecture—through the imaginary of containers, Gaston Bachelard once suggested (in *La poétique de l'espace*) that we can look at fragile shells, or the most delicate chrysalis, just like our intimate small caskets, as objects *that may be opened*.

Withdrawal into a shell, if that were the idea of the loneliness of the soul, is always paradoxical, since humans, much like animals or plants, crave intimacy of touch and consolation, the soft warmth of light, or as Emin might suggest through her explicit autofictions, the response of a lover to her lust and passion. In fact, in her autobiography, *Strange Land*, Emin thinks of art as analogous to quivering sex, when our cunts are wet with stimulation, and she likens great sex to out-of-body experiences



Tracey Emin, *The Loneliness of the Soul*, Royal Academy of Arts, 2021. Installation view. Photo: Johannes Birringer

—the kind of ecstasies of the soul that are described in Sufi poetry or Tantric mysticism. Perhaps her lines draw up an immersive delirium, dissolving boundaries of a conscious mind and tapping into the surreal. Yet, neither Munch nor Emin have faith in the divine or the cosmic, although a closer look at Munch's watercolors and later landscape paintings (or some of his nude figures in his graphic prints) may link the lines and deft colors to an internal, psychological pain that might be blinding. The solipsistic image that comes to mind if one looks at one of Munch's self-portraits is one where he only half-finishes his face, leaving it blank with only one eye.



Tracy Emin, *I Never Asked to Fall in Love—You Made Me Feel Like This* (2018), Installation view, Royal Academy of Arts, 2021. Photo: Johannes Birringer

The mangled and distorted crimson gynaecology evoked in Emin's self-portraiture can amount to shrill melodrama; it is deeply disconcerting yet forces you to connect into it, identify it. How peculiar and irritating is it, all this splatter? But how prodigiously evocative is it to women viewers who have gone through the blooded experiences of abortion, miscarriage and menopausal depression? How emotionally gripping can it be to all those of us who know the bloody damaging psychic fallout of rejection, betrayal and humiliation, or the body giving way, our biological anatomy also a toolkit of our abjections, scarred memories.

The show, however calculated it may have been for the blockbuster museum curatorial committees that nowadays program our Infinity Rooms and Virtual van Gogh Immersive 3D Experiences, it also does leave us mournful, quiet and somber, as we walk away from this exhibition not knowing about Emin's life, of what she expects from ageing and the later stages of her female physical and sexual being, or what this may imply for our own reflections on our embodiments, the ecstasies and ravages we all experience and bring along with us, together with all the broken promises and illusions. When you title a self-portrait *I Never Asked to Fall in Love—You Made Me Feel Like This* (2018), what is on your mind? Do we need to unpack and unravel what is underneath (in the artist's life) or can we take home from the exhibition what is left, perhaps very quietly, in the corners of our eyes, gentle touches of water color (feint beige, blue and pink), and some vivid colorful acrylics—fast lines that split and waver, attenuating into long entanglements of

running pigment, the female figure's face: blank or obliterated, behind slashed daubs and blocks of black, red or blue. What is left of everyone you have ever slept with except a faint memory? What is left of your childhood and your old age? The loneliness of the soul is merely a weak consolation.

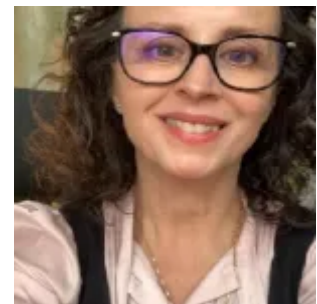
Endnotes

[1] Tracey Emin/Edvard Munch, *The Loneliness of the Soul*, 18 May–1 August 2021, Royal Academy of Art, London.

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