

Christian Tony Norum: An Homage to Art and the Artist

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Christian Tony Norum wanders around with a cap emblazoned with the message “I love Edv. Munch”, a declaration of love written in ballpoint pen on light-blue fabric. That artists have their particular heroes from the history of art is well-known. Such idolization is a matter of relating to a legacy of art, of working to forge a career and find one’s place. Art history presents us with a complex system of influence running from one artist to the next. While some sources of inspiration are proudly trumpeted, others are more surreptitious: the great nineteenth-century figure painter Adolph Tidemand, for example, was inspired by none other than Raphael.¹ A few generations later, the encounter with Picasso’s *Guernica* at Kunstneres Hus in 1937 proved to be a defining moment for Rolf Nesch, while the American painter Philip Guston had a reproduction of Piero della Francesca on his studio wall. Cézanne studied Poussin, while Claude Monet, Henri Matisse, Edgar Degas, Paul Signac, and Paul Gauguin all owned paintings by Cézanne. And during a major retrospective at the National Gallery in Oslo in 1945, Edvard Munch’s paintings resonated deeply with Asger Jorn.

When it comes to hero worship in art, however, Christian Tony Norum takes some beating. In recent years he has carried out a major project that renders homage to artists such as Edvard Munch, Asger Jorn, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse. The painting *Looking In to Dimensions Documenting History* (2017) shows a bus full of luminaries from the world of art, including Munch, Picasso, and Hilma af Klint. While Munch himself kept his idols close to the vest, Norum makes inspiration the very essence of art, with artistic idols serving as constitutive elements in his various works. Candidly and almost systematically, Norum searches out artworks, places, institutions, and materials linked to his heroes, thereby highlighting the relationship between the individual artist and art history. All art builds in one way or another on previous works of art. This was famously encapsulated by the art historian and museum director Alfred H. Barr in the chart of artistic inspiration he made for the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition at MoMA in New York in 1936.² Similarly, in the study *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), the literary historian Harold Bloom, known for his notion of the literary canon, examined how authors relate to previous literature. Bloom discussed authors’ fears of being influenced and their yearning to become a fresh new voice that would transcend the boundaries of what had previously been written. Such aspirations belong to a modernist way of thinking and to the idea of developing a distinct idiom independent of the past. For his part, Norum is afraid of neither art history nor of being influenced. The feature wall at Galleri K is adorned with the large-scale painting *Sublime Hidden Treasures* (2017) with its depiction of the National Gallery’s grand stairwell, to which Norum has added a towering portrait of Henri Matisse taking it all in. The work pays homage to the National Gallery as an art institution and to Matisse’s impact on Norwegian art history through his Norwegian followers, the so-called Matisse students, whom he taught at his art school in Paris.³ The stairwell depicted in *Sublime Hidden Treasures* is the very one that leads to the National Museum’s collection and the legendary Munch Gallery.

Indeed, of all the aforementioned artists it is Munch who enjoys the place of privilege in Norum’s art. And when it comes to Munch, Norum’s collaboration with his live-in partner, the artist Andrea Bakketun, plays a key role. Bakketun is a descendant of Harald Holst Halvorsen, the art collector who was Munch’s art dealer and gallerist. Halvorsen presented Munch’s art and held exhibitions at his gallery Holst Halvorsens Kunsthandel.⁴ In Norum and

Bakketun's previous home in Bjørn Farmanns Gate in Oslo, the same street where Galleri K lies, vestiges of Halvorsen's life were visible in the art, furniture, books, and objets d'art he had acquired. The collection and the flat serve as the basis for several of Norum's and Bakketun's works and art projects. In various ways, the flat highlights the importance of art, biographies, environs, and art institutions in Norum's own art, alternating as he does between painting, drawing, graphic art, installation, performance, and curating. This is a multifaceted artistic praxis that invites us to reflect on two key questions: What does art do to us? And how do we live with the history of art?

Norum and Munch

Munch's art and biography have enmeshed themselves in most of what Norum does, paints, prints, writes, and organizes. This autumn he travelled to the German seaside resort of Warnemünde, where painted in the same environs where Munch painted in the summers of 1907 and 1908, right before his nervous breakdown and hospitalization at Dr Jacobson's private clinic in Copenhagen. In Warnemünde, Munch painted the beach, the sea, and bathing men.⁵ These paintings are vitalistic works of art that celebrate the sun, masculinity, the human body, and life-affirming forces. Munch's magnum opus from this period is *Bathing Men* (1907), which was envisioned as part of a larger cycle that depicted the male figure from youth to old age.⁶ Munch photographed the naked men on the beach, and there is also a well-known photograph of Munch himself standing semi-nude and painting outdoors on the beach. The picture captures Munch working energetically with his brushes and palette, dedicated to his art and to the salubrious bathing. In contrast to his 1890s pictures and their focus on jealousy, illness, and death, Munch turns here his attention towards the beach, the sun, the sea, and the body. These joyous motifs also led Munch to experiment boldly with colours, brushstrokes, and materiality. In *Young Man on the Beach* (1908), for example, sand from the beach has been mixed in with the paint and thus become part of the painting's physical structure.⁷ The surroundings thereby flow into the art, not only as a motif and an ideology, but also in a purely material sense. And it was there, at Warnemünde, that Norum painted the beach where Munch had painted before him. Not content with seeking out the history of art in books and exhibitions, Norum literally walks in Munch's footsteps and takes the landscape, the area's history, and the very genre of painting with him into the present day. The idea of artistic inspiration itself is thereby revitalized.

Ekely

Warnemünde is but one of the Munch-related sites Norum has visited. On several occasions he rented Munch's studio at Ekely, where he painted, slept, and held exhibitions in Munch's surroundings. Munch purchased the Ekely estate in 1916 and lived there until his death in 1944. The Swiss chalet and its surrounding garden lay in the rural environs of Vestre Aker (since 1948 a part of western Oslo). This is where Munch built studio buildings designed by the architects Arnstein Arneberg in 1920 and Henrik Bull in 1929, of which the latter edifice, known as the Winter Studio, still stands today.⁸ At Ekely, Munch also built his characteristic outdoor studios, where he worked on large-scale paintings. The studio is the site where art comes into being; it is a space for creativity, work, and distractions. And at Ekely, Munch would test out various juxtapositions and constellations of his pictures, including the *Frieze of Life* series, and it was there he would receive museum bigwigs and journalists. Numerous photographs document Munch in the Winter Studio. In the 1950s, after Munch's death, an artist colony with studios was built nearby the estate. This was a strategically important move to ensure reasonable and well-suited facilities where artists could work.

Norum has used Ekely both as a workplace and as a gallery, indoors as well as outdoors. The exhibition as a motif turns up in both paintings and prints. He printed a series of linocuts at Ekely, in the printmaking studio that was founded there for artists following Munch's death. These linocuts clearly allude to Munch's graphic works and to the presses that once adorned Munch's chalet, which was demolished in 1960. Munch's constant experimentation with printmaking has earned him a reputation as one of the medium's greatest ever practitioners. Inspired by these efforts, Norum has developed a set of print motifs that he varies in different constellations, on different types of paper, and with different forms of ink and hand-colouring. One of the linocuts shows the studio at Ekely with Norum's paintings on display in the room, including the monumental painting *In This Composition of Color, I Have at Last My Ten-year-old Play* on the feature wall, where a canvas attached to a pole was stretched out on the ceiling. Painted with sweeping brushstrokes and in vibrant colours, the work features a long-haired figure placed behind a desk, ostensibly Munch's own. This amply coiffed figure recurs in Norum's pictures and bears a kinship with the female figures Munch himself depicted. Like Munch, Norum has developed a series of pictorial types that we encounter in picture after picture. In Munch's art, we recognize motifs such as the coastline, the moon pillar, the tree trunks, and the female figures. They function as an almost fixed inventory of types that he varied and let wander throughout his pictures, thereby becoming signifiers of life, nature, womanhood, love, and death. Similarly circulating throughout Norum's art we find the aforementioned well-coiffed female figure, pictures of museum and gallery rooms, and monochromatic, rectangular colour fields. The title of the present exhibition, *The Oceans Blue Dots in the Black Backdrop*, is also the title of the painting that greets visitors at the entrance. In the picture, various exhibition rooms and colour fields are juxtaposed in the pictorial plane, while a small, light-blue rectangular field alludes to the textile wallpapers that framed the major sesquicentennial exhibition *Munch 150* (2013) co-organized by the National Gallery and the Munch Museum.

Backdrops and reused materials

The use of backdrops is a recurring artistic strategy in Norum's works and exhibitions. This approach relates to materials affiliated with Munch and the reuse of these materials. In addition to artworks, sites, and surroundings related to artistic idols, material residues form a separate category in Norum's homage project, with for example old Munch posters, exhibition wallpapers, and remaining PVC sheets from exhibitions held at the Munch Museum serving as the basis for new works of art. The materials bear witness to the manner in which Munch's art circulates and to Norum's eye for connections to the great master.

When Thon Hotel Munch in Munchs Gate 5 in Oslo renovated its premises, the Munch posters that had once adorned the bedrooms were thrown away. Norum got hold of these old, framed posters and used them as backgrounds for his own works. In one series, Norum smoothed the frame down and painted over Munch's images, though upon closer inspection we can discern the posters serving as the background. Also the wallpapers from the *Munch 150* exhibition were used to form such "backdrops". For that exhibition, the various display rooms were monochromatically papered in colours such as light blue, dark blue, orange, and bright red to serve as a backdrop for Munch's art. The colours were chosen to complement the pictures on display and in accordance with the exhibition rooms of Munch's own day. After the exhibition was over, the wallpapers were removed and Norum was able to secure some for his project. He repurposed these wallpapers as canvases, whether to underlie his paintings or to be stretched out "as is" as monochromatic works of art. Norum thus incorporates Munch's "background" and allows fragments from the National Gallery and the

Munch Museum to enjoy an afterlife in art, in a synthesis of art, exhibition rooms, and art institutions.

In conjunction with the Munch Museum's *Johns + Munch* exhibition in 2017, PVC sheets were made featuring the bedspread pattern from Munch's famous painting *Between the Clock and the Bed* (1940–42). The painting inspired the American artist Jasper Johns to create a series of works using Munch's bedspread as a motif. In Norum's exhibition, the bedspread is incorporated through one of the Munch Museum's PVC sheets. Placed over the chair, the sheet serves as the background for the projector that shows a film documenting Norum's performance. The use of Munch posters and the bedspread reproduction also allude to Munch's works as pop cultural icons and commercial goods. During the *Johns + Munch* exhibition, the bedspread tuned up on mobile phone covers, spectacle cases, mugs, and handbags, items that permeate our everyday activities and surroundings. This is how we live with the history of art.

The Munch Museum

The *Jorn + Munch* exhibition brought together two of Norum's heroes, Asger Jorn and Edvard Munch, and served as such as the perfect frame for Norum's intervention at the Munch Museum in autumn 2016. Titled *Chanting, All Clamoring, Chirping (Chiroptera), Blaring Elevator Stops. Dings*, the exhibition was a wide-ranging, three-day-long artistic stunt that presented Norum's works both outdoors in the atrium and inside the large auditorium that houses Munch's monumental drafts for the University Aula decorations. The paintings shown outside were placed directly on the ground or hung on trees or on the building's walls, where they were exposed to the autumn wind and rain. The pictures stood outside for the entire duration of the three-day exhibition and were thus exposed to a Munch-style "kill or cure" treatment.⁹ The auditorium walls are still covered in the light-blue textile wallpaper from *Munch 150*, which now formed the background for both Munch's and Norum's pictures. A cloth spread out in front of Norum's pictures was covered in autumn leaves and invited spectators to see a connection to the traces of leaves in the plein-air paintings. A separate section featured an exhibition with fifty artists, all of whom had been invited by Norum, and there was also a full programme of performances and concerts. The event was similar to Norum's exhibitions at Ekely, such as the *Human Mountain* exhibition in 2015 where Norum invited a hundred artists to display their works in Munch's studio. Works are included in Norum's exhibitions not on the basis of a strict round of jurying but through friendship, admiration, or perhaps a chance encounter on the street. Cooperating with other artists and organizing major group exhibitions is something that distinguishes Norum from Munch, who was wont to enjoy his own company at Ekely. Through Norum's intervention, the Winter Studio and the Munch Museum thereby became a venue for artistic collaboration and the social activities that take place around Norum.

As mentioned above, seeing Munch's later paintings at the National Gallery's retrospective exhibition in 1945 proved formative for the Danish artist Asger Jorn's further career, as analysed by the art historian Oda Wildhagen Gjessing in a study that underpinned the *Jorn + Munch* exhibition at the Munch Museum in 2016.¹⁰ Jorn was already well-acquainted with the early Munch through the paintings from the 1890s that had made Munch famous. The retrospective in 1945 included much of Munch's later production, and Jorn was mesmerized by the paintings' chromatic vibrancy and energetic brushwork.

As representatives of early expressionism and abstract expressionism, respectively, Munch and Jorn explore painting as materiality and action. Studying their canvases and

brushstrokes affords us a glimpse into how these pictures were created – we see the gestures and the movements. “All that painting documents is the work carried out on it,” observes the art historian Stian Grøgaard, who concludes that “painting became modern by showing how it was created”.¹¹ Norum navigates this field with Munch and Jorn as his lodestars, borrowing from their images, painterly praxis, and strategy of including surface traces of their actions. The two painters differed however: Munch, according to Grøgaard, “was too timid to turn the entire picture into a gesture”;¹² Jorn, by contrast, was bold enough to do so, but this makes us more clearly discern the spontaneous Munch. The juxtaposition of Jorn and Munch highlights similarities in their colours and brushstrokes, but whereas Jorn ventures into abstract pictures full of gesture, Munch never abandons the human figure. His closest brush with abstraction is to be found in his depictions of the sea in the Warnemünde paintings, where waves are portrayed as abstract patterns, as in *Waves* (1908). Munch’s direct technique and use of colour speaks to Jorn, as they also speak to Norum. Indeed, Norum even wrote a dialogue where he conversed with Jorn and Munch about painting, the role of the artist, and life in art.

Married to art

With Munch and Jorn as his guiding lights, Norum finds his bearings in the world of painting. His figures and colours greatly resemble Munch’s, while the abstract and gestural aspects are drawn from Jorn with the stretched-out wallpapers from *Munch 150* highlighting monochromatic painting as one of the medium’s teleological endpoints. Norum thereby assumes a variety of positions within painting. He can create large-scale figure paintings, even as he can mess around with them or add pastose strokes of paint to the canvas. His background in graffiti art has given him experience in taking control of large surfaces, and doing so quickly. He has learned to work directly and spontaneously, in close contact with the urban landscape and its various surfaces, using the spray can as his brush. Working on-site and in the street also serves as the starting point for one of Norum’s performances from his 2015 exhibition at Kunstnerforbundet in Oslo, where plein-air painting was the final act of a performance that featured Norum taking a trip through various art institutions in Oslo. Like Munch, who had painted on the beach in Warnemünde, Norum stood outside and painted in Kjeld Stubs Gate, in front of Kunstnerforbundet, looking in on his own exhibition on the opening night, with Gunnar S. Gundersen’s façade and the sculpture of Per Krohg in the background. When the painting was finished, it was installed in the exhibition room, infusing the room with the scent of fresh oil paint. The entrance to the exhibition room had been appended with Theodor Kittelsen’s doors from his home in Hvitsten, featuring the artist’s painted water lilies. Thus imbued with historical significance, the entrance served to remind visitors of the procession of artists who have been shown at Kunstnerforbundet, with Kittelsen himself being the first artist to hold a solo exhibition at Kunstnerforbundet, in January 1911.¹³ Most famous for his illustrations for Asbjørnsen and Moe’s *Norwegian Folktales* and his own *Black Death* series, Kittelsen also turned his home into a work of art through painted doors, wall surfaces, and furniture. Such an intertwining of life and art is something that appeals to Norum.

Norum’s citywide performance was filmed and is now being shown at Galleri K. The artist refers to the performance as his marriage to art, with the ceremony itself taking place in the National Gallery’s stairwell – a declaration of love to the National Gallery and to the building that was Norway’s very first museum of art. Considering the building’s uncertain future, with the National Gallery set to move to a new complex in 2020, the performance and the film both seem like a political appeal. From the National Gallery, Norum continued to Kunsternes Hus and the stairwell there featuring Per Krohg’s ceiling fresco of “the artist’s

thorny trek to the top”; when the building was inaugurated in 1930, the long struggle of Norwegian artists to have their own exhibition building was finally over, a struggle that had begun as far back as the early 1880s. Norum’s journey through Oslo’s art institutions continued on to Kunstnerforbundet, an art institution formed by artists for artists. The gallery, founded in 1910 by Henrik Sørensen and other prominent artists, became a venue for exhibiting several of the famed Matisse students and thereby helped launch modernism in Norway.

Norum’s art reflects the complexity of the modern day and the diversity in approaches and perspectives. By highlighting the importance of admiration, inspiration, fascination, and empathy, Norum creates a profound homage to art and the artist – an homage that shows due reverence to the studio where art is created and to the institutions that display art and take care of it for ever.

¹ Eilif Salomonsen, “Spekulative bilder: Adolph Tidemands historiemaleri i 1840-årene – seks utvalgte tegninger sett i lys av samtidig tysk historiemaleri og hegeliansk dialektisk tenkning” (master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2016). Salomonsen demonstrates how Tidemand composed his works in a dialogue with European masters such as Raphael, Albrecht Dürer, and Jacques-Louis David.

² Alfred H. Barr created the chart for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at MoMA in 1936. Barr’s handwritten chart can be found in the museum’s archive.

³ Henri Matisse ran his art school in Paris from 1908 to 1911. Several Norwegian artists studied there and have come to be known in Norwegian art history as the Matisse students, which included Jean Heiberg, Henrik Sørensen, Axel Revold, Per Deberitz, and Per Krohg.

⁴ Harald Holst Halvorsen opened his private art gallery, Holst Halvorsens Kunsthandel, in 1917. The gallery was located at Universitetsgaten 14, right across from the National Gallery. Halvorsen represented artists such as Edvard Munch, Kai Fjell, Ludvig Eikaas, and Inger Sitter. After Halvorsen’s death in 1960, his daughter Anne Birgitte Bjerke took over the gallery operations, before Holst Halvorsens Kunsthandel closed its doors in 1995.

⁵ The exhibition *Livskraft: Vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900–1930*, held at the Munch Museum 17 February–17 April 2006, presented Munch’s pictures in the light of vitalism as an historical phenomenon. See *Livskraft: Vitalismen som kunstnerisk impuls 1900–1930*, exhibition catalogue (Oslo: Labyrinth Press, 2006).

⁶ Trine Otte Bak Nielsen, “Edvard Munch: De tre livsaldre, 1907–1908” (graduate thesis, University of Oslo, 2006).

⁷ Gerd Wold, *Edvard Munch: Samlede malerier*, vol. 2: 1898–1908 (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2008), 792–793, cat. nos. 808–809.

⁸ Gerd Wold, “Byggherren på Ekely”, in *Munch og Ekely 1916–1944*, ed. Sissel Bjørnstad (Oslo: Labyrinth, 1998), 93–122.

⁹ Mille Stein discusses the myth of “kill or cure” (*hestekur*, lit. “horse cure”) in Munch’s art. She highlights the art collector Rolf Stenersen’s role in how Munch’s techniques have been presented. Although Munch did paint outdoors, many of the pictures that he allegedly subjected to an intentional kill-or-cure treatment are unfinished works and drafts that were stored carelessly and that were never shown at exhibitions. See Mille Stein, “Edvard Munch og ‘hestekuren’: En revurdering”, *Kunst og kultur* 100, nos. 1–2 (2017): 48–74.

¹⁰ See Oda Wildhagen Gjessing, “Asger Jorns billede: En undersøkelse av Edvard Munchs betydning for Asger Jorns billedmessige uttrykk 1944–53” (master’s thesis, University of Oslo, 2005).

¹¹ Stian Grøgaard, “Ingen metode er spontan”, in *Jorn + Munch*, ed. Oda Wildhagen Gjessing (Oslo: Munchmuseet, 2017), 111–112. Translations in this essay are by the author.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

¹³ Hans-Jakob Brun, *Kunstnerforbundets første 100 år* (Oslo: Kunstnerforbundet, 2011), 66–68.