

Charles Munch: Northwoods Renaissance Man



Tree, man, deer and rabbit line up in descending order to face the viewer head on in Charles Munch's painting *Hush*. Each figure is equally considered. The terrain is geometrically segmented into plowed rows of farmland and partially wild hills with every blade of grass or perfectly formed leaf stylized to the point of creating patterns. Bold light-hued lines enclosing bright solid colors infuse the scene with a jittery neon vibrancy. The controlled composition and techniques to render it appear unnatural but there is a poised serenity bordering on the utopian.

Comic-book conventions of pop art and the sharp color cut into geometric form that define post-impressionism seem evident in Munch's work, but the artist claims Renaissance painters Piero della Francesca and Giovanni Bellini as primary inspirations. Indeed he shares della Francesca's curious compositional math, Bellini's penchant for dream-like representations of the natural world, and both men's humanist point of view. The complicated relationship between man and his element make up the narrative but the vehicle of storytelling is the beauty of oil on canvas. Munch offers the viewer the "object of mediation" and allows us to fill in the thematic subject.

In his professional statement the artist writes, "I use bright, clear colors, and simplified shapes, attempting to convey a distinct image by the plainest means possible. I eliminate extraneous details, allowing room for the expression of emotion through the abstract elements of color, line, and shape. I depict my subject with barely enough description to make it recognizable, and then try to bring it to pulsing life through vibrant color relationships and dynamic composition. My goal is to create images that are even truer to my vision of nature and my emotions about it than a realistic painting could be."

Charles Munch attended the Portland Museum School, New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture, and Reed College. Trained in representational art, it

was not until the early eighties that he transitioned his style to the simplified, emotionally expressive work he has become known for.

Originally from St. Louis, Munch regularly summered in Door County with his family. The lake views and wildlife of the region were imprinted upon his aesthetic from an early age and there is an almost child-like fixation on reclaiming those innocent days.

In *The Peaceful Forest*, the viewer encounters an intimate scene in a clearing. A few deer graze oblivious in the foreground, but one doe appears captivated by nude humans of indeterminate sexual origin lolling in the trees. The people are ghost-like, translucent blue and unashamed. They do not face the viewer and appear as wild as their animal counterparts.

“How do we fit in the natural world?” Munch says this is one of the primary questions he asks as he paints pictures that explore the tension between humans and animals in their unspoiled environment.

“By combining optimism and anger I am showing the animals as triumphant, or at least holding their own.”

In *Snowbirds*, the artist offers a literal bird’s-eye view of a snowy evergreen forest that is pretty as a Christmas card. The scene is populated with people and deer spaced between trees at regular intervals. The men might be wearing hunting regalia but do not carry weapons. They almost appear to be traveling with the herd. There is no sense of pursuit.

Since 1982, Munch has lived on an isolated hilltop near poetically named Lone Rock, Wisconsin. He was an artist-in-residence at the Paine Art Center and shows regularly at the Milwaukee Art Museum and Chicago Cultural Center. In 2008, he was awarded a Wisconsin Arts Board Fellowship.

Despite being surrounded by the flora and fauna he captures, Munch tends to paint indoors, relying on his imagination to supply in editorial fascination what it lacks in detail.

Two Worlds paints the intersection of man and beast in posthumous harmony. Does and their fawns prance through a serene graveyard. Markers are incorporated seamlessly into nature, suggesting that the artist makes no judgment about our monuments to the dead. There is a playful nod to the continuity of life. The peaceful setting highlights the nobility of creatures that hoof over upturned earth made green and fruitful by decaying flesh. Perhaps man comes to terms with the world around him only after he reaches his inevitable destination.

Charles Munch’s singular vision will remain on exhibit through October 10th at the Tory Folliard Gallery in Milwaukee.

