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[Charles Munch: Dreaming in Color - Fairfield Centre for Contemporary Art]

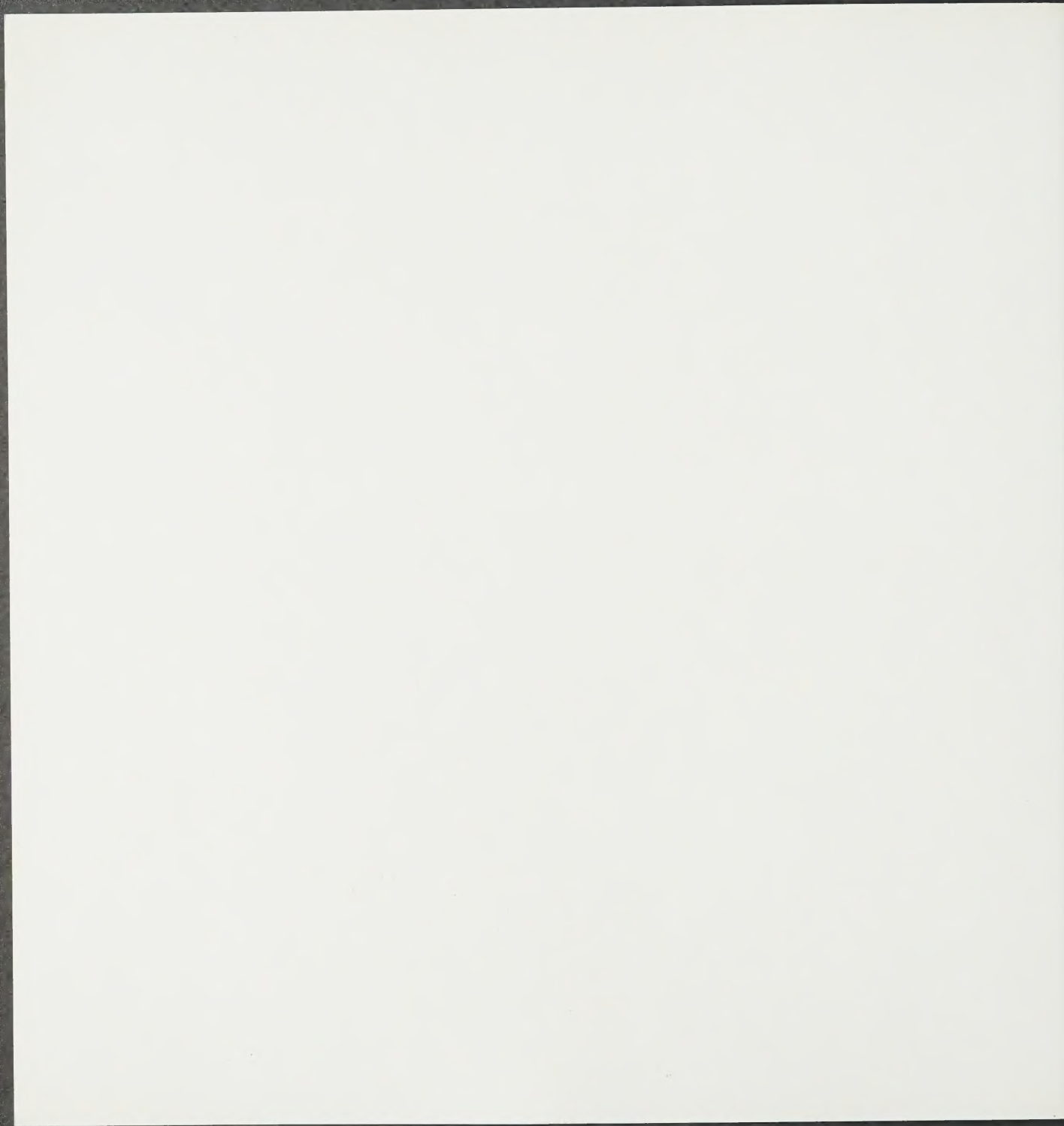
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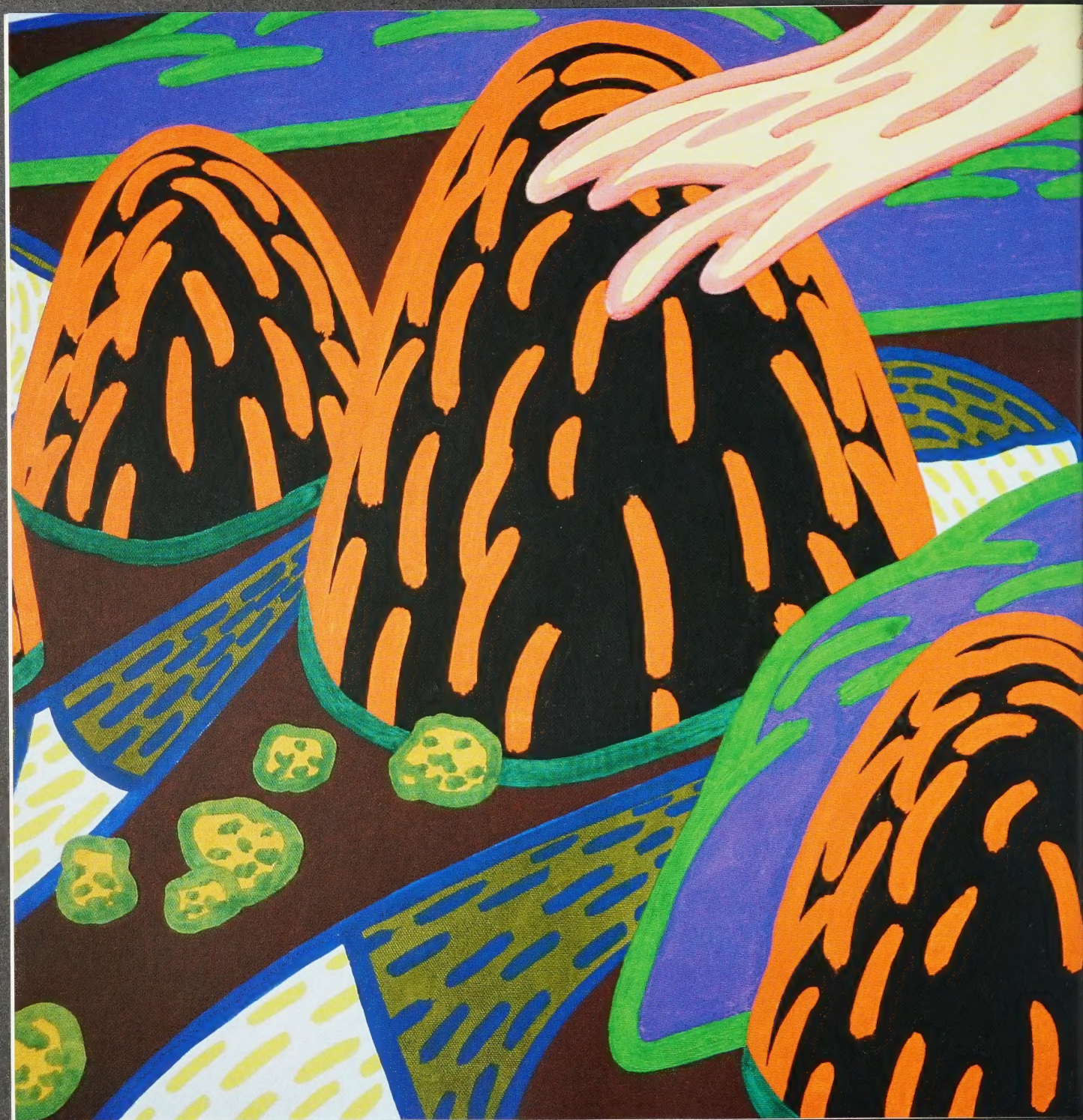
Charles Munch
DREAMING IN COLOR
Paintings 1971-2006

Jody Clowes
Richard Ely





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F A I R F I E L D
Center For Contemporary Art

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"Painting a Path Home" © Jody Clowes
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Self Portrait on Porch 1971
oil on canvas
30 x 20

Painting a Path Home: Introduction

Jody Clowes

Charles Munch is a painter with the heart of a dramatist. His charged and mythic scenes play out against powerfully graphic landscapes so vivid that they resemble characters themselves. Among rolling hills and dense woods, men wrestle with bears, straddle huge horses bareback, and sleep through the footfalls of passing deer and mountain lions. The woods and fields seem sometimes friendly, sometimes fierce, and the humans' roles are played with ambiguity, raising potent questions about our place in the natural world. Are we intruders in the wilderness, or still part wild ourselves? Where is the boundary between the wild and the tame? What is the relationship between the forest and the farm?

Without making any pretense of answering these questions, Munch's enigmatic dramas express both his love of nature and his urgent concern about the disappearance of wild lands and animal habitat. A central theme of his work is our failure to be good stewards of the planet, but he is not a moralist. His paintings are deeply considered meditations on the nature of being human and our complicity in the radical reconfiguration of the world around us. They seek new ways of being at home in nature again, of recognizing both nature's intrinsic value and our essential kinship with the wild.

Munch's early work seems worlds away from the paintings he's become known for. Trained as a realist and devoted to the traditions of early European painting, he spent fifteen years honing his ability to communicate what he saw through paint. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Munch's paintings focused on the things he loved best: broad fields under expansive skies, simple barns and churches nestled among clumps of trees, or his partner Jane Furchgott in their comfortable old house. The many self-portraits from these years are reflective and dispassionate, focusing on depiction rather than self-examination. By 1980, however, the serenity of his bucolic landscapes and figure studies was increasingly out of sync with his

tumultuous inner life.

Searching for subjects that conveyed greater emotional intensity and narrative power, Munch began to paint from imagination rather than observation. The freshness and color of the scenes that emerged in his sketchbooks inspired a new style of drawing, with pools of bold color demarcated by even, consistent lines. Never a bravura painter, Munch reveled in the clarity of this new approach. He meticulously pared back his use of line, all but eliminated brushwork, and laid down neat sections of unmodulated hues. Newly fascinated by the mechanics of visual communication, he became more directly engaged with the way marks carry meaning. The objects in his canvases began to look like symbols of themselves: leaves became pointed ovals, streams were formed with two undulating lines, and forests were painted as a gathering of rhythmic columns. Paradoxically, the simple contours and strong colors simultaneously created a dreamlike atmosphere and made his challenging imagery appear even blunter than direct realism might.

As Munch's representations began to edge toward abstraction, he became obsessed with the language of symbols. Between 1987 and the mid-'90s he created a fertile series of pictures and installations about the nature of abstraction. Seeking to convey the energies at the heart of life, he made abstract paintings representing elemental forces like fire and air. By the late 1990s, however, Munch's interest in abstraction was subordinated to his desire to portray passionate interactions between humans, animals, forests, and fire.

Pouring everything he knows about communicating through line and color into each work, Munch has become a painter of great sophistication and subtlety. His vision of living in balance with nature—and the fatal consequences of failing to find that balance—is cautionary, tinged with both humor and sadness, and profoundly humane.



“Because I Could”

Munch first studied painting as a young teenager, focusing on watercolor technique. He was already committed to realism when he arrived at Reed College in 1963, where, as Munch recalls, the figurative painter Willard Midgette “gave me permission to be a realist painter.” In the waning years of Abstract Expressionism one still needed such permission, and Midgette’s open-minded approach was a remarkable gift for a student so unmoved by artistic fashion. Midgette’s teaching emphasized art history, and his course on Florentine Renaissance painting made a lasting impression. At Reed Munch also studied with Lloyd Reynolds—a leader of the midcentury calligraphy revival—and it is easy to see the precision and fluency of calligraphic line in his mature style. Although he continued his studies at Portland Museum School and the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting, and Sculpture, it was his experience at Reed that had the greatest impact on his life as an artist.

Despite his devotion to Renaissance art, as a young man Munch was most drawn to landscape. He took a purist stance, working from life and carefully recording what he saw before him. He chose most often to paint scenes from Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, and the farmland around his family’s summer home there. After graduation, he began working as a paintings conservator in New York, and found himself absorbing lessons in the techniques of his predecessors. His conservation work focused on 17th-century Dutch and 19th-century American paintings; not surprisingly, the luminous sky, low horizon, and hushed atmosphere of several of his best canvases from the 1970s, like *Shiloh Church* [11] and *Gravel Piles* [15], sound echoes of both of these landscape-painting traditions. But what he really took from his experience as a conservator was a profound respect for craft. By 1971 his own skills were becoming quite advanced, and he dedicated himself to perfecting them. “Because I could,” as Munch says, he

began painting in a tightly controlled manner, using a dry brush, a subtle palette, and a thoughtful, nuanced approach to composition. Occasionally he chose to work more freely—as in *Self Portrait with Beard & Long Hair* [23], for instance—but in general he favored a crisper, cleaner stroke.

Realist painting was receiving renewed critical attention in the 1970s, yet Munch’s own work remained staunchly out of fashion. He had little interest in the intrinsic qualities of paint or the impact of photography, and there is no hint of commentary or irony in either his style or his choice of subjects. The impression one gets is of a remarkably self-contained and self-directed personality, unconcerned with the goals or ambitions of his peers. The work from this period is overwhelmingly sunny and serene, imbued with conviction and an unabashed, almost childlike love of the Wisconsin landscape. The exquisite *Joliet & Juniper* [16] reveals this well: despite its formal echo of the empty buildings in Edward Hopper’s work, the mood of quiet repose carries none of Hopper’s bleak melancholy. Similarly, Munch’s figure studies from this period are beautifully composed, intimate portraits—most of them, in fact, of himself or Furchgott—that express a satisfying lyrical ease. Although the structure of *Upstairs Winter Model* [14], for example, is quite complicated, the result is a convincingly natural image.

Among the most effective works from the 1970s are nearly a dozen still lifes, often composed with unexpected objects that bespeak modern domesticity: a brown paper bag with a supermarket logo, or grapefruit wrapped in plastic. Curiously, their compressed spaces and tight focus create an atmosphere more charged than in some of Munch’s more ambitious canvases. *Still Life with Lemon & Thyme* [21] is perhaps the best, intricately arranged and loaded with texture and shine in a spectrum from mossy

terra-cotta to glossy enamelware and the glare of stainless steel. The black background sets each object in sharp relief, and the whole composition hinges on a single bright lemon.

Without any knowledge of Munch's later work, the peace and repose of his mature realist painting seem straightforward enough. Given the benefit of hindsight, however, the stillness and neutrality of Munch's imagery from the 1970s take on an almost eerie quality. It's hard not to see something brewing under the surfaces. In 1980, cognizant of the radical shift in direction he was about to take and wanting to make one last realist still life to keep for himself, Munch painted *Reclining Still Life* [28]. Setting the objects side by side in a very shallow plane, he cropped the composition hard and enlivened his palette with startlingly pungent shades of red, green, and yellow. At the far right a window looks out onto a snowy field, as though

offering a glimpse of the unknowable future. Over the next several years, Munch's artistic life would take him into similarly uncharted territory.

Introspection & Experimentation

Although he didn't make a clear move away from realism until 1981, Munch was already becoming restless and frustrated with the direction of his work even as he painted some of his most assured realist canvases. Thinking, as always, of Renaissance painting, he was eager to convey mystery and drama, to paint powerful emotions in strong colors. But the obvious subjects at hand in Sturgeon Bay, where he and Furchgott had settled, were decidedly subdued. *Interior with Two Figures* [22], painted in 1975, represents an early attempt at staging a scene with models, telling a story without discarding his practice of painting



Spring Trees 1971
oil on pressed board
7 3/4 x 12



Shiloh Church 1971
oil on canvas 16 x 33
Linda & Daniel Bader, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

from life. Like the brown grocery bag in *Reclining Still Life*, the setting (which is Munch's own home), furnishings, and clothing fix the narrative firmly in the present, a common strategy in contemporary painting inspired by the Old Masters. Although Munch began working with an Annunciation scene in mind, the meaning of *Interior with Two Figures* is intentionally ambiguous, suggesting a tense, sexually charged conversation. The atmosphere is curiously dry: the "angel" seems to be lecturing the woman, and she clearly doesn't want to hear him; in fact, she looks as if she'd much rather be somewhere else.

Six Women [26], another significant work from this transitional period, is more timeless: except for their modern hairstyles and their tan lines, the women could easily be a frieze of classical nymphs. Compositionally strong and beautifully rendered, *Six Women* sets off

challenging sparks, but it doesn't burn long. The painting came about in part because models were readily available through a cooperative life drawing group, which may explain why it feels provisional. Neither fish nor fowl, it's too convivial to be a pure figure study, too neutral to be a probing psychological portrait, and too artificial to imply narrative. It was an experiment he did not repeat.

The real shift in Munch's work occurred as he finally began to look inward for inspiration. *Clothes* [30], painted in 1980, expresses this with comic literalism; Munch notes wryly that he did a lot of drawings of his legs for awhile. It seems significant that *Clothes* was painted without a mirror, underlining his desire to explore his inner life more directly. The rich tones, confident brushwork, and off-kilter perspective lend this canvas great warmth, and the composition, centered on his feet, implies movement

and potential. Yet despite its dramatic point of view, *Clothes* is strangely static. It offers few clues about where Munch might be going.

Oedipus & the Sphinx (Charles & Jane) [30] is more revealing. Although Munch describes this work as a false start, it does show his first tentative steps toward his mature style. In a departure from his usual method, he drew from life first, then painted from drawings. While the faces and hands are carefully modeled, the table looks like faux-painted wood grain, and Munch's plaid shirt is playfully unreal. The black backdrop, like a stage curtain, lends the figures dramatic weight. By paring it to essentials, Munch gave this simple picture a jolting directness. *Oedipus & the Sphinx* is the first of his paintings to portray convincingly the electricity of strong emotion, and to grapple seriously with the issues of relationship that are so central to his work. The couple's interaction—

particularly Munch's searching gaze—is uncomfortably intimate. Their locked eyes suggest hard questions with a riddling thrust: questions, perhaps, about the boundaries between lovers, and the limits of our capacity to understand one another.

Wrestling with challenges in his personal life and feeling his way toward a new artistic path, Munch actually painted very little during 1980. Instead he poured his energy into watercolor and crayon sketches, drawing almost exclusively from his imagination. The volatile imagery that bubbled up was raw and difficult; even the tree studies from this period vibrate with a tense inner life. Dreamlike and sometimes violent, Munch's drawings were loose, exploratory, and positively lurid in comparison to his realist palette. They recall the jarring color harmonies and bold paint application of the Post-Impressionists, pitting bubble-gum pink against bitter lime green or



Nude Woman on Bed 1972
oil on canvas approx. 20 x 30
location unknown

scarlet against turquoise and sketched with rapid, allusive strokes. Freed from the requirement to look like the model, the figures are rangy, acrobatic, and loose-limbed, their scale and foreshortening slightly askew. The space around them is tightly compressed, and they squeeze up to the picture plane with claustrophobic effect, demanding attention.

As his sketchbooks began to overflow, Munch selected the most compelling drawings for translation into oil paint, striving to capture their vivid freshness. The results were large, striking canvases that confront the viewer and command a room. Thematically, these works are densely packed, rife with biblical references yet often so personal as to be obscure. It should be noted that Munch's Christian motifs are not especially religious. They have more to do with his reverence for Renaissance painting than with Christian belief, and ultimately serve his own eccentric ends. *Creation & Birth* [34], for example, is obviously not a conventional Madonna and Child. Rather than the joy of new life, it depicts the shock and pain of separation, and the startled baby is thrust toward us with no promise of salvation.

First Judgement: Gender [32] plays obliquely on the Last Judgement theme. In this ambitious composition, Munch portrays the moment one becomes male or female, with the ambiguously gendered nude on the right awaiting its fate. (It's interesting to see the angelic messenger from *Interior with Two Figures* [22] appear again here on the left, charged with a bright authority that he lacked in the earlier picture.)

Having a twin sister has fueled Munch's fascination with the arbitrariness of sexual identity. More broadly, he's always teasing out dualities. Almost all of the fertile dramas in his sketchbooks, it seems, boil down to paired opposites. Twins and couples of all sorts recur throughout his work—from mother and child to man and deer—and what they are doing generally seems less important than the not-so-simple fact of their relationship. It isn't always clear what is happening between his figures, anyway. It's entirely possible that the good Samaritan in *Saved from Drowning* [37] has changed his mind, and is pushing the hapless victim back under.



War Cloud 1972
oil on canvas 28 x 32
Private Collection

Communicating Mystery

In *Seeking a Way* [35], Munch depicts himself under the earth, burrowed into the body of the planet. Having tapped into rich veins of color and symbolic imagery, he found himself prospecting for more, hoping to grasp the fundamental nature of what he was doing. It seemed to him that the pictures appearing spontaneously in his sketchbooks might have universal resonance, and he began thinking about the way symbols speak to our deeper, wilder selves, the part of us that participates in the earth's essential rhythm. In *Seeking a Way*, you can see him listening for that rhythm and hoping to pick up the beat. More and more, Munch sought to reduce the elements in his paintings to clear, basic marks, getting as close as he could to the essential, wordless hum of creation.

Once he committed himself to this distillation process, his painting strategies began changing rapidly. Look at the difference between 1981's *First Judgement: Gender* [32] and *Saved from Drowning* [37], painted in 1984. *First Judgement: Gender* has a complicated program, startling



Upstairs Winter Model 1973
oil on canvas 48 x 54
Philip & Mariette Orth, Naples, Florida

shifts in perspective, and a richly expressive range of brush strokes. In *Saved from Drowning*, the composition is radically scaled back. Fat, clean outlines pin each element firmly in place, and the squiggly water and brushed-in sky have an even, consistent texture. The strict delineation recalls collage, with each section retaining its own individual character. Compared with *First Judgement: Gender's* fever dream, *Saved from Drowning* is like a flash of insight. Both paintings employ impossible postures and weird angles, but the cartoonlike quality of the later work makes these somehow more believable. The image just makes more sense.

Munch owes a clear debt to the shorthand of comic books, signs, and graphic design. His background in calligraphy—he still talks about “the order and direction of strokes”—offered its own, very specific education in visual clarity. But the idiosyncratic system of line and color that Munch has developed is largely a by-product

of his drawing technique. In the mid-1980s, he was still modeling his figures through tonal gradation. As he continued using watercolor and crayon in his sketchbooks, it dawned on him that thick crayon lines could serve as dikes for translucent pools of watercolor. The stark simplicity of this technique, which gave pride of place to the sharp impact of strong color, was just what he'd been looking for. Translating it into oil paint, he applied each section of color as a thin, almost transparent wash, then brushed in the slightly denser outlines. The year 1987 marked a turning point, and Munch has continued to paint in this disciplined, systematic manner ever since.

The brooding *Blood Rain* [41] was one of the first paintings to exploit his new discovery, with its rune-like trees against pale pink, red, and grayed-down blues. It was followed closely by *Red Hands* [41], in which the color of the outlines themselves takes on a central role. The odd hues in *Red Hands* create a truly peculiar atmosphere, with



Gravel Piles 1974
oil on canvas 14 x 21
Michelle Berrong &
David Bader
Erwinna, Pennsylvania



Joliet & Juniper 1974
oil on canvas 32 x 40

fiery orange enmeshed in dull lavender and soft yellow pulsing behind bloody scarlet. These two canvases convey very shallow spaces. But as he eliminated so many other decisions and turned his attention to the effects of color, Munch became captivated by the problem of optical depth. Applying everything he'd learned as a conservator and a realist to this investigation, he searched for ways to create convincing landscapes with his new system. In the deep woods of *Night Runner* [40], we get an early glimpse of his favored strategies: a succession of receding horizon lines and short parallel marks, carefully placed verticals, and most of all, an extremely sophisticated palette of juxtaposed color. Compare *Night Runner* with more recent works like *Crows* [64] or *Angel Wars* [58] or *Husb!* [61], and you can see that Munch has never stopped thinking about space.

He's never stopped thinking about abstraction, either. Yet Munch is not interested in transcendence; his understanding of abstraction is thoroughly embodied. His metaphysical leanings are embedded in earth, water, air, and fire. As the clouds and trees and rocks in his paintings became more like signs and symbols, Munch began to envision a correlation between the human capacity for abstraction and the elemental forces of nature. The creation of art, he reasoned, is parallel in some way to the creation of life, and must be drawn from the same mysterious energy that fuels the world around us.

Although brushing up against that energy excited and unnerved him, thinking about artists as participants in creation made him feel more than a little grandiose. In *Man & Painting 4* [38], a naked, iconic man draws back in awe before a radically abstract image. The diptych reflects Munch's own reverence for art, as well as his growing sense that *all* paintings are abstract creations. By putting paintings into his pictures, he raised provocative questions about the role of art. The ability to create—to use signs and language, to think beyond what we see before us—is what makes us human; it separates us from the rest of nature. Paradoxically, it also connects us to nature's deepest mystery, the creative energy that drives life on the planet. As he honed his ability to work with symbols, Munch felt himself inching closer to that mystery, and each inkling of understanding made him want more.

Ensembles & Installations

Although Munch was piling on layers of meaning, he didn't cram them all into each painting. In order to read the connections between their diverse themes, the paintings from 1987 through the early '90s really need to be seen together. On the surface, *Monkeyman*, *Blood Rain*, *Red Hands*, and *Night Runner* don't seem to have a lot in common. And their overlapping concerns with abstraction, man's place in nature, and the artist's place in the world are undeniably abstruse. One needs an initiation, a little guidance into the labyrinth of his intent. When the



Jane Drawing Charles c.1975
oil on pressed board 8 x 6 3/4



Farm Landscape 1974
oil on canvas 29 x 60
Nancy & John Munch
Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin



Madison Art Center offered Munch a solo exhibition in 1987, he took the opportunity not only to show these works as an ensemble, but also to create an initiatory space.

He painted the walls gray, cooled the lighting, and built false columns at portals throughout the gallery. Like a playwright or filmmaker, he plotted the scenes in sequence, creating a spiral floor plan to lead visitors through the installation. Munch titled the show "Outer/Inner Sanctum," and its staged journey coiled into a central room, like a pilgrimage to the center of a mystery. *Monkeyman* [39] stood at the beginning, a hybrid creature clutching an abstraction he can't articulate and oozing pathos. In the "inner sanctum," Munch placed a large image of a naked man and woman, like Adam and Eve. Instead of the tree of knowledge, they flank an abstract painting that descends from the heavens. It's a funny image, puzzling at first glance. But it's also a keen summation of why they got kicked out of Eden: as they learned to think in abstractions, Adam and Eve abstracted themselves right out of the natural world.

It would be four years before Munch got a chance to create another installation, but he began planning for it almost as soon as "Outer/Inner Sanctum" closed. "Borderland," mounted in 1991 at the Milwaukee Art Museum, repeated the idea of a structured walk into a central mystery. In this case, though, visitors arrived at the inner space by one route and left it by another. And while decidedly lighter in tone, this second installation, with twice as many paintings, was far more consciously ordered than the first. It created a series of galleries and corridors in which visitors moved through varying aspects and degrees of abstraction, gradually retracing the path of Munch's investigations.

The heraldic *Man, Deer, & Painting* [42] opened the gallery with a rich paradox. The "painting" between the man and the deer, a summary depiction of a log that fills the canvas, is neither pure abstraction nor pure representation. And logs, of course, reside on the border between wild trees and domesticated lumber. Munch's painting of a log is like an icon of a constructed object—an abstraction once removed, if you will. There's a



Havdalab 1975
oil on canvas
18 x 32
*Isabel &
Alfred Bader*
Milwaukee,
Wisconsin

giddy humor to this idea, once you get the hang of it. In a similar vein, *Landscape Between Abstractions* [44] (which hung in an intermediate space) is like a virtual hall of mirrors. It's a painting of a painting surrounded by woods, surrounded by another painting, and finally surrounded by the world around it. Other works within "Borderland" directly echoed the Surrealist painter Rene Magritte's theatrical humor and visual jokes about the nature of art. Munch even limned drawings onto the gallery walls, unifying the space and further underlining the object-ness of the paintings within it. Munch himself finds many of his paintings funny, and the deadpan absurdity of these punning works does have a remarkable charm.

Although he appreciates the humor in his pursuits, Munch is also deadly serious. Considered as a whole, the underlying mood of "Borderland" was contemplative, curious, and probing. *Digging into the Wind* [44] and *Splitter* [43], hung near one another in an outer corridor,

resemble medieval paintings of the seasons, from planting to harvest, and suggest the possibility of living in concert with the land. Like effective signs, they are easy to read, and just abstract enough to serve as icons of good stewardship. Further in, Munch hung more reductive landscapes and purer abstractions. The four paintings within the central room represented his effort to paint the four elements, the primal fibers of the natural world. With unapologetically biblical language, he called them "letters of a First Word," as if they might be the alphabet or, perhaps, the genetic code used to spell creation. Envisioned as haunting, unbounded fields, they aim to express the ineffable, the unseen and inchoate.

Munch's next installation—and his last to date—was held at the Chicago Cultural Center in 1992 [46]. In "Fear & Desire" he set out to blur even further the boundaries between the paintings, their viewers, and the world around them. Munch painted geometric shapes

on the walls to create perspectival illusions, set life-sized cutout figures and cozy groupings of real furniture around the gallery, and even lettered a poem on the entry wall. As in "Borderland," the works ranged from elemental abstractions to resonant narratives and included (naturally) a few more of his riddling, iconic pictures of logs. Although they look like simple jokes, his three

cutout figures represented a well-considered spectrum of abstraction. *Animal God*, a green sprite, is scaled to fit on a nightstand, effectively reducing him to the status of a figurine. *Art Man* [46] is a cartoon of a cartoon, with his silly jumpsuit and hieratic pose, and *Shoe Lacer*—casually retying her shoe in front of the stormy and provocative *Fire on the Mountain* [48], her posture making light of the



Still Life with Lemon & Thyme, 1975
oil on canvas 22 x 34
Michelle Berong & David Bado
Erwinna, Pennsylvania

painting's tragic import—is calculated to amplify the prosaic effect of a real gallery visitor.

It's sometimes hard to pin down Munch's attitude toward his own work. The shifting tone of the works in "Borderland" and "Fear & Desire" is disorienting, veering from awe and exaltation to punning mockery and back again. Both installations were put together by mining his sketchbooks for drawings that suited the themes he wanted to pursue. By making connections and underlining points, these complex groupings seem designed to serve Munch's own need to see and understand his work more fully. He used them to tell himself a story—to take the cryptic individual scenes he'd composed and weave them into a larger, less inscrutable narrative. In that sense, the gravity of his metaphysical paintings and the light humor of his

visual jokes relate to each other like characters in a play. Both the hero and the jester have an important role.

Hopes & Fears

Since the early 1990s, Munch has concentrated on elegantly conceived interactions between people, animals, and the natural world, played out like scenes in a ritual drama. Much of the appeal of his recent paintings is the tension between their colorful, accessible style and the enigma of Munch's intent. As with so many of his early narrative works, the relationships he presents are often opaque or open-ended. Take *Phantom Buck* [45], a particularly striking example. Two hunters and two worshippers flank the ghostly apparition of a huge buck,



Interior with Two Figures 1975
oil on canvas 32 x 44

but Munch doesn't explain the buck or take sides with either pair of humans. Implying that neither the hunters who want to overpower the buck nor the worshippers humbling themselves before it are quite right, he leaves us to ponder the other options. The elegiac sky, with its setting sun, suggests that our time may be running out.

Reading his recent paintings, one might conclude that Munch doesn't trust what evolution has done to us: he seems to see human consciousness as a double-edged sword. Still, many of these works evoke optimism and balance, as if he were struggling to maintain his faith in human beings. In *Hush!* [61], a man, a deer, and a rabbit stand together like watchful comrades, and the huddled, almost feral person in *Sanctuary* [50] is silently joined by an array of subtly camouflaged wild creatures. The bareback riders in *Winter Journey* [53] and *The Way Out* [56] are being carried through the woods by huge, gentle horses who appear to know the way. Even fire has the potential to be an ally. In *Resurrection* [49] an untended campfire roars up to dance between the sleepers, yet it seems pleased to have company, and danger couldn't seem farther away. Munch's scenes of sleeping campers are among his most idyllic images—although it isn't always apparent whether Munch sees them in a positive light, or just believes people are less destructive when asleep.

His optimism is always provisional, however, and many of his recent paintings are truly mournful and accusatory. The wary deer in *Wisconsin Fantasy* [54] looks over a landscape in which it has no place. *Boundary Issues* [62] pits a deer in the forest against a clothed man on cleared land; his naked counterpart, who might have been allied with the deer, is too distracted or too self-involved to take part in the conflict. There may be no resolution. In *Crows* [64], the deer is already dead, but the man with his dog walks by without noticing. The man's implacable self-containment is mirrored by the cows in *Silent Night* [68], who couldn't care less about a house on fire.

The pained, prophetic messages in these late works—Munch calls them his “angry/sad paintings”—plead with us to do better, to find a way to embrace our own wildness and heal the wilderness that remains. One can only hope that some of us will heed the brilliantly direct language of



Self Portrait with Beard & Long Hair 1976
oil on canvas 16 x 10

his paintings, and reclaim our potential to create rather than destroy. Like the calm canoeist in *Floating World* [71], we do belong in nature, and so far nature has never stopped calling us home.



A Painter's Journey

Richard Ely

In the Studio

On a warm July afternoon in 2006, the painter Charles Munch stands in a corner of his studio, brush in hand, gazing thoughtfully at a large, nearly finished painting. Tall and slender, his blond hair slightly graying, Munch at sixty-one appears boyishly youthful in a faded blue T-shirt and red bathing trunks, despite the wire-rimmed glasses that accentuate his intellectual air.

Much of the studio is crowded with canvases leaning against the wall. Postcards and sketchbooks litter the floor, and the palette table is heaped with strips of color-daubed canvas. But the area where he paints is spacious and light-filled, the two adjoining walls covered with paintings in progress. Munch has been working in this studio nearly every day since it was built in 1983. It's his sanctuary, perched above the garage attached to the house that Munch and his partner, Jane Furchgott, designed for themselves on a rural hilltop near the town of Lone Rock in southwestern Wisconsin.

He and Furchgott, both recently semi-retired from three decades of work as paintings conservators, care for a large garden, an aging dog known only as Pup, four fussed-over cats, and a comfortably lived-in house in which almost nothing is new. In the kitchen a tan rotary phone sits on an antique Mission-style table, and pasted to the windows are paper cutouts of hawks meant to discourage birds from flying into the glass. The high-ceilinged living room has an aura of dusty stillness, with ancient wicker chairs, a wood stove, bookcases lined with oversized art books, and several cats curled asleep on the soft furniture. There is no television.

In conversation, Munch is soft-spoken and attentive, speaking of his life and work with quiet self-assurance. A man of many interests, he is a bread baker, an aficionado of 1950s and '60s rhythm and blues, an amateur naturalist,

and a reader of novels (he loves Jane Austen and has read all of Anthony Trollope, but these days reads mainly contemporary fiction), as well as a hiker and traveler who regularly embarks on canoe and kayak adventures with his best friend, Ted Haglund. Yet what is most striking about this alert, energetic man is his self-awareness, the sense he conveys of having deeply explored and come to terms with his inner life. In fact, it is this emotional openness that has enabled him, for the past twenty-five years, to access the personal imagery that animates his mysterious and beautiful paintings.

The painting he now contemplates depicts a scene from nature, rendered as a brightly colored vision. Munch's sharply outlined figures are drawn with clarity and verve, and appear lifelike within the stylized world he has created. The scene is not of an actual place, although it feels familiar, as if we may have visited there once while wandering in an alternative, more magical universe. As with many of Munch's artworks, the painting evokes a sense of quiet wonder. The scene is alluring, but its meaning eludes easy understanding—and that's part of its spell. You have to puzzle it out, even as the images resonate in your body, your senses, and your emotions.

Munch lays down his brush. He is almost satisfied, but not quite. No matter—he's been working for hours, and it's now five o'clock, time for a swim in the pond. He puts his painting materials away, leaves the studio, and heads out into the brightness of the day.

The Second Twin

Charles Munch was born on June 9, 1945, the last child of a comfortably middle-class family in the St. Louis suburb of Webster Groves. It was the very beginning of



Six Women 1978
oil on canvas 60 x 96

the postwar era, a prosperous and conservative time. His parents were both chemists, though his mother had given up working after her marriage. His father—a competent and authoritative man who could make anything he wanted out of wood, metal, or glass—was somewhat aloof, a stern disciplinarian who kept his children in line with occasional serious spankings. He had bonded well with his oldest son, John, and to a somewhat lesser extent with his next two children, Mary and David. But by the time Charles and his twin sister, Susan, were born, Mr. Munch seemed to have wearied of fatherhood. Charles's birth had come as a shock, since no one knew that his mother was carrying twins. The oft-repeated family story tells how John, the oldest boy, received a call from his father at the hospital saying a baby girl had been born. Fifteen minutes later, a second call announced the startling news that a boy had

also been born—Charles Munch.

Like her husband, Munch's mother had a scientific mind, valuing rationality over emotions. Yet where Mr. Munch often seemed grim or angry, she was placid, mild-tempered, and happy—a quiet presence for her children. Because she strongly believed that children should not be coddled, she had an almost shockingly laissez-faire attitude toward parenting, sometimes choosing not to intervene even when her children put themselves in real danger. For instance, one summer when the twins were about twelve years old she took them on a caving expedition in Door County, Wisconsin, near the family's summer home. Guided by a single small flashlight, they crawled through muddy passageways for a quarter mile until the tunnel became too narrow for her, at which point she handed the flashlight to the twins and let them go ahead while she

sat waiting alone in the dark. On another occasion a few years later, Munch recalls leaping precariously from rock to rock in the rapids of a rushing river—perhaps risking death—while his mother sat calmly watching. When she did choose to discipline her children, the method she employed—fines for bad behavior and cash rewards for good, all tallied in tiny ledgers known as “allowance books”—seemed intended to encourage an adult sense of responsibility in the Munch progeny.

She had a reason for all this. She wanted her children to be independent and unafraid, and, at least in Munch’s case, she succeeded. Beginning in childhood, he learned to be the person that he is to this day: a risk taker, content to go his own way, mostly unaffected by fashion or the opinions of others. His painting style, which has been in place now for over twenty-five years, is the direct result of this fearless pursuit of exactly what he wanted.

Munch describes his childhood as happy, if a bit bland. He excelled in school and enjoyed playing with neighborhood friends. Summer was his favorite time

because of two recurring adventures. Each year, his father devoted his entire three-week vacation to taking the family boating on the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers or into the Great Lakes. The boat, which he doted upon and sometimes visited at the harbor even in wintertime, was a small cabin cruiser that slept six. Since there were seven in the family, it was always crowded. Charles, who loved books, spent many hours in the cockpit reading or dreaming over illustrations. Later, even as a teenager, he continued to reread his favorite children’s novels, in part because he loved the pictures so much.

The second summer adventure was even better. Every July, at cherry-picking season, Charles’s mother took the children to the house she’d inherited on twenty acres of land in Door County, near the town of Sturgeon Bay [18]. For the first week, the children helped their mother pick cherries in their orchard to sell to the local cannery, entering their earnings in the allowance books. Then they vacationed. Exhilarated at finding himself out from under his father’s shadow, Charles could expand and blossom.



Restoring Still Life 1979
oil on canvas 14 x 42



Reclining Still Life 1980
oil on canvas 14 x 70

He loved the Sturgeon Bay house, with its Prairie-style architecture and vaguely Art Nouveau furnishings, almost as much as he loved the world surrounding it: the tall grasses, the wildflowers, the maple and poplar trees, the cherry orchard, and nearby Lake Michigan. The air felt fresh and intoxicating, and the cool light gave everything a crystalline clarity.

Here, more than at home, Charles and his twin sister were inseparable. Even in play, they could be quite studious and often undertook ambitious projects together. Munch loved comic books, which were not permitted in the St. Louis house but could be found in abundance at the summer place. One time he and Susan pored over Donald Duck comics in order to construct a Duck family tree based on clues in various stories. Another time they measured the dimensions of every room in the house and drew a careful floor plan, hoping to discover a hidden closet. They also studied wildflowers and tried to identify them using a little book from the *Golden Nature Guide*

series, eventually making their own guide by taping pressed flowers onto the pages of a homemade book.

Although in Sturgeon Bay Charles and Susan shared a bedroom, at home in St. Louis he slept in a lower bunk bed in a room he shared with his two older brothers, John and David. Perhaps following their father's example, the older boys were remote and guarded around young Charles, repeatedly warning him to leave their things alone. A sign printed on a toy printing press and taped to John's dresser summed up their attitude: "Keep Out, This Means You." Munch didn't like being snubbed by his brothers, but he accepted the situation with relative equanimity. What else could he do? Besides, he had his sister and his own friends, and could happily amuse and occupy himself alone.

Already he loved paintings, which he encountered each week in magazines that arrived at the house, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *Jack and Jill*. In the mid-'50s, before the predominance of photographic journalism, magazines were filled with artwork. Charles studied the



cover paintings, quickly learning to recognize the styles of artists like Norman Rockwell and Boris Artzybasheff. The *Post*'s stories were often illustrated with slick, splashy color paintings that both fascinated and repelled him. In *Time*, he always read the art reviews, often cutting out and saving them.

When Charles was still in grade school, his sister Mary—who was five years older than the twins—began attending private art classes and bringing home her watercolor paintings, paints, and brushes, all of which enthralled Charles. She began teaching him some of what she knew, and then, in seventh or eighth grade, he and Susan started classes with the same teacher. Although she taught a formulaic technique—"This is how you paint leaves, this is how you paint clouds"—which was only moderately useful in the long run, the classes gave him a chance to pursue an activity he was good at and also enjoyed. In a family where everyone (except Susan) was older and more accomplished, it was a relief to be able to

excel at something.

Even at a young age, Charles had his own ideas about painting. He rejected the bravura brushwork that watercolorists often employ, finding it disingenuous, as if the artist were pretending to make something difficult appear easy. When it came to painting for himself, he preferred to wander around Webster Groves making pictures of old houses he admired.

Each year, Charles and Susan were the top students in their class. When Charles entered high school he was still physically immature and somewhat socially awkward. Yet because he was a friendly and unpretentious person, and also because he had known many of his classmates all his life, people liked him, and he stayed on good terms with everyone, regardless of differences in social class, academic tracking, or athletic ability. The high school art classes tended to attract outcasts and poor students—the "hoods"—but Munch got along with them just fine. He fit in best with the slightly intellectual crowd and is still

Oedipus & the Sphinx (Charles & Jan)
1981
oil on canvas 34 x 50



Clothes 1980
oil on canvas 38 x 42

friends with a few people he knew from that time. He wrote for the school newspaper and literary magazine, drew covers and illustrations, and made decorations for high school proms. He also entered several art competitions, both regional and national, and sometimes won prizes.

Senior year, when he and Susan graduated as, respectively, salutatorian and valedictorian of their class, the twins became a local phenomenon. Charles enjoyed the attention, even though he suspected that the school—enthusiastic about the publicity a pair of successful twins could generate—had honored him with one or two extra awards he may not have deserved.

An Artist's Education

Shortly before his high school graduation, Charles's father made a comment that left a strong impression. "Charlie," he said, "you can do anything you want in this world." Although Charles didn't quite believe his father's message, by the time he left for Reed College in Portland, Oregon, in the fall of 1963, he felt good about this next step in his life. He had no idea what he would major in, but had chosen Reed because it was a small, independent liberal arts school that offered an unusual amount of freedom, and also because his brother David was a senior there. When Charles arrived, he was amazed at the change in David, from a morose, uncommunicative teenager to a



Between the Trees 1981
oil on canvas 43 x 62



First Judgement (Gender)
1981
oil on canvas 50 x 64

chatty, solicitous older brother with a genuine interest in his younger brother's life. Charles could only surmise that, away from the restrictions of the family, David had begun to blossom into the person he truly was.

Charles had some blossoming to do himself. He arrived at Reed a few years before the beginning of the hippie era, yet the school was already filled with beatniky longhaired young men and women. These barefoot, casually adorned students were a revelation to him of the beauty of "humans in their natural state," especially

in comparison to the carefully groomed suburbanites of Webster Groves.

Freshman year at Reed was an exciting time for Charles Munch. He studied drawing with figurative painter Willard Midgette, an excellent young instructor who became an influential friend. With the help of his adviser, Munch also managed to get into a calligraphy class not usually open to freshmen, which was taught by Lloyd Reynolds, a leading figure in the calligraphy revival of the time. Munch quickly developed enough skill to

become one of several students paid for calligraphic work on campus. The school had a tradition of hanging three-by-seven-foot banners from balconies in the dining hall to announce events or personal milestones, and during the next two years Munch was paid to make many of these. He often illustrated them, and the experience helped him overcome his initial shyness about seeing his work

displayed in public. He also took his first art history classes and was surprised to discover that teachers were impressed by his written ideas, which he had assumed merely stated obvious truths.

Early in the year he met two other budding artists—Erik Johnson, who became his best friend, and the beautiful and childlike Jane Furchgott, who grabbed



Cedar & Poplars 1981
oil on canvas 47 x 48

him on her dormitory staircase one night when she was feeling lonely and demanded that he talk to her. Munch, Furchgott, and Johnson soon became close friends who took a lot of long walks together, sometimes discussing their mutual passion for art. Charles and Jane passed many hours in the college library paging through McGraw-Hill's new fifteen-volume *Encyclopedia of World Art* and discovering



Creation & Birth 1982
oil on canvas 68 x 49

whole areas of art history previously unknown to them.

They became fascinated by two overlapping mid-19th-century English art movements: the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Arts and Crafts movement exemplified by William Morris. Because both movements were somewhat utopian and nature-oriented, they inspired Munch and Furchgott to fantasize about someday living in a communal environment surrounded by objects that they and other artists had created together. Around this time, Munch was also influenced by Art Nouveau, a European movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. He experimented briefly with drawings and Christmas cards in that style, then abandoned it, but not before he'd absorbed its linearism into his own aesthetic. That summer, hoping to become more conversant in German, the language he'd studied since high school, he worked as a laborer in a German brick factory.

Sophomore year, Munch continued taking classes in the college's core liberal arts program, and also studied painting with Midgette. By now he had loosened up, let his hair grow, and joined in the freewheeling spirit of the Reed community. That summer, he audited Midgette's class in Florentine High Renaissance painting, a style that deeply impressed him, and also worked as a commercial artist for the college. At the end of the summer, he made up his mind to become an art major, disregarding both his parents' objections and the fact that Reed offered no major in art. What the school did offer was a joint degree program with the Portland Museum School. Munch moved into a rooming house in downtown Portland and spent his next year studying at the Museum School. To his disappointment, the various classes at the school turned out to be too disconnected from one another to be useful. Color, composition, and line never quite added up to painting.

At the end of the year he returned to Reed, where his friend Johnson and two other students, Laura Kaye and David Reed, had convinced the college to establish an art major. When the three told him they were planning to spend the next year at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture in New York City, Munch decided to go too. In New York, he shared an

apartment with Johnson in a run-down Lower East Side neighborhood and also visited with Furchgott, who had dropped out of Reed and was living in Manhattan while attending Columbia.

Munch arrived at the Studio School knowing very little about it, but soon discovered that, although the curriculum was refreshingly unified, it had a bias toward a rather narrow neo-Cubist aesthetic that was at odds with his own instincts. He learned all he could about

shallow Cubist pictorial space, and then, early in the second semester, when an unhappy David Reed decided to drive to New Mexico, Munch accompanied him. They camped in the desert near the small town of Lordsburg, set up makeshift easels, and painted every day for a month, occasionally driving to a truck stop for showers and hot meals. They also visited Midgette, on sabbatical in Taos, before returning to New York. Munch spent the rest of the semester painting in his apartment. In June, he headed



Seeking a Way 1982
oil on canvas 31 x 50

back to Sturgeon Bay for the first of several summers alone (excluding the few weeks when family members came to vacation) at the family house, painting every day and living frugally on money he'd saved from his freelance art jobs. In Sturgeon Bay, as in New Mexico, he was enthralled by the light and the beauty of the landscape, setting up his easel outdoors and painting familiar scenes close to the house.

As Munch began his final year at Reed in the fall of 1967, the nation had just discovered hippies and the Summer of Love. While other young people flocked to San Francisco, Munch returned to Portland to complete his thesis, *Thirteen Paintings and Some Ideas about Symbols in Them*, in which he attempted to define the poetic connection he felt between compositional elements and a painting's deeper meanings. The accompanying work consisted of landscapes and informal portraits observed from life, plus one large figure painting created entirely from his imagination. At this point, Munch had not yet developed a distinctive style of his own, although his paintings could be described as loosely impressionistic. Because Reed had a policy of not revealing student grades until after graduation, Munch was astounded at semester's end to learn he'd earned Phi Beta Kappa.

That summer, he returned to Sturgeon Bay to again paint in near-isolation, moving his easel to an enclosed porch of the unheated house when the weather became cold in the fall. In October, hungry for both art and companionship, he contacted an art collector named Richard Flagg, reputed to have the best collection in Door County, and asked if he could visit. When Flagg agreed, Munch arrived only to discover that Flagg's collection consisted of wonderful medieval and Renaissance objects and almost no paintings. But Flagg took a paternal interest in Munch, even offering him a good job in his leather business. After Munch politely declined, Flagg suggested that he look for work as an art restorer—an occupation Munch had never heard of before.

New Intimacy with Old Masters

Munch returned to New York, moved into Jane Furchgott's



Poet & Executioner 1983
oil on canvas 34 x 35

apartment, and interviewed with two restorers suggested by Flagg. The second was William Suhr, who had a private restoration business focusing on 19th-century American and European Old Master paintings, and also worked half-time as paintings conservator at the Frick Collection, a small private museum in Manhattan. Munch, his hair down to his shoulders, wore a stylish Pierre Cardin suit to the interview. For some reason, Suhr told him to come back after the upcoming presidential elections, and when Munch returned after Nixon's victory, Suhr hired him as a full-time paid apprentice. A dapper, white-haired man who wore bow ties and exuded an Old World charm, Suhr had two other employees, both somewhat elderly—a surly man who refused to share his expertise with Munch, and a woman, Kari Wagner, who taught Munch everything he wanted to learn.

About six months after Munch began working for Suhr, Furchgott was also hired as a paid apprentice at

the studio. Suhr initially offered her far less than he paid Munch, because she was "a girl," but after she complained vehemently to Suhr's secretary, the secretary prevailed upon Suhr to raise her salary. Not long afterward, both Suhr's other employees left and Munch became studio manager, in charge of most aspects of the business whenever Suhr was out of the office. Suhr was in the habit of taking three-month vacations each summer, so he left Munch in charge for the first month. At the end of that month, Munch and Furchgott received two months' paid vacation and headed for Sturgeon Bay to spend the rest of the summer painting.

Sometime during the first year of the apprenticeship, Suhr started grooming Munch to be his successor at the Frick. From the start, Munch was ambivalent about working full-time as a paintings conservator, and when he later realized Suhr didn't have the authority to choose a successor, he was slightly relieved. As the months passed, he grew tired of urban life and missed the rural landscape of the Midwest. He was also depressed by the crime and squalor of New York—his apartment had been burglarized and he'd been robbed at knifepoint in his building's elevator—and after about a year and a half working for Suhr, he announced that he wanted to leave. Suhr entreated him to stay one more year, and Munch agreed. As that year wound down, Charles and Jane were married on November 28, 1970, at her parents' house on Long Island.

In January, they packed their belongings and headed down the coast in a Volkswagen camper, visiting family and stopping at museums along the way. In South Carolina, they turned westward and continued across Texas and into the Southwest, then up to Portland, before finally returning to Sturgeon Bay just as the snow was melting in April [6].

That fall they stayed in Sturgeon Bay until the end of October when they drove back to New York, put the van in storage, and flew to Europe. After visiting Furchgott's sister Terry in England, and exploring a number of museums around London, they took a train to Brussels and bought another Volkswagen—this one a used cargo van with an extended fiberglass top. With the help of several kind and generous people who lent them tools

and gave them space to work, Munch outfitted the van as living quarters, building a convertible bed and curtaining off the area for privacy. Now he and Furchgott set off across Europe to visit art museums. Every day they'd park on a city street close to their targeted museum, enter when it opened in the morning, and stay until it closed in the evening. Back at the van, still parked by the museum, they'd eat a simple meal of bread and packaged soup cooked on a single-burner camping stove; in a celebratory



Saved from Drowning 1984
oil on canvas 51 x 42

mood, they might throw two eggs into the soup to hard-boil. Then they'd go to sleep and get up the next morning to do the same thing, either returning to the same museum or driving to the next one on their itinerary.

They followed this routine for seven blissful months and never tired of visiting museums or looking at art. At times they were disappointed by the condition of the paintings (as restorers, they'd become impatient with the dirt that often obscured the colors), but every day held

the promise of discovery and excitement. Halfway through the trip, after thoroughly covering Belgium and Holland and much of Germany and France, they headed south, spurred on by cold weather, to spend three months in Italy. There, because they loved Italian painting so much, they visited every notable museum or church in nearly every city or town in the country—but especially in Florence and Venice, their favorite cities of all. Throughout their travels, they spent money only on food, gasoline, and a large



Man & Painting 4 1985
oil on two canvases each 45 x 35 3/4



number of museum postcards and art books, which they packed and mailed to the States before leaving Europe.

They saved Spain for last, having heard it was a good place to get rid of their van. However, after arriving and spending time in museums in Barcelona and Madrid, they learned that foreigners had recently been forbidden to sell cars to Spanish citizens. So Munch called a U.S. Army base and advertised the van there, eventually selling it to an American soldier stationed in Spain. Then Munch and Furchgott flew back to New York, took their own van out of storage, and drove to Sturgeon Bay, once again arriving in early spring.

A Life's Work Begun

Now they had a plan: to live in the family summer house year-round and work as restorers. They set about purchasing equipment, such as a vacuum hot table, for the business, and installed a new furnace, a supplementary wood stove, storm windows, and insulation, doing as much of the work as they could themselves. Through Richard Flagg, they found several clients, including the Milwaukee Art Museum (then known as the Milwaukee Art Center). Munch contacted Alfred Bader, president of a chemical company and an energetic, knowledgeable collector and art dealer who specialized in 17th-century Dutch paintings with Old Testament subject matter. Bader soon became their most consistent and loyal client, supplying them with about one-third of their total restoring work. He also became a frequent buyer of Munch's paintings.

From the start, finding work was never a problem. For one thing, there were no other restorers in the area, and Munch and Furchgott had excellent credentials. It seemed to Munch that there was an almost endless supply of paintings in Wisconsin waiting to be restored. By the end of their first year, he and Furchgott had as much work as they wanted, working half-time and spending the rest of



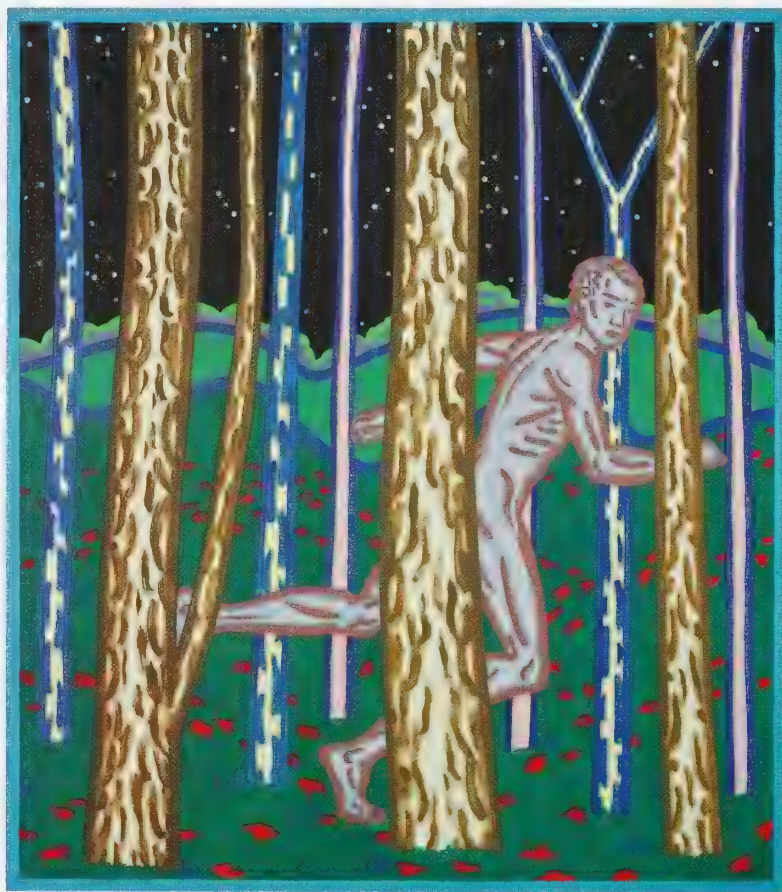
Monkeyman 1987
oil on canvas 54 x 27

the time on their own projects.

With the business underway, Munch's wandering, seeking, adventurous life gave way to a quiet, settled, domestic one. He and Furchgott worked in tandem, each having been trained in different aspects of the profession, according to Suhr's Old World gender bias. Furchgott had been taught to clean paintings and reattach blistering paint, while Munch was taught to repair weak and torn canvases [27]. Both excelled at retouching, which was by far the most meticulous and time-consuming aspect of the

work. The long hours of practice taught Munch to mix pigments quickly and precisely. This skill helped him bring color to the forefront of his artistic concerns.

Munch enjoyed painting restoration and the flexibility that working at home allowed him, even though for a couple of months each summer they had to move their work studio from a large bedroom to a small one to make room for vacationing family members. Except for those visits, Munch and Furchgott were quite isolated. Even their clients rarely visited. Instead, every few months,



Night Runner 1987
oil on canvas 52 x 46
Jack & Melinda Bailey
Madison, Wisconsin

Munch made several appointments and drove to Milwaukee to drop off and pick up work, a service his clients very much appreciated.

Munch now thought of himself primarily as a restorer, although he was painting with as much regularity and passion as ever. Before leaving for Europe, he had completed one painting in a new, more detailed, realistic style, and he continued in this vein for the next half decade or so[11]. Beginning in 1974, while casting about for subject matter to paint during the winter, he began working on still lifes[20]. He was surprised by how much he enjoyed setting them up, and by the amount of drama he could create simply by placing objects in different relationships to one another.

At this point, Munch was selling paintings only to Alfred Bader and not showing his work publicly. Nonetheless he continued to make valuable contacts through the restoring business. One of those contacts unexpectedly paid off when the director of the Oshkosh Public Museum, while visiting Munch and Furchgott about a restoration matter, was impressed enough with Munch's paintings to offer him his first solo exhibition, which took place at the museum in 1976[23].

Around this time, Munch and Furchgott helped start up a natural foods co-op in Sturgeon Bay, and in the process became connected to an expanding network



Red Hands 1987
oil on canvas 36 x 26



Blood Rain 1987
oil on canvas 26 x 40



"Borderland: Paintings by Charles Munch" (entrance to the installation
Milwaukee Art Museum, February 2 - March 17, 1991)
Man, Deer, & Painting 1990, oil on three canvases 71 3/4 x 70, Milwaukee Art Museum

of friends. They also started a cooperative life drawing class, whose members served as the models for Munch's large, ambitious painting, *Six Women* [26], which won best-in-show in a 1978 juried exhibition at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

A Joyous Way to Paint

In 1978, Furchgott's sister Eve visited from San Francisco and introduced Charles and Jane to the radical ideas that eventually spurred Munch's breakthrough into a new style

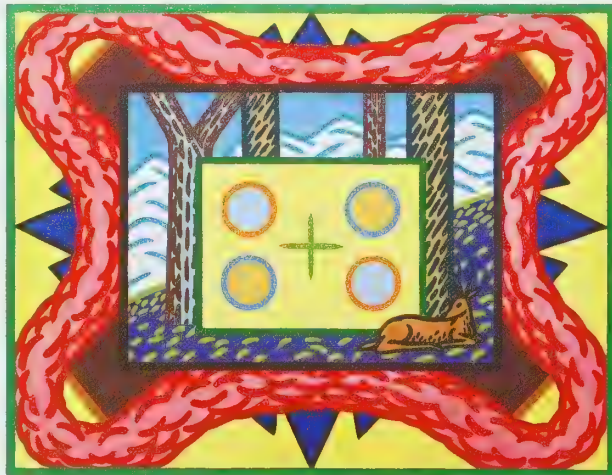
of painting. In San Francisco, Eve was living in a utopian intentional community known as Kerista Village, whose philosophy strongly appealed to Munch. Rather than trying to fit themselves into the existing social order, the Keristans believed it was possible and desirable to create a community where each person could follow his or her deepest dreams and desires. Eve stayed with Munch and Furchgott only a short time, but returned that summer with half a dozen community members who all moved into the Sturgeon Bay house, creating a circuslike atmosphere, sleeping on porches and cooking gigantic meals every day.



Splitter 1989
oil on canvas 52 3/4 x 43
Jack & Melinda Bailey
Madison, Wisconsin

It was an exciting and overwhelming time. The Keristan philosophy was all-encompassing, covering human relationships, politics, economics, and just about everything else. The Keristans had their own ways of talking and relating, and had agreed to live by the principles spelled out in a lengthy, detailed social contract. Munch found much of this compelling, yet he also noticed that a few of the more powerful and longtime members sometimes enjoyed immunity from their own rules. For this reason and others, Munch never seriously considered moving to San Francisco to join the group. Yet their visit powerfully affected him, shaking him up in a number of ways and making him question the choices he'd made, especially the choice to live in a somewhat isolated relationship with a spouse who was also his business partner.

After the Keristans returned to California, Munch and Furchgott set out to create a small intentional community in Door County. They also decided that married couples could be an impediment to the formation of a multi-



Landscape Between Abstractions 1990
oil on canvas 39 x 51



Digging into the Wind 1990
oil on canvas 57 x 41
RBC Dain Rauscher, Minneapolis, Minnesota

adult family and agreed to a divorce that was finalized October 7, 1981. Through various forms of outreach, they attracted and interviewed many interested candidates, two of whom became—at least for a time—committed to a shared communal life.

In the midst of all this, Munch began developing a new painting style, partly inspired by the Keristan ideals. It started in his sketchbook with images that turned away from an examination of the outside world and began focusing attention, in oblique ways, on himself, his body,

and his emotions, raising questions about his identity as a human being and as a man. This new direction is exemplified by paintings like *Clothes* [30]. Before long, his sketches became even looser and more cartoonlike, with bright surprising colors (usually only two per form) and no cast shadows. The subject matter became more dreamlike and symbolic than in his previous work. Quite consciously, he was reaching for a more emotional, personal, and joyous way to paint, one that allowed larger strokes and deeper meanings—in effect, freeing him both physically and emotionally from the tedious precision that both his restoring work and his realistic paintings required. He wanted to be able to move, to stretch out.

Deciding he needed more space, he rented a large classroom in a converted downtown school building about two miles from his home. The room had one entire wall of windows, and on the other three walls Munch hung four-by-eight sheets of white insulation board, on which he tacked unstretched canvases. Then he began painting directly from images in his sketchbook, working quickly and in a state of exhilaration and excitement, sometimes filling a canvas in a single morning. He began listening to rock 'n' roll while painting, trying to loosen up, to have more fun. The subjects included figures, landscapes [31], still lifes, and interiors [32], sometimes personal reinterpretations of Christian imagery [34]. He worked in



Phantom Buck 1991
oil on canvas 52 x 69



"Charles Munch: Fear & Desire" installation view), Chicago Cultural Center, October 10 - November 29, 1992
Art Man 1992, oil on plywood 73 x 36 x 1 1/4; *Green Wings* 1992, oil on canvas, each 44 x 24 1/2
Large Window 1992, oil on canvas 74 x 26 1/2; *Fire on the Mountain* |48

total privacy, not even allowing Furchgott to visit until after he'd filled all three walls with paintings. By this point, he had so thoroughly surrounded himself with his own creations that he felt, he says, "as if I were inside my own brain."

Eventually, he invited Jane and one other person—a woman who was now the only other person in their inchoate community—to visit the studio for a celebratory mini-opening, including refreshments. He was very happy, and Jane was excited by his new work.

A New Home

Soon afterward Munch had to give up the studio. After months of searching for a place where they could start a new community free from the constraints of the family summer house, Munch and Furchgott found an ideal spot—a parcel of 220 acres on a hilltop in southwestern Wisconsin—and their lives began to change once again.

The land was beautiful, especially the grassy ridgeline from whose highest point they could look out in all directions and even catch a glimpse of their pond nestled

in a hollow. There was no house, only a dilapidated barn on the verge of collapse. However, the neighbors across the road had an empty mobile home that Munch and Furchgott could temporarily rent. By now, their other community member had left, and they were the only two people involved in the purchase. All they needed was a loan. But their Sturgeon Bay bank refused to lend to them because they were leaving the area, and the banks near Lone Rock refused because they were unknowns, so they borrowed the money from Alfred Bader. They made their purchase in the fall of 1981.

Initially they had planned to wait a year before moving,

but now that they had the land they decided to just get going. For the next six months they gave themselves a crash course in building and design and hired an architect to draw blueprints of the new house, which would include two large workrooms for the restoring business. In May, they loaded up their belongings, drove five hours south to Lone Rock, set themselves up in the trailer, and started to build. They had decided to economize by not hiring a contractor, so all the decision-making responsibilities fell on their shoulders. Munch worked full-time every day with the hired carpenters, while Furchgott worked part-time as a second carpenter's assistant and also did her best to carry



River Mountain River 1992
oil on canvas 40 x 44



Fire on the Mountain 1992
oil on canvas 88 1/2 x 82
Lakeland College, Sbeboygan, Wisconsin

on with the restoring business, set up in the trailer. In the evenings, when both were already exhausted, they often had further work to do in preparation for the carpenters' arrival the following morning. Many nights they also needed to make at least one crucial building decision by the next morning. To their dismay, they discovered that they weren't very good at making decisions together under pressure. Furchgott had fixed ideas of how she wanted things to be, while Munch was more inclined to look for a compromise. For the first time ever, Munch began losing his temper and yelling at her. But they kept right on working, and by fall the house was completely enclosed, though unfinished—and their relationship remained intact. They moved their belongings into the shell of the house and let out a breath of relief. For the time being, Munch began painting in a lower-level bedroom.

Meanwhile, he and Furchgott continued to advertise for people to live with them in a multi-adult family. They devised their own social contract to use as a discussion-starter with candidates. However, after about a year, it became clear that they weren't attracting compatible people, so they decided to focus their energies elsewhere.

Several years earlier, before the Keristans interrupted their lives, they had talked seriously about having a child, and now at the age of thirty-eight they tried to conceive. After about six months without success, they consulted doctors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's infertility clinic. The doctors were surprisingly unsympathetic, partly due to the fact that Munch and Furchgott were no longer married, and the whole experience left them hurt and grieving. To this day, Munch remains angry about the doctors' attitude toward what he describes as "already vulnerable and heartbroken couples." After transferring to another hospital, Furchgott endured a series of invasive exams and Munch submitted to a small operation. When it became clear after an intense and difficult year that nothing was helping, Charles and Jane gave up trying to have a child. After further soul-searching, they also decided not to pursue other avenues, such as in vitro fertilization or adoption. At this point, Munch mainly felt relieved that the ordeal was over. It was time to move on.



Resurrection 1993
oil on canvas 48 x 32
Robert Brink, New York, New York

Connecting with the Art World

In 1982, shortly after the completion of the house, Munch was invited to New York by David Reed, now a successful abstract painter who had some ideas about how to give Munch's career a boost. Because of the expense of shipping

paintings, Munch rolled up a number of his canvases—recent work done in his new, colorful style[33]—and flew with them to New York, where he had ordered custom-made stretchers sent to Reed's address. There he spent a few days stretching the canvases on the floor of an extra studio that Reed had made available to him. When the paintings were hung, Reed and Munch arranged private showings for several gallery owners and critics they hoped would be interested in Munch's work. Out of those meetings came an invitation for Munch to join a new 57th Street gallery called Siegel Contemporary Art.

After Munch returned home, he and a hired carpenter built the attached garage with Munch's studio above it (as had been originally planned), and by the fall of 1983, he

had a big, well-lighted studio as well as a relationship with a New York gallery.

Now that he was beginning to gain some recognition as an artist, Munch started to grapple with questions about his identity as a painter. What did it mean to call himself an artist? Did art have something meaningful to offer, or was it an elitist activity? Out of these questions came a series of works he referred to as the *Man & Painting* series[38], mostly diptychs with an image of a gesticulating naked man on one canvas and an abstract painting-within-a-painting on the other. The emotions expressed were generally painful ones, such as fear and guilt.

Over the next two years, Munch participated in three group shows at Siegel, and in 1985 he had a solo exhibition there, including much of the *Man & Painting* series. For Munch, the show's opening was pretty overwhelming. Openings are always intense for him, and he often feels as if he has entered an altered state of mind. In New York, he also felt like a Midwestern innocent in the big city. However, he kept his eyes open and learned a lot about how the art world operated. He sold only one painting, but the show was considered a success, in part because it received a short, positive blurb in the *New York Times*[37].

While in New York, Munch noticed that his paintings appeared somewhat alien there, his style and subject matter conspicuously earnest compared to the predominant aesthetic of cool, ironic detachment. He also realized that it would require a lot of effort and travel to sustain a fruitful, long-term relationship with Siegel. This potential problem, however, became moot when Siegel, along with almost one-third of the New York galleries, was forced to close during the recession of the late 1980s and early '90s.

But shortly before that happened, Munch began working on a solo show for the Madison Art Center in Madison, Wisconsin, where one of his realist paintings, *Interior with Two Figures*, had been included in a 1977 survey of Midwestern figurative painting. Now, in the Center's recently opened downtown location, he was offered a small, awkward space known as the Triangle Gallery. After visiting the space, Munch decided to reconfigure it into a spiral passageway leading to a small inner chamber. He



Sanctuary 1994
oil on canvas 53 x 51
Robert & Susan Holmes
Eagle River, Wisconsin

Girl from Glacier Town 1995
oil on canvas 38 x 42
Sonya Newenhouse, Madison, Wisconsin



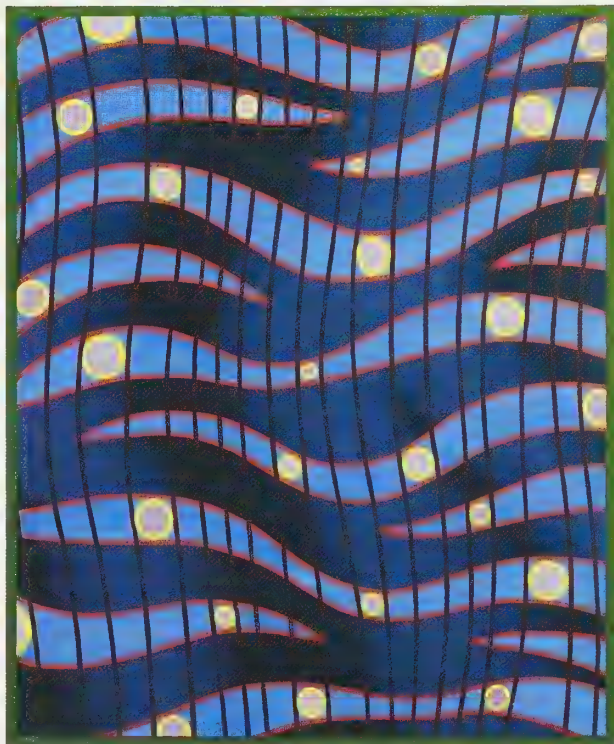
built a scale model and, over the course of the next year, completed thirteen paintings to fit into the new space. The paintings were loosely connected by the themes of alienation from—and reconciliation with—nature [39][41].

Installed in 1987, the show "Outer/Inner Sanctum," attracted significant press attention. "It is a place apart from anywhere else," wrote Dean Jensen of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* about his feeling upon entering the space. "The air seems to change. The temperature seems to drop. Some of the scenes make one feel as though the viewer has happened upon the world on the other side of the northern lights....Certainly it is one of the richer productions to have been mounted by a Wisconsin artist recently."

Soon afterward, Munch was invited by Natasha Nicholson, wife of the Art Center's former director, to join a new gallery she was opening, where he ultimately had

two solo shows. It was now clear that Munch had found a place in the Midwestern art world. For this reason, he wasn't devastated when Siegel closed. Realizing that New York was not the only place in the country to pursue an art career, he turned his attention to Chicago, a big city much closer to home. On several occasions, he drove down to Chicago and endured the sometimes humiliating experience of trying to interest gallery owners in his work. The effort paid off when he made a connection with Perimeter Gallery.

Next, expanding on the concept of the Madison installation, Munch began working on paintings for an even larger installation at the Milwaukee Art Museum, to be titled "Borderland." [42] Munch once again reconfigured the space to suggest a journey, this time from representation through semi-abstract to abstraction and



Organic Abstraction 15 1996
oil on canvas 53 x 44

then back again by a different route. The show, installed in 1991, included twenty-four paintings[43][44], faux columns, monochrome wall decoration, and even a piece of original furniture. Steven Kapelke, writing for the *New Art Examiner*, was enthusiastic: "The strength of Munch's work in this exhibition, I believe, is in the intellectual force of the images. Each of the paintings offers much more than could be imagined on first viewing, owing to both the nature of the exhibition—its desire to be viewed holistically—and the reflexive, or self-referential, quality of individual works....'Borderland' is an ambitious journey charted by a mature artist."

The following year was Munch's busiest ever as

he prepared for two shows in Chicago, opening a week apart—first at the Chicago Cultural Center and then at Perimeter Gallery[45]. Determined to have new paintings for both exhibitions, he began painting at least five and often eight hours each day, mostly in the afternoon, while still keeping up with ordinary household chores in the morning and working three or four hours at night as a restorer.

The installation at the Chicago Cultural Center, entitled "Fear & Desire,"[46] included fourteen oil paintings on canvas[47][48] plus three freestanding painted cutout figures. The walls were painted in shades of white and gray to create the illusion of shallow recesses and hallways for the paintings to occupy. Munch intended the show to suggest the similarity between two seemingly opposite themes—fear of and desire for abstraction, and fear of and desire for union with nature. Mandy Morrison gave the show an insightful full-page review in the *Chicago Reader*, writing that "Munch's approach to nature is personal, even eccentric; yet his use of natural forms is formulaic, similar to the work of American icons such as Grant Wood. But because his colors are so rich and his brushwork is so consistent, Munch's imagery never feels thin." In conclusion, she wrote, "'Fear & Desire' is a complex work yielding a multitude of interpretations. It's also a deeply satisfying visual experience, one that should not be missed."

Munch had now become an established regional artist.

Still Growing

At home, Munch's personal life felt out of balance, and he began seeking male friendships. In 1988, he joined a radical men's group called the Wildmen: part support group, part outdoor adventure group, part philosophical discussion group exploring ideas of masculinity and spirituality—and part boyish fun. The group's interests dovetailed with many of the ideas he was exploring in his paintings, especially the relationship between humans (men, in particular) and the rest of the natural world[43].

He also became friends with Randall Berndt, who had introduced himself when they both had paintings in

the Wisconsin Triennial exhibition at the Madison Art Center in 1987. Although Munch's and Berndt's styles differed, both painters were fascinated by color, and both created somewhat mystical paintings by gaining access to personal imagery from rural life and the natural world. Berndt became Munch's "best painter friend." In 1993 they traveled to Amsterdam together and spent three weeks seeking out great Dutch and Flemish paintings. Since then they have continued to support each other in ways that only a fellow painter can.

In 1993, Munch installed his first show at the Torv Folliard Gallery in Milwaukee. The gallery, located in Milwaukee's historic Third Ward, has a wall of windows that look out onto the street. There, in the cool light off Lake Michigan, Munch's colorful paintings appeared to glow a bit more warmly and brightly than anywhere else. As of 2006 he has had seven shows at Torv Folliard and has sold more paintings there than with any other gallery.

The following year, Munch had his first solo show with the Grace Chosv Gallery in Madison. In 1996, he and Berndt hung the first of their (now five in total) duo shows at Grace Chosv. Later that year, Munch had a solo show scheduled in Madison at the Wisconsin Academy Gallery. Not wanting to exhibit any of the paintings twice in the same city, he decided to produce a body of abstract works based on his fascination with microphotographs of the structure of wood. Munch considered the show, "Organic Abstractions," [52] a successful one-time experiment.

Now that he was regularly showing his work in commercial galleries, Munch began to take into consideration the requests of gallery owners that he include smaller and less expensive paintings in his shows. For each show, he framed two or three crayon and watercolor paintings and also offered for sale the smaller, preliminary versions of some of his large oil paintings. By now, he was becoming comfortable with the idea of being a Wisconsin or Midwest artist, of "starting where I am and building outward."

In the mid-1990s, his partner, Jane Furchgott, began to explore shamanism as a spiritual path, and for a time Munch also participated. But his trance experiences lacked

the power and richness reported by other people in the group. While he remained sympathetic to the shamanic method of journeying to inner realms to consult with animal allies, he decided that he was already doing much the same thing, with greater success, in his process as a painter [57].

In 1995, Munch's father died after a series of strokes. Learning of his death, Charles experienced a few hours of intense relief, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders. Then his emotions turned to grief and confusion, plunging him into the darkest period of his life. Once again he felt compelled to question all his major life



Winter Journey 1997
oil on canvas 40 x 36
Scott & Luvie Myers
Winnetka, Illinois

choices, scrutinizing them for the taint of rebellion. Out of that time, from the scores of drawings he worked on, one painting emerged—an early version of the man-versus-bear theme [65] he returned to later. Finally, after several months, this period of intense introspection ended, and Munch felt cleansed and clearheaded, ready to continue on his life path. Since then, he has felt less doubt and more clarity in his life than ever before. In 2000, when his mother died, his reaction was far more serene.

In 1999, Munch met and befriended Ted Haglund, an easygoing soon-to-be-divorced father who worked as an urgent-care doctor. The two soon discovered that they enjoyed outdoor activities together, such as camping, biking, and canoeing. Munch had always been physically active, but now he became even more so. Over the next several years he and Haglund made a number of winter trips to places like Jamaica, north Florida, Big Bend National Park, and the Gulf of California. Munch often returned with ideas for paintings based on places they had visited, including peaceful scenes of people camping



Wisconsin Fantasy 1997
oil on canvas 18 x 24
Sonya Newenhouse, Madison, Wisconsin



Moonrise 1999
oil on canvas 47 x 52

or canoeing [71]. Munch, who had always tended toward introspection and acute self-awareness, found Haglund's sunny, less introspective nature to be a good influence, and their friendship contributed to the overall sense of equanimity and self-acceptance found in some of Munch's more recent paintings.

Nonetheless, this inner peacefulness has not prevented him from being angry about the role human beings have played in the destruction of the environment and the extinction of animals and birds. Both he and Furchgott have long been active in the fight to save threatened species, and in 2005 Munch completed a group of pictures depicting confrontations between humans and animals where the animal is in control or has the upper hand [65] [66] [68]. Munch describes these paintings as serving a function akin to New Age visualization. That is, if there is any chance of our reversing the trend toward destruction of nature, we must first be able to picture other outcomes, other possibilities. He hopes



Dream Dogs 1998
oil on canvas 32 3/4 x 45
Caroline & Peter Repenning

the paintings can inspire viewers to think about their relationships to nature in different ways.

In the past five or six years, sales of Munch's paintings have been good enough to allow him and Furchgott to gradually cut back on their restoring work. Now they are semi-retired and Munch is focusing primarily on his own paintings. His most recent show, mounted in the fall of

2006, was a 35-year retrospective at the Fairfield Center for Contemporary Art in Sturgeon Bay.

Back In the Studio

Munch continues to paint every day when he is at home. Describing his current work, he speaks of "a mellowing

process typical of people beyond middle age," adding that his paintings are concerned with "discovering who I am and what I can expect out of life—and learning how to live with the things that aren't exactly how I want them to be."

To reach Munch's studio, you walk through one of the former restoring workrooms, still dominated by the huge vacuum hot table, now used as a worktable. Stepping into the studio, you feel you are entering an inner sanctum. Despite the clutter, it's quiet and peaceful here. There is a

smell of oil paint and acrylic gesso. To the right, in front of a row of south-facing clerestory windows, hangs a long curtain of translucent white fabric; a pulley system allows Munch to adjust the amount of light entering his studio. In a corner near the windows, several deer antlers lie temporarily discarded in a pile on the floor.

Straight ahead, Munch's current paintings fill the northeast corner. Below them, on a tall stool, a sketchbook lies open to a crayon-and-watercolor sketch corresponding



The Way Out 1998
oil on canvas 53 x 70



The Lake in the Woods 1899
oil on canvas 38 x 45
Tory Folliard Galleries
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

to one of the paintings on the wall. Two small oil paintings, both preliminary versions of large paintings, are tacked to the wall on the left. In front of you on the east wall are the two large paintings still in progress, both nearly finished.

The painting Munch is working on today, as yet untitled, shows a peaceful scene, an old cemetery flooded with light and scattered with tombstones. The colors could be described as apple green, warm forest green, granite

pink, and a deep purplish blue. In the center is a life-sized stone angel in profile, facing to the right. Several deer run unhurriedly across the canvas right to left, trotting among the gravestones on their way to some destination outside the picture. Most of the deer have already passed the angel, who may be offering a blessing. Or perhaps not. In any case, the deer are heedless of the angel, as they are heedless of the dead lying beneath them, heedless of the sacred meaning the graveyard has for human beings, heedless

of death itself. And yet they are not alien here. They belong to the cemetery as much as the grass, the trees, the gravestones, the sky.

The painting is lovely and quiet, the work of a mature artist coming to terms with mortality. Its spirit is

accepting, not sad. You sense that the man who painted it—Charles Munch—is still young enough to run heedlessly across the earth, even in the shadow of his own death.



Angel Wars 2000
oil on canvas 42 1/2 x 34



Man Bear 2001
oil on canvas 36 x 44
Private Collection

Chronology

1945

Charles Munch born June 9 in Webster Groves, suburb of St. Louis, Missouri; has twin sister, Susan, born first, and an older sister and two older brothers; father, Ralph H. Munch, is a research chemist; mother, Charlotte Erwin Munch, is a housewife also educated as a chemist.

1945-63

Spends several weeks each summer at his mother's family's vacation house in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin; develops strong attachment to Lake Michigan and Wisconsin landscape.

1950-63

Attends grade school, junior high, and high school in Webster Groves near his home at 303 Planthurst; during last five years of public school attends private art classes that emphasize watercolor painting; graduates from high school in 1963.

1963-64

Attends Reed College in Portland, Oregon; introduced to art history as part of a broad humanities program; studies drawing with figurative painter Willard Midgette, calligraphy with Lloyd Reynolds; meets fellow freshman Jane Furchgott; first experiences Europe as student laborer in German brick factory.

1964-65

Continues at Reed College; studies painting with Midgette; earns money as freelance calligrapher; settles on major in art; summer job at college as commercial artist; audits Midgette's summer course on Florentine High Renaissance painting and is deeply impressed.

1965-66

Attends Portland Museum School in Portland, Oregon, as part of joint art degree with Reed College; finds curriculum too fragmented; works during summer at Reed College as graphic and theater designer.

1966-67

Studies drawing and painting at New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture along with fellow Reed students David Reed, Erik Johnson, and Laura Kaye; lives with Johnson at 635 E. 9th St. on Lower East Side; tires of the city and NYSS neo-Cubist aesthetic; spends most of second semester with David Reed near Lordsburg, New Mexico, painting in the desert; summers alone in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, painting landscapes.

1967-68

Completes art major at Reed College with creative thesis, "Thirteen Paintings and Some Ideas about Symbols in Them"; graduates Phi Beta Kappa; lives and paints at Sturgeon Bay summer house through October; moves to New York city to live with Jane Furchgott at 155 Ridge St. and hunt for a job; begins paid apprenticeship in private studio of William Suhr, at that time paintings conservator at the Frick Collection; Furchgott joins him as Suhr's apprentice.

1969-70

Works for Suhr as conservator treating 19th-century American and 17th-century Dutch paintings; moves to 68 E. First St. where Furchgott later comes to live with him; spends two months each summer with her at house in Sturgeon Bay; is promoted to studio manager; is asked by Suhr to later succeed him at the Frick Collection and accepts; marries Jane Furchgott at her parents' house on Long Island, November 28, 1970.

1971

Leaves New York in search of more landscape and less crime; drives in a camper van with Furchgott to South Carolina, New Mexico, California, Washington, and Wisconsin, visiting all the art museums along the way; settles in Sturgeon Bay to paint from spring to fall, developing a more detailed realistic style characterized by *Shiloh Church*; travels with Jane Furchgott in a camper van through England, Holland, Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, visiting major museums and architectural sites.

1972

Returns in spring to Sturgeon Bay to settle down; starts paintings conservation business with Furchgott, serving customers in eastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois; continues to paint in the controlled realistic style of the previous summer.

1973

Munch and Furchgott establish a steady paintings conservation business with clients including Milwaukee Art Museum and Dr. Alfred Bader, who will purchase many of Munch's paintings during the next eight years; attempts large-scale figure painting with *Upstairs Winter Model*.

1974

Paints large landscapes including *Farm Landscape* and the first of his carefully composed still lifes.

1975

Is included in Milwaukee Art Museum's anthology exhibition "Wisconsin Directions"; paints *Still Life with Lemon & Thyme*.

1976

First solo exhibition, at the Oshkosh Public Museum, Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

1977

Included in the exhibition "Contemporary Figurative Painting in the Midwest" at Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin.

1978

Completes big figure painting, *Six Women*, judged best-in-show with large cash prize in "Wisconsin '78" at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point; meets Furchgott's sister's San Francisco commune and begins thinking about multi-adult families; attempts with others to assemble such a community in Sturgeon Bay.



Hush! 2002
oil on canvas 50 x 40



Boundary Issues 2003
oil on canvas 49 x 70

1979
Makes intense efforts toward building a multi-adult family and/or community.

1980
Feeling increasingly restricted by his highly developed realistic style, works extensively with watercolor and/or crayon on paper, drawing from imagination, focusing his

attention on himself and his emotions; paints final large realist picture, *Reclining Still Life*, and first looser, more colorful painting, *Clothes*, an unconventional self-portrait.

1981
Rents classroom/studio in old Sturgeon Bay high school building to have more space and privacy; paints first large oil paintings in new, more colorful, imaginative style,

including reinterpretations of Christian imagery, such as *A Penitent & His Painting*; agrees with Jane Furchgott to divorce as a way to facilitate a multi-adult family; continues living with her; purchases with Furchgott 220

acres near Lone Rock in southwest Wisconsin as a better site for intentional community than the Munch summer house in Sturgeon Bay.



Prairie Fire 2003
oil on canvas 24 x 34
Jack Cherry, Grundy Center, Iowa



Crows 2005
oil on canvas 54 x 60

1982

Moves with Furchgott to trailer house on neighbors' land near Lone Rock; builds house in four months with much of his and Furchgott's labor; moves into an unfinished interior completed over next several years; paints in a spare bedroom as the two large workrooms are required for paintings conservation; accepted as gallery artist at Siegel Contemporary Art, New York, New York.

1983

Paints in studio constructed over new garage attached to house; continues reinterpretation of traditional religious iconography; participates in three group shows at Siegel Contemporary Art.

1985

Solo show at Siegel Contemporary Art in New York, which includes several paintings from his new *Man & Painting* series.

1987

Solo installation, "Outer/Inner Sanctum: Paintings by Charles Munch," at Madison Art Center, combining a suite of paintings with a created interior architecture.

1991

Installs "Borderland: Paintings by Charles Munch" at Milwaukee Art Museum, including artist-designed spaces, furniture, representational and abstract paintings, and wall drawings.

1992

Solo show at Perimeter Gallery, Chicago; solo installation, "Charles Munch: Fear & Desire" at Chicago Cultural Center, which includes illusionistic walls, painted cutouts, and furniture, along with paintings.

1993

Begins to focus predominantly on the relationship between humans, other animals, and the rest of the natural world; first of seven solo shows at Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1994

First of six solo or duo (with Wisconsin painter Randall Berndt) shows at Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin.

1996

Creates first and only exhibition of exclusively abstract paintings, "Organic Abstractions," at Wisconsin Academy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin.

1997

Included in "Wisconsin Art Since 1990" at Milwaukee Art Museum.



Deadly Dancing 2004
oil on canvas 53 x 53
Jon Schlagenbaft & Curt Stern
Milwaukee, Wisconsin



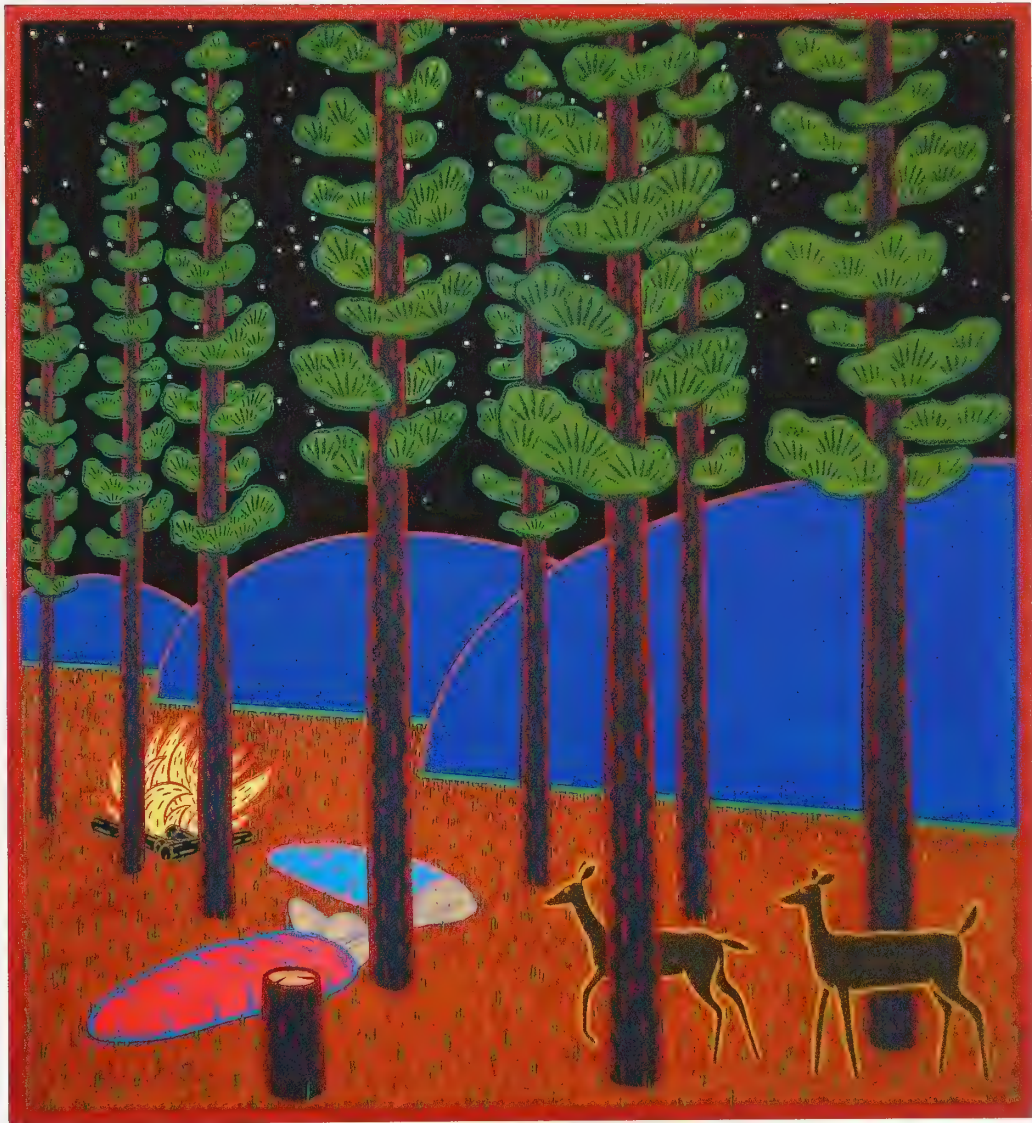
Lights 2005
oil on canvas 38 x 46

2000
Begins frequent canoeing, biking, and camping trips with Ted Haglund that influence the imagery of future paintings.

2001
One of three living painters chosen by art book publisher Harry N. Abrams to represent the state in *Wisconsin: The Spirit of America*.

2005
Completes a group of paintings expressing sorrow and anger over extinction of animal species and destruction of their habitat.

2006
Four paintings included in "Up North: Imaging Northwoods Culture & Mythology" at West Bend Art Museum, West Bend, Wisconsin; career retrospective exhibition (1971-2006) at Fairfield Center for Contemporary Art, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin.



Jack Pine Camp 2004
oil on canvas 57 x 52



Silent Night 2005
oil on canvas 28 x 47"
Jon Schlagenbafi & Curt Stern, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Exhibition History

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- | | | | |
|------|---|------|---|
| 2006 | "Charles Munch: Dreaming in Color, Paintings 1971-2006,"
Fairfield Museum of Contemporary Art, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin | 2004 | "Fire Works: Recent Paintings by Randall Berndt & Charles Munch
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison |
| 2005 | "Charles Munch: Dangerous Companions," Tory Folliard Gallery
Milwaukee, Wisconsin | 2002 | "Visions of Water," Wisconsin Academy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 2003 | "Charles Munch: Recent Work," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee
Wisconsin | 2001 | "Go Figure," Eklektikos Gallery, Washington DC |
| 2001 | "Charles Munch: Paintings," Well Street Art Company, Fairbanks, Alaska | 2001 | "Parallel Worlds: Paintings by Charles Munch & Randall Berndt,"
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison WI |
| 2001 | "Charles Munch: New Paintings," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee,
Wisconsin | 2000 | "Singular Visions, Ten Wisconsin Painters at the Academy," Wisconsin
Academy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 2000 | "Charles Munch: Paintings," Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, Illinois | 1999 | "Wisconsin Painting & Sculpture from the Permanent Collection,"
Milwaukee Art Museum |
| 1999 | "Charles Munch: Dream Time," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee
Wisconsin | 1998 | "Day & Night: Recent Paintings by Charles Munch & Randall Berndt,"
Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 1997 | "Two Sides of Charles Munch," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee,
Wisconsin | 1998 | "Testing the Waters," Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, Illinois |
| 1996 | "Charles Munch: Organic Abstractions," Wisconsin Academy Gallery,
Madison, Wisconsin | 1997 | "Wisconsin Art Since 1990," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee
Wisconsin |
| 1995 | "Charles Munch: Fame/Wild," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin | 1997 | Recent Acquisitions," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |
| 1994 | "Charles Munch: Paintings & Cutouts," Grace Chosy Gallery, Milwaukee,
Wisconsin | 1996 | "Wisconsin Dreams: Recent Paintings by Charles Munch & Randall
Berndt," Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 1994 | "Charles Munch: Paintings & Cutouts," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee,
Wisconsin | 1994 | "Dreams, Hopes, Fears," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |
| 1994 | "Charles Munch: Paintings & Cutouts," Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, Illinois | 1992 | "Still Lives - Paintings & Sculpture," Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee,
Wisconsin |
| 1992 | "Charles Munch: Fear & Desire" (an installation), Chicago Cultural Center
Chicago, Illinois | 1990 | "Wisconsin Triennial," Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 1992 | "Charles Munch: New Work," Perimeter Gallery, Chicago, Illinois | 1990 | "A Decade Downtown," Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 1991 | "Borderland: Paintings by Charles Munch" (an installation),
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin | 1989 | "Charles Munch, Jack Hooper & Jeff Starr," Davidson Galleries, Seattle
Washington |
| 1990 | "Charles Munch: Paintings," Natasha Nicholson Works of Art,
Madison, Wisconsin | 1988 | "Individuals: New Art from Wisconsin," Milwaukee Art Museum at
333 Gallery, Chicago, Illinois |
| 1988 | "Charles Munch: Paintings: Landscapes & Figures
Natasha Nicholson Works of Art, Madison WI | 1988 | "James Kielkopf and Charles Munch," Thomas Barry Fine Arts,
Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| 1987 | "Outer/Inner Sanctum: Paintings by Charles Munch" (an installation)
Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin | 1988 | "Endangered Species," Klein Gallery, Chicago, Illinois |
| 1985 | "Charles Munch: Recent Paintings," Ruth Siegel Ltd., New York, New York | 1987 | "Wisconsin Triennial," Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 1983 | "Charles Munch," Rahr West Museum, Manitowoc, Wisconsin | 1985 | "Alumni Exhibition," New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting &
Sculpture, New York NY |
| 1976 | "Paintings by Charles Munch," Oshkosh Public Museum, Oshkosh,
Wisconsin | 1985 | "Family Dramas," N.A.M.I. Gallery, Chicago, Illinois |
| | | 1984 | "Wisconsin Directions 4," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |
| | | 1984 | "Charles Munch & John Whalley: Selections from the Alfred Bader
Collection," Krannert Gallery, Purdue University, Lafayette, Indiana |
| | | 1983 | "Rambunctious," Siegel Contemporary Art, New York, New York |
| | | 1983 | "Nocturne," Siegel Contemporary Art, New York, New York |
| | | 1983 | "Installation of Recent Works by Anne Abrons, Charles Munch, David
Schirm, and Maria Scotti," Siegel Contemporary Art, New York NY |
| | | 1982 | "Ten Variations on a Theme: The Human Figure," Siegel Contemporary
Art, New York, New York |
| | | 1982 | "Wisconsin Biennial," Madison Art Center, Madison, Wisconsin |
| | | 1982 | "Painterly Realism," Rahr West Museum, Manitowoc, Wisconsin |
| | | 1978 | "Wisconsin 78" (Best of Show Award), University of Wisconsin-
Stevens Point, Stevens Point WI |
| | | 1978 | "Wisconsin Directions 2," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |
| | | 1977 | "Contemporary Figurative Painting in the Midwest," Madison Art Center
Madison, Wisconsin |
| | | 1975 | "Wisconsin Directions," Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |
| | | 1973 | "58th Wisconsin Painters & Sculptors Exhibition," Milwaukee Art
Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin |

Selected Group Exhibitions

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2006 | "Up North: Imaging Northwoods Culture & Mythology,"
West Bend Art Museum, West Bend WI |
| 2006 | "Artists Choose Artists Choose Artists," The Painting Center, New York,
New York |
| 2005 | "Out of the Woods: Recent Paintings & Drawings by Charles Munch &
Randall Berndt," Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin |
| 2005 | "Inner Visions: 4 Painters' Nature Narratives," New Visions Gallery
Marshfield, Wisconsin |
| 2005 | "Wild Color," Florida Gulf Coast University, Fort Myers, Florida |
| 2004 | "A Decade of Art," James Watrous Gallery of the Wisconsin Academy
Madison, Wisconsin |
| 2003 | "Signs & Testimonials," Reed College, Portland, Oregon |



Floating World, 2006
oil on canvas 30 x 38

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- 2005 Jacob Stockinger, "Two Area Artists Spotlited," *Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, March 31, 2005
- 2004 Berndt & Glowacki, "The Grand Opening," *Wisconsin Academy Review*, Madison, Wisconsin, Fall 2004
- 2003 James Auer, "Small Thoughts & Original Visions," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 26, 2003
- 2002 James Auer, "Art by Committee Produces Signature Piece," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 15, 2002
- 2001 Joanne Trestrail, *Wisconsin: The Spirit of America*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, New York
- 2001 Robert Cozzolino, "Nature in Concert," *Isthmus*, Madison, Wisconsin, June 15, 2001
- 2001 James Auer, "Munch Show Keeps You Wondering," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 14, 2001
- 1998 Jacob Stockinger, "Joint Exhibit Artists like Night and Day," *Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, November 4, 1998
- 1997 Auer, James, "2 Artists Present Stylized Fantasies," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 11, 1997
- 1996 Clowes, Jody, "Interior Landscapes," *Isthmus*, Madison, Wisconsin, September 20, 1996
- 1996 Lynch, Kevin, "Wisconsin Dreams," *Capital Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, June 12, 1996
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- 1994 Blocker, Susan, "Area Artist Draws the Line," *Wisconsin State Journal*, Madison, Wisconsin, February 4, 1994
- 1993 Paine, Janice T., "Munch's Art Bold, Enchanting," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 6, 1993
- 1992 Morrison, Mandy, "The Invisible Frame," *Chicago Reader*, Chicago, Illinois, November 6, 1992
- 1992 Shimon, J. and Lindemann, J., "The Enigmatic Nature of Charles Munch," *Art Muscle*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, August/September, 1992
- 1991 Kapelke, Steven, "Charles Munch," *New Art Examiner*, Chicago, Illinois, June, 1991
- 1991 Paine, Janice T., "'Borderland' Explores Edge of Abstraction," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Feb. 1, 1991
- 1991 Kingsbury, Martha, *Borderland: Paintings by Charles Munch*, February, 1991, Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 1989 Stevens, Mitchell, "Individuals: New Art from Wisconsin," *New Art Examiner*, January, 1989
- 1987 Dyer, Chris, "Two Bear Valley Artists Selected for Wisconsin Triennial Show," *Home News*, Spring Green, Wisconsin, October 7, 1987
- 1987 Jensen, Dean, "Artist Creates Own Sanctum," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 7, 1987
- 1982 Westfall, Stephen, "Ten Variations on a Theme," *Arts*, October 1982
- 1982 Russell, John, "Current Shows of Interest," *The New York Times*, July 2, 1982
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- 1978 "Munch Painting Receives Laurels," *Door County Advocate*, October 24, 1978
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- 1977 Madison Art Center, *Contemporary Figurative Painting in the Midwest*, Madison WI, February, 1977
- 1976 Auer, James, "Gallery Gazing: Shows in Review," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 24, 1976
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Charles Munch in his studio 2002

To learn more about Charles Munch's paintings visit
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All paintings illustrated are by Charles Munch. Those with no location noted are in the collection of the artist.

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.

Front Cover: *Dream Dogs*, detail [55]

Frontispiece: *River Mountain River*, detail [47]

Back Cover: *Shiloh Church* [11]



“The strength of Munch’s work...is in the intellectual force of the images. Each painting offers much more than could be imagined on first viewing...” Steven Kapelke, *New Art Examiner*

Charles Munch is well known for his bold, luminously colored paintings of people and animals in expansive landscapes. For twenty-five years, his richly imagined images have explored the tangled relationships between humans and the rest of the natural world.

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Jody Clowes is a freelance curator and director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Design Gallery.

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