
Karl Ove Knausgård on Edvard Munch

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“My art has been an act of confession.” So said Edvard Munch at the end of his life. I believe that anyone who has seen Munch’s paintings will understand this remark. Not only because he painted so many self portraits, or because so many of the stock scenes he returned to again and again have clearly autobiographical elements, but because it’s as if something is revealed in everything he painted, even the landscapes without people, a field covered in snow, a jetty by the shore, a pine forest in the gloaming. This is the essence of Munch’s art. But also what we can say least about. In fact, the question is rather whether it is possible to say anything about the essence of Munch’s paintings at all. The paintings are wordless, they are silent and unmoving. They are made up of colours and shapes and they touch to us in a way that words never can, they reach places in us where words have no access. So much in our culture is rational, so much is reason and logic, the apparatus we use to understand ourselves and the world we are part of is enormous and sophisticated, it seems we have a language for everything, from the components of the atom and their movements, to the destruction of the soul through schizophrenia. But we have no words for the simplest of things, for example, the way in which a person is present in the room, that person’s essence, it’s not something we understand, but something we feel and know with our emotions. He is like this, she is like that. If I were to ask you to think about your mother, you would all have a clear picture of who she was, a feeling of your mother’s personality, presence, soul. You would just know it. She is like this, or she was like that. But if you were then to communicate this snapshot to someone else, for example by writing a description of her, you would never be able to fully communicate the image of her that only you have, what you feel, what it is that makes her her for you. Even though you were to write a thousand pages, it wouldn’t work. Because what I am talking about here is her presence. And this is not only true of people. It is also true of trees. Every tree has its own expression, its own way of standing in the world. A beach. A forest. A field. A house. A living room. When I say it like that, it sounds like any beach, any forest, any field. But there is no such thing as any field. There are only specific fields in the world, with a definite presence. And this

presence is not determined by the field alone, just as your mother's presence in your world is not determined by her alone. Equally important is the way in which we perceive the field or our mother, who we are, what our realisations and experiences are, what mood we are in when we see them or think about them. In other words, reality is not something that exists beforehand, it is something we create, something that manifests in each encounter. The world is constantly in the making. It is always moving, it is fundamentally unpredictable and chaotic. It is, of course, impossible to live in such a world, one that is created every time we open our eyes in the morning. It is impossible to live with the unpredictability and chaos, the fact that we never know what is waiting behind the next house or around the next corner. To process the profusion of details that every encounter entails is also impossible. Which is why we have developed all our categories and concepts and systems. And why culture is organised around repetitions and rituals, and our daily lives are so ruled by habits and routines, traditions and fixed behavioural patterns. We never look for what is new, we look for what is the same in the new. It's a coping mechanism, it's a survival strategy. And it's effective. We no longer sit around a fire in the wilderness and listen in fear to all the sounds out there in the dark, we sit in our homes and watch documentaries about predators while we drink coffee from the same cup that we always drink coffee from. Imagine for a moment that you were to get up and go to the loo, and when you came back, there was a man you had never seen before sitting on the sofa. How would you react? Presumably with horror, fear or anger. And I can guarantee that you would remember that man's face for many years to come, what he said, the way in which he said it. And if you were then to go into town the next day, you would be surrounded by strangers, you would see hundreds of faces that you had never seen before, but they would not fill you with horror, fear or anger, and you would not remember them later when you got back home. Because that is how we work, we always have our guard up, it protects us against all these impressions which only become visible when our guard is down, and then the world can touch us suddenly and with great intensity.

There are people who are so sensitive and aware that they have no such guard, no protection against reality. We often say that they are too sensitive, not thick-skinned enough or over-emotional. This always implies a form of functional incompetence, as these over-emotional people are dependent on greater stability, constancy and predictability than others. Travelling, for example, becomes impossible. Because then everything is new, the impressions build into a storm that is impossible to navigate. It's hard not to think about the Norwegian author Tor Ulven in this context, who, in the latter years of his life, never left the house, he simply couldn't do it, he was too

scared. He took his own life, and people only do that when they are so tormented that life becomes unbearable. What was it that tormented him? I don't know, but I assume that it was not anything specific, rather something more general, a feeling of pain for no reason. But what Tor Ulven did, as he sat there captive to his own emotions, was to write. And he wrote with such feeling, with an almost limitless sensitivity, that we can read about a glass of water, a breadboard and some crumbs as part of the universe without such big words, which make everything invisible, ever being used. What Tor Ulven did is exactly what painters through the ages have done - I'm thinking, for example, about the Dutch seventeenth century masters, how they painted their still lives of everyday objects and made them radiate with such a presence that a sense of belonging was sparked in anyone who saw them - this is where we are, this what we really are. But belonging is treacherous, because it invites intimacy, and intimacy pulls reality into what is familiar, which then in turn becomes part of our guard, part of what stands between us and the world. I don't think Edvard Munch knew that, but I think he felt it. He did his first oil paintings when he was sixteen, and even though the very first painting, which depicts the view towards Telthusbakken in Christiania, as Oslo was then called, is perhaps a little stiff and lacks elegance, as though painted with great effort, he developed incredibly quickly. Only a few months later his painting was of a very high standard and as a nineteen-year-old, he produced small masterpieces. From the outset, his sense of colour, his sense of light, his sense of composition and his sense of mood are striking. It is hard to get enough of many of these pictures, for example the one called *Garden With Red House*, which he painted when he was eighteen, or the fantastic self-portrait he did when he was nineteen. If Edvard Munch had, for one reason or another, stopped painting when he was twenty-two, that is to say, with his masterpiece *The Sick Child*, we would perhaps not have celebrated his one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, but he would still be remembered. Edvard Munch, one of our great young dead, lost his mother when he was five, grew up with an introverted, religious father, showed great talent at an early age, was taken under the wing of Christian Krogh and the Christiania Bohemians, and his last painting, the famous and iconic *Sick Child*, provoked both admiration and disgust when it was shown at the autumn exhibition in 1886.

But that is not what happened, Edvard Munch lived until he was eighty, and he painted almost every day for the rest of his life, and more or less in isolation for the final thirty years. The most incredible thing about Edvard Munch is the fact that he produced such a phenomenal amount of work, and that he did it on his own. He had no children, and apart from a few difficult relationships in his youth, he had no wife

or lovers, and he kept the few friends he did have at a distance. The only thing he did was to paint. And his paintings, they were constantly changing, from day to day and period to period. This is where I believe Munch's uniqueness lies, in this enormous fluidity, because what he left behind is a record of his encounters with the world, just as he was, in the form of his paintings, where it's as if the world is renewed every time, under ever changing circumstances, so that he meets the world with all his experience, everything he has lived, and in this encounter the paintings are created, an experience in itself, which is then thrown back to him, and in turn to the pictures in a continuous, sixty-four-year-long process. It is in this context that the word confession comes into its own right, because in these pictures he stands naked, with his guard down, even in his landscape paintings, there is nothing between him and the world, and it is this unguarded encounter that we see, not just once in one picture, but again and again, in hundreds of paintings. Naturally, not all of them are masterpieces, not all of them are of the same high quality, but Munch didn't care about quality, and he didn't care about creating masterpieces, no artist worth mentioning does, because quality, that's something that is already there, it's the protection, it is the wooden fence that holds reality at bay. And a masterpiece, that's something we can no longer truly see, it has become an icon, something rigid and unchangeable, a brand. *The Scream* by Munch is just such a masterpiece, we don't see it anymore. But there are over seventeen hundred other paintings, and one of them, which he painted just before *The Scream*, has the same flaming red background, the same bridge, but instead of the iconic skull-like face, there is a man in a hat standing in profile in the foreground. When I saw it, a shudder ran through me, because *that* was emotion, *that* was the abyss, *that* was the angst.

It's hard to think of anything less exclusive and more human than emotions. Everyone feels joy, happiness, pain, sorrow. But we cannot live with the strongest emotions, because sorrow and being in love become unbearable in the end, we have to wear them down in order to carry on living. What is so special about Edvard Munch is that he never managed to wear down these emotions, which is also true of many. I know several hyper-sensitive people. In the old days, they were said to be suffering from "nerves", so perhaps what is so special about him is that he was so extremely artistic and talented that he was able to give these nerves shape, and in the simplest way as time went on. That was what he was striving for. Which is why his pictures are so often unfinished, often more like sketches, they are not meant to represent reality, a door should not look like a door, but rather like a painted door, that's to say, as a door should be felt, or experienced. Munch was a painter in the extreme, the painting was an object, a thing in itself to be pursued, and therefore he was able to go where

only a painting can go, to that which is beyond words, but which is still part of our reality. And this is why reproductions never do Munch's paintings justice. Just as a mother, a tree or a field exudes something unique, a soul if you like, Munch's paintings do the same. Which is why he left them out in the wind and rain. It didn't matter if they were damaged, it was not only what they portrayed that was meaningful, but also what they were, in and of themselves, as objects. And if you have ever stood in a room in front of a painting by Munch, or Van Gogh or Rembrandt for that matter, you will know that part of the painting's magic is that it brings together its time and yours, its place and yours, and there is comfort in that, because even the distance that is inherent in loneliness, is suspended in that moment.



Karl Ove Knausgård (Photo: Maartje Strijbis)