

WORKPLACE

The Week

'Where to Buy: Olivia Jia at Workplace Gallery'

11 June, 2022

28 ARTS

Art

Exhibition of the week **Edvard Munch: Masterpieces from Bergen**

The Courtauld Gallery, London WC2 (020-3947 7711, courtauld.ac.uk). Until 4 September

In the UK, we tend to think of Edvard Munch (1863-1944) as a master of "existential angst", said Florence Hallett in *The i Paper*. Yet as this exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery makes clear, that characterisation is only half right. Featuring 18 paintings on loan from a major collection of Munch's work in Bergen, in his native Norway, it covers a crucial period, in the 1880s and 1890s, when his work shifted from dalliances with French impressionism to "the sparse, vibrant" portraits that have come to define him. These works – most of which have never been seen in Britain before – reveal that Munch was a resourceful artist, adept at capturing both "emotional intensity" and "the eerie, magical quality of Norwegian light".

It's "fascinating" to see how indebted Munch was to the French painters whose work is so well-represented at the Courtauld, said Jackie Wullschläger in the FT. *Spring Day on Karl Johan Street* (1890), which he painted after a visit to Paris, is a pointillist depiction of Oslo's main thoroughfare on a sunny morning; the crowd is depicted as bright flecks, and its palette could almost belong to Seurat. Yet two years later, in *Evening on Karl Johan Street*, we see the same boulevard in dramatically different style. Dark figures loom forward, their faces like "pale masks", their "button eyes" gazing straight at us through a haze



Munch's two depictions of Karl Johan Street

of artificial light. This "break-through" painting paved the way for later "tormented" visions such as *At the Deathbed* (1895), inspired by his memories of his sister's death from tuberculosis. Dark figures surround the bed, their pain and grief conveyed by "white or burning faces", and hands that are "clenched, or gripping the bed, or in prayer".

There is something spectacular in Munch's depictions of "human misery", said Laura Cumming in *The Observer*. Yet he was capable of subtlety, too. The paintings inspired by visits to his seaside home are transfixing: in *Inger on the Beach* (1889), we see his sister seated "among glowing rocks on the shore, her white dress incandescent in the gloaming"; and in *Moonlight on the Beach* (1892), five moons hang down, illuminating the scene "like a string of jewels". Other works force one to marvel at Munch's "extraordinary technique", with his "lustrous pearl and silver strokes", "insistent whorls", and "sleeping stains and haloed heads". In his work, hair "takes on a life of its own", while figures march straight out from the canvas. Perhaps strangest of all, in this must-see show, is a self-portrait he made in 1909 after having a breakdown: against a chaotic backdrop, the artist sits "upright and composed in a neat three-piece suit". It's "electrifying".

Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

Olivia Jia

at Workplace Gallery

Over the past few years, a number of young painters have revived arcane styles that had long ago been written off by the arbiters of artistic fashion. In the case of American artist Olivia Jia (b.1994), it is trompe l'oeil, the illusionistic medium which has not been taken seriously by the cognoscenti since before the Second World War. For this show, *Ex Libris*, Jia appropriates the pages of books – nature encyclopaedias, scrapbooks, art historical tomes – often juxtaposing their contents with imagery sourced from memory, the internet or her own immediate surroundings. A self-portrait in profile is set against a depiction of the Moon shining through the branches of a tree on the



Crane Comb and Bedroom Window (2022)

opposing pages of one such book; another sees torn sheets, depicting everything from an owl's eye to an antique vase, arranged on a cracked mirror. All the while, a palette heavy on blues and greens gives the paintings a distinctly nocturnal air. Romantic and intelligent in equal measure, it's a strong body of work. Prices range from £2,000 to £5,000.

40 Margaret Street, London W1 (020-8396 6622). Until 17 June

A royal "tree of trees"

First we had the comically awful Marble Arch Mound; last week, London was given another potentially divisive piece of "faux foliage", said *The Art Newspaper*. Thomas Heatherwick's *Tree of Trees* was erected outside Buckingham Palace, to celebrate the Queen's Green Canopy – a tree-planting campaign marking her Platinum Jubilee year. The 21-metre-tall living sculpture (funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies) consists of a cast-iron trunk, with 80 steel branches that support 250 saplings in aluminium pots. It was illuminated for the Jubilee weekend; now the whole thing will be dismantled and the saplings given to community groups to plant. On Twitter, some described the *Tree* as beautiful. But *The Guardian's* art critic was not impressed. It stands as "a massively over-engineered structure that recalls a hastily disguised mobile phone mast", said Oliver Wainwright; it's an "aesthetic disappointment" and a "gross misuse of carbon-hungry steel and aluminium".



© KODE BERGEN ART MUSEUM, GIFT FROM BERGEN ART SOCIETY 1986; THE PASKAS MUYTER COLLECTION

THE WEEK 11 June 2022

dd1d5f26-64be-4fe9-8d97-b0ccc56fa362

50 Mortimer Street, London, W1W 7RP, UK | +44 (0)2076313497 | info@workplace.art | www.workplace.art

Workplace Gallery Ltd. Registered in England and Wales, 50 Mortimer Street, London, W1W 7RP UK. Company No 7068254, VAT No GB126132352