



Christmas in the Brothel, Edvard Munch, 1905

Winter Reading for Artists

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One of this season's stranger images is Edvard Munch's "Christmas in the Brothel." The painting depicts the artist senseless besides the bordello Christmas tree. Indifferent, the Madam consumes her cigarette and book. Christmas, Munch seems to tells us, can be luridly colourful, but it is also a time of reflection. Like the Madam, I do some of my heaviest reading during the holidays. I'm particularly drawn to art books that, like Munch's painting, treat the sacred with an element of the profane. My favourites consider art unromantically, as a vocation performed by mortals with dirty hands. Below are a few titles I return to again and again.

***Inside the Painter's Studio* by Joe Fig (2009)**

In this collection of candidly practical interviews, the artist Joe Fig speaks with established New York painters about the nut-and-bolts details of their daily routines. The typically deadpan questions include: What kind of paints do you use? Do you listen to music? How often do you clean your studio? Through these exchanges, the painters reveal themselves to be at once extraordinary - particularly in their commitment - and utterly human. It is surprisingly charming to read how the greats pick up groceries on the way home and work to the soundtrack of NPR (the American equivalent to BBC radio). Fig also creates elaborate dioramas of each painter's work space. The meticulous attention to the splatters on the floorboards, the soiled rags, and the miniature brushes feels like a homage to the labour of painting.

***Man with a Blue Scarf* by Martin Gayford (2013)**

Artist biographies often dwell too long on the subject's childhood or personal history, when what you really want to delve into is their creative life. Martin Gayford's book is a memoir of posing for a portrait by Lucian Freud. For seven months, Freud carefully observes Gayford while the writer reciprocates. Gayford records their sittings and Freud's banterous insights on the high and low: the "curious way [Vermeer's] people just aren't there," the weightlessness of Raphael's figures, how Princess Margaret couldn't sing, his friendship with Kate Moss. Gayford describes the then 82-year-old painter's unflagging intensity, how Freud works standing for hours, how he refuses to ignore a slight double-chin that Gayford attempts to conceal, how he insists that Gayford remain as he completes the background - to better "understand [his] head." Few writers gain such intimate access into the sanctum of an artist's practice.

***Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag (2003)**

The "Dark Queen" of arts and letters meditates on the imagery of violence. The power, she emphasizes, is not only in what is portrayed but also excluded: "An ample reservoir of stoicism is needed to get through the... newspaper... each morning... And the pity and disgust that [these wartime] pictures... inspire should not distract you from asking what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are not being shown." When studying Goya's Desastres etchings and Robert Capa's war photography, Sontag makes the most thoughtful comparison of hand-made and mechanical images that I have encountered. Sontag died a year after this book was published. One wonders what she would have made of today's internet and its mass proliferation of not only brutal but often doctored photographs.

***Nature and Art are Physical: Writings on Art, 1967-2008* by Rackstraw Downes (2014)**

Most artists are too coy, disingenuous, or ill-equipped to articulate what they do. Rackstraw Downes, the British-American painter, is a particularly literate exception. In his collection of writings, Downes explains his working methods, his views on artists such as Charles Burchfield and Picasso, and the fallacies of Modern Art criticism. In his piece, "What Realism Means to Me," Downes argues that contemporary realism is a product rather than an opponent of abstraction: "One of the side effects of modernism and abstract art was to upset and clear away old painting methods, training systems, traditions, so you could start representing again from zero... So personally when I hear realists today berate and beleague modernism, I'm inclined to think they might with as much justice bring a paternity suit against it instead." In "Tenses of Landscape," Downes expresses his attraction to scenes that conflate the "separated realities" of nature and progress, sites in which the industrial merges with the overgrown so that the idea of environment becomes ambiguous. For artists who want to think more deeply and more lucidly about their work, Downes should be the exemplar.

***In Praise of Shadows* by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (published in English, 1977)**

In our world of bombastic and salacious flamboyance, Tanizaki's contemplation of Japanese aesthetics - dark, quiet, enigmatic - is a welcome antidote. The novelist's sense of beauty, suspicious of the new and shiny, concerns depth and history. He "find[s] beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates..." I was especially moved by his veneration of patina: "Yet for better or for worse we do love things that bear the mark of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colours and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them." When struggling with London's December grimness, Tanizaki nearly persuades me that the gloom is an elegant experience. Happy reading and happy holidays.