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Seeing Himself in Others

BY LANCE ESPLUND | DECEMBER 10, 2014

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In the Neue Galerie's exhibition "Egon Schiele: Portraits," a 1915 photograph shows the angst-ridden Austrian Expressionist standing next to his full-length studio mirror. Seemingly startled, the artist looks over his shoulder, eyeing himself, sidling up to the glass. Schiele's sisters noted that he "never passed a mirror without stopping and staring at himself intently." Poised here like a gunslinger, Schiele faces off against his own reflection.

The show comprises about 125 drawings, paintings and sculptures, including a plaster cast of the artist's death mask. Curated by Alessandra Comini and designed by Federico de Vera, it is handsome and affecting, among the most convincing and focused selections of Schiele's artworks I've seen. Organized thematically, it devotes sections to friends, family, patrons, children, artists, lovers and, of course, Schiele himself.

The tiniest portrait here is a 1 1/2 -inch-tall sculpted head, depicting one of Schiele's fellow inmates at the Sankt Pölten Prison. It is in a section dedicated to the artist's incarceration, in 1912, after Schiele (1890-1918) was arrested and charged with the statutory rape of one of his prepubescent models. Schiele served 24 days, not for the abduction and seduction of a minor but for exposing her to pornography—Schiele's own artworks.

Schiele's tiny sculpted prisoner is among the show's strongest artworks. Its deep-set eyes and furrowed brow draw a stern, freakishly exaggerated character. Devilish and talismanic, the salmon-colored head, with a satiny sheen, resembles an ancient fragment of unfired clay. I was surprised to learn that it is actually made of kneaded and carved bread, lending an air of transfiguration.

Other small gems include a brooding, washy self-portrait (c. 1906), in watercolor and gouache, in which Schiele's piercing eyes and tousled hair, like a choppy sea, enliven the picture's smoky atmosphere. Another self-portrait, an oil from 1907, is milky-soft—as if we were seeing Schiele through fog. In another, a small, dark oil-on-canvas-fragment from 1913, Schiele's frontal close-up crops his face just above the forehead and below his nose. Conjuring images of the Veil of Veronica, it has the immediacy of an impression—a stain.

In strong larger pictures, such as the nearly abstract oil painting "Procession" (1911), Schiele stacks figures from edge to edge, like a wall of stones. The womblike "Conversion" (1912), an oil-and-charcoal-on-canvas, is a spiraling cluster of figures lodged as if within a shell. And in the painting "Man and Woman I (Lovers I)" (1914), Schiele trans-



'Man and Woman I (Lovers I)' (1914) by Egon Schiele. PRIVATE COLLECTION

forms a nude couple and their bed into a fractured patchwork of rock and ice. It is a self-portrait in which the artist moves like a spider and his female lover is captured prey.

In these works, the artist's most successful portraits, Schiele engages with the entire rectangle, creating holistic universes. More often than not, however, his desolate, skeletal figures, floating aimlessly, are surrounded by expanses of blank paper and scumbled white canvas.

Schiele's signature wiry figures are brittle, ghoulish, agitated—unmistakable. Blanched and veined yellow, red and green, they sometimes resemble putrefying bodies scraped to the bone. And they usually exist alone as dangling fragments suspended uncomfortably within the frame, which encroaches upon and crops them at odd angles and places. These portraits often feel impatient, unfinished—their subjects seemingly abandoned in a void.

Artists have long incorporated blank or single-colored areas (often referred to as the ground) into their pictures, making these spaces as important to their compositions as the painted or drawn parts (the figure). In Schiele's works, however, his empty spaces are usually merely empty, leftover, mute. They just fall away.

From the earliest works here, the drawings from plaster casts of antique sculptures that Schiele did

at Vienna's Academy of Art in 1906, portrait busts are isolated, drifting on the page. And in his early portraits of women, from 1907, Schiele, like most student artists, superficially attends to the backgrounds of his drawings by simply shading them in—seemingly as an afterthought. Schiele, who had a meteoric career, in many ways remained a beginning artist. At age 28, he died of influenza. He never outgrew his initial academic approach to picture-making.

What saves Schiele's graphic portraits, for many viewers, I believe, is that their figures so often are expressively exaggerated into caricatures. And it doesn't hurt his popularity that Schiele, in art and life, was preoccupied with loneliness, rebellion, suffering, sex and death.

Schiele's father died of syphilis when Schiele was 15; but not before he became mentally ill, attempted suicide and passed the disease on to his wife, whose first three children were stillborn. Her fourth child died at the age of 10, when Schiele was three. And Schiele may have acted on his own sexual interest in his younger sister, and in other prepubescent girls, whom he employed as nude models.

After three dissatisfying years studying with a conservative art professor, the unruly Schiele was mentored by Gustav Klimt, a founding member of the Vienna Secession. Schiele quickly garnered success as an

avant-garde artist and portraitist; as well as notoriety for his explicitly psychosexual portraits and self-portraits. A grouping of these erotic works at the Neue Galerie includes mostly images of girls and women, some of whom, with legs spread, are fully exposed to the artist's gaze. Most feel crude and clinically anatomical. Despite their brazenness, only one, the carnivalesque "Reclining Semi-Nude" (1911), is actually erotic. Here, a prone woman exposes her bare behind and reddened sex; her multicolored striped dress, pulled high above her waist, encircles her hips like a merry-go-round. The dizzying view induces a heady lilt, similar to that felt during arousal.

Elsewhere, in some of Schiele's nude self-portraits—which often depict the artist masturbating—he shadows himself with halos and bands of white paint. These jolting white lines animate the figures, like electric shocks of anxiety, excitement, rapture and revelation. They burst forth like emotional confessions.

What we feel most forcibly in Schiele's portraits—whether they be of his father-in-law, his wife, street urchins, fellow artists, prisoners or prostitutes—is not the distinct and varied personalities of his sitters, but the presence of the artist himself. In his portraits, no less than his self-portraits, Schiele always has one eye looking in the mirror.