Volatle Femininity in Edvard Munch’s Interior Bathing Scenes

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ABSTRACT

Edvard Munch rarely depicted images of women bathing in interior settings. Yet these paintings are particularly fascinating since both the bathing space and the bathers remain elusive as it is quite unclear where the women are bathing and for what purpose. This article analyses two of Munch’s interior bathing scenes from the fin-de-siècle through discussing both social understanding of interior bathing spaces at that time and the implications for the female bather within the bathing locale.

Keywords

Edvard Munch, gender, bathing culture, sexuality

Sammendrag

Edvard Munch fremstilte sjelden innendørs badende kvinner. Likevel er disse maleriene særlig fascinerende, fordi både lokaliteten og baderne er vanskelige å definere; det er ukart hvor kvinnene bader og hvorfor. Artikkelen analyserer to av Munchs innendørs badescener fra århundreskiftet gjennom en diskusjon av samtidens sosiale forståelse av innendørs bad, og hva det kunne innebære for den kvinnelige baderen i lokalet.

Nøkkelord

Edvard Munch, kjønn, badekultur, seksualitet
This article deals with two indoor bathing scenes from the late 1890s by the Norwegian artist, Edvard Munch (1863–1944). *Women in a Swimming Pool* (1896–97) (ill. 1) and *Jealousy in the Bath* (1898–1900) (ill. 2) both depict women bathing in indoor settings of either a pool or a bathhouse, a theme that Munch rarely developed in other artworks. These paintings, largely ignored in the Munch literature, are particularly interesting as they differ greatly from Munch’s outdoor bathing imagery of the first two decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, aside from the indoor bathing setting, these paintings display little stylistic and thematic consistency. In examining two of Munch’s paintings of indoor female bathers, this paper provides insight into an understudied theme in Munch’s oeuvre by contextualizing bathing culture socio-historically and situating this theme in relation to Munch’s larger artistic production.

Central to both paintings are ambiguous bathing locales. In *Women in a Swimming Pool*, given the implied size of the space, the number of figures, and the apparent segregation of sexes, it might appear the women are in a public bathing space. However, is it possible to know exactly where these bathers are located? Are they in a public bathhouse? A spa? A sanatorium? A brothel? The space never resolves into a specific locale, leaving the scene vague. *Jealousy in the Bath* is equally as puzzling, rendering a bathing couple seated in a

1. Munch painted another indoor bathing scene, *Women Bathing*, in 1896. I have analyzed this painting previously in conjunction with Munch’s interior bathing imagery discussed in this article. Although not included in this particular article, this painting also provides a fruitful space to tease out some of the complex ambiguities in Munch’s feminine interior bathing scenes.
bath or pool. This socially unacceptable mix of the sexes suggests the scene is not located in a morally upstanding bathing space, yet the location remains elusive.

This article approaches these paintings by exploring the connotations associated with the numerous bathing situations in which the bathers might be located. Whether conscious on Munch’s part or not, the ambiguity of the bathing space renders the figures volatile and allows the bodies to oscillate between “types” of femininity usually stabilized in specific tropes. If we understand gender not as fixed but as socially, politically, and culturally constructed, the volatility of the bodies in these paintings allows insight into how bathing culture produced gendered subjects at a time when constructions of gender were shifting.\(^2\) The paintings furthermore render visible Munch’s understanding of bathing culture

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as a site where this change was taking place. In these paintings, bathing spaces provide
a medium for depicting imprecise gender identities, blurring the lines between not only
various categories of “Woman,” but destabilizing notions of masculinity and femininity.

BATHING SITES AT THE FIN-DE-SIÈCLE

Much of the research surrounding Munch’s interest in bathing culture focuses on his male
bathing scenes and has not been placed in dialogue with the interior scenes populated by
female bathers.3 This may be due to the often-ambiguous meanings invested in indoor
pools and bathhouses at the fin-de-siècle for the female bather. Alongside the rise in seaside
bathing, indoor bathing establishments also grew in popularity, advocated by medical and
scientific professionals for health and fitness reasons.4 Doctors prescribed bathing for both
men and women to counter mental and physical ailments associated with fin-de-siècle
concerns over bodily degeneration.5 Bathhouses, long prevalent in cities where communal
bathing was the norm, remained popular in urban locations, while rural and seaside spa
resorts, which provided bathhouses and bathing treatments as amenities, grew in popular-
ity. Spa towns served as luxury vacation destinations luring visitors by advertising “water
[as] the antidote to the diseases of civilization…”6 Both rural and urban bathing locales
provided a venue to cure oneself of diseases believed to result from urban existence, includ-
ing degeneration and various nervous problems, under the guidance of a medical profes-
sional.7 However, the class valences of interior bathing establishments were complex, as the
location where one bathed was indicative of social status. Individuals receiving treatments
in spa towns and bathhouses were generally middle to upper-middle class.8

As part of public fitness initiatives, public swimming pools were open to a range of
social classes.9 At the fin-de-siècle, an idealized Greco-Roman body was understood as
the epitome of mental and physical health, resulting in increased participation in leisure
exercise. Swimming was advertised by medical professionals as the ideal total body con-

4. Georges Vigarello, Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Uni-
5. See, for example, Sebastian Kneipp, Meine Wasserkur (Bayern: J. Kösel’sche Buchhandlung, 1890); Émile Duval,
La pratique de l’hydrothérapie (Paris: J.B. Baillire et Fils, 1891). For more information on sport and public regen-
eration see Robert Nye, Crime, Madness, & Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline
European Historical Perspectives, eds. Susan Anderson and Bruce Tabb (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 12.
7. Ibid.
8. It is worth noting that while patrons to spa towns were often upper or upper middle class, beaches were per-
ceived as more egalitarian spaces. Due to the popularity of bathing at the time, a range from upper to lower
classes could often be found at the beach. See for example, Michelle Facos, “A Sound Mind in a Sound Body:
Bathing in Sweden,” in Water Leisure and Culture, 106.
Adler and Maria Pointon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 77.
ditioning. For the bourgeoisie, bathing in public was reserved for mental and physical regeneration, while hygienic bathing was done in the privacy of one’s own home. However, to encourage public sanitation, low-cost bathhouses were provided for the urban poor. Following fin-de-siècle standards of propriety, women were provided their own room and brief time allotment to wash. These bathhouses did not offer the health and fitness regimens like the bourgeois bathhouse and were largely an attempt to mitigate the spread of disease and to counter increasing social fears of germs and microbes.

Bathtubs were also linked to prostitution. At the fin-de-siècle, due to widespread fears of venereal disease, strict measures were taken to monitor prostitutes, limiting and regulating their mobility and monitoring hygiene and bathing practices. Despite strict regulations, some bathhouses tolerated prostitution if both patron and prostitute were discreet. Bathing, both for hygiene and as a cover for illicit activity, was understood as part of the prostitute’s sedentary lifestyle. Studies on prostitutes even claimed excessive bathing as a contributing factor to her obese body typology. Because the bathhouse was associated with degeneration, regeneration, and prostitution, some social critics of the day understood it as above all a place to witness degenerate behavior. In *Degeneration*, Max Nordau lambasted contemporary art, including symbolism, which he understood as contributing to social decline. He listed numerous places where the contemporary degenerate might be found: “let us follow in the train frequenting the palaces of European capitals, the highways of fashionable watering-places, the receptions of the rich, and observe the figures of which it is composed.” Although marketed as sites of health, Nordau understood spa towns as sites where deviants might be found.

The bathhouse was also bound up with a fascination with a gendered “Orient.” Turkish baths recreated throughout Europe allowed participants to engage in “exotic” non-western bathing practices under the guise of health. Like most bathing sites at the fin-de-siècle, Turkish baths were gender-segregated spaces, scheduling different days for men and women, with most days reserved for men. These leisure spaces were sites of male homosocial bonding that boasted to cure degeneration with an additional exotic appeal. However, nineteenth-century European paintings of harem scenes often depict a pool area filled with odalisques, portraying a “natural” scene of female leisure that genders

13. Ibid., 200.
18. Ibid., 320.
the indoor bathing space as feminine. These paintings enact scenes of ultimate masculine dominance over women both physically and sexually. Placing this dominance in an exotic setting and painting it in a realist manner casts the image as objective for a viewer who can perceive himself as not implicated in the sexual exploitation but nevertheless allowed to look. Works like these, according to Linda Nochlin, depict the Orient as “a world without change, timeless, with atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were ‘afflicting’ or ‘improving’ but at any rate, drastically altering Western societies at the time.” The Turkish bath, both in paintings and practice, allowed an escape for Europeans into what was perceived as a timeless space of relaxation, pleasure, and sensuality, enacting a fantasy experience that was inherently gendered. Munch’s strange bathing spaces conflate references to Turkish baths, brothels, sanatoria, and leisure bathhouses. The merging of these contradictory feminine bathing activities invests the women with a complex and malleable identity that combines different feminine tropes, allowing the women to operate outside of a fixed gender identity.

**THE BATHERS AND A CRISIS IN Masculinity**

Scholarship by Patricia Berman has done much to debunk the tendency in Munch literature to view the artist as a misogynistic painter of femme fatales. Rather Berman notes that Munch functioned within literary and medical milieux that essentialized the female body and behavior as either fertile mother or degenerative femme fatale. Social perceptions left little room for women to function outside this binary and, as a result, many of Munch’s women tend to conform to one of these oppositional poles. However, these bathing scenes depict figures in an ambiguous space loaded with different possible meanings. Oscillating between these diverse locales simultaneously deconstructs and reconstructs viewers’ understanding of the type of women depicted, offering different ways to engage with Munch’s complex understanding of “Woman.” In their multivalence, the bathers often cannot be stabilized within contemporary systems of binaries. Berman has suggested that many of Munch’s figures of the 1890s embody a reversal of traditional gender roles, with men depicted in what has been considered a feminine manner and women vice-versa, suggesting that Munch’s artwork at this time interrogates the idea of a fixed gender identity. The bathers discussed here similarly never stabilize within traditional gender roles, providing an opportunity to further investigate Munch’s complex understanding of gender.

Munch’s distortion of gender identities can be understood within the context of what has been identified as a fin-de-siècle crisis of masculinity, in part informed by medical and scientific discourses suggesting that human evolution could not only evolve forwards, but degenerate backwards.24 Modern men were considered a weak replica of pre-industrial men, succumbing to alcoholism, syphilis, nervous and hereditary diseases, and threatening to produce damaged offspring or no offspring at all.25 Contemporary urban existence was perceived as a risk to male psychic and social power, leading to degenerate lifestyles and effeminate masculinity. The increasing presence of women in public, embodied by the figure of the New Woman, furthered social anxiety over gender norms, which were understood as biologically evolved, inscribing traditional domestic roles onto the female body within the bourgeois family structure.26 New roles for women in public were seen by many to evidence social decay and the inversion of sexual roles, inducing fear over the apparently impending death of the bourgeois family structure.27

Munch cultivated a degenerate bohemian identity through his artwork and viewed himself as predisposed to genetic diseases involving weak nerves.28 He actively took on the role of outsider living beyond the confines of bourgeois life, participating in the socialist-anarchist groups of the so-called Kristiania Bohème and Zum Schwarzen Ferkel (At The Black Piglet), the latter named after a Berlin wine cellar frequented by a group of mostly Nordic and German writers and artists.29 These milieux informed his oeuvre of the 1890s, and many of the figures that populate his paintings at this time belie a gender ambiguity as in the bathing scenes under discussion. Figures fail to align with traditional roles but also do not offer stable new forms of masculinity or femininity. Berman convincingly argues that Munch’s male figures, “in their powerlessness over their sexualities, their bodies, or their environments …offer spectacles of an unstable ‘new man,’ one whose identity is aligned with both urban enervation, but also with liberation.”30 While degeneracy provides emancipation for some of the male figures, the bathing women discussed here fail to achieve a similar release through their gender-fluidity.

25. Tamar Garb, Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 5.
VOLATILE FEMININITY AND JEALOUSY IN THE BATH

In *Jealousy in the Bath*, Munch makes palpable the fin-de-siècle crisis in masculinity by portraying the male body as susceptible to danger from both the approaching female bather and the sword-wielding statue. As noted previously, the space fails to settle into a specific watering context. Yet the mixing of genders makes it clear that this is neither a public pool nor a morally upstanding bathhouse. A phallic pillar divides the scene, separating the bathers on the left two-thirds of the canvas from Munch’s jealousy motif on the right third. It is unclear whether the pillar serves to physically separate two spaces or if it serves as a psychological barrier between a mental state and a “real” bathing scene. The female bather faces her companion, a man with his back to the viewer who presumably looks either at the woman or the statue. Observing the scene from a similar vantage point, viewers can identify with the male bather, whose slumped shoulders and boxy “helmet” hair can be identified as a stand in for Munch.

Looming over the bath, the statue is the only decorative motif in the scene. This figure can be read as masculine through the shaded male genitalia reiterated by the phallic scimitar and the rigid pose echoing Egyptian pharaoh statuary. However, this figure is also feminized through its starkly outlined chest, mimicking the breasts of the female bather. With references to both masculine and feminine bodily typologies, this statue embodies fin-de-siècle fears of gender inversion. The spread legs of the male bather – evoked by the flick of white paint near his torso – makes this encounter corporeal, as both his chest and phallus are accessible to the approaching woman and statue. Since both the statue and the woman tentatively lean towards or over the male bather, we read the statue as a threat to the male figure, a proxy for the intentions of the female bather.

Like the statue, the woman fails to conform to a stable gender identity. She combines Munch’s prostitute type, seen in *Rose and Amélie* (ill. 3), and his mermaid motif, most recognizable in *The Mermaid* (Philadelphia Museum of Art). Munch’s prostitutes tend to be robust, full-figured women, mirroring fin-de-siècle texts describing the prostitute’s body. In *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris* (1836), Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet identified a “prostitute type” as an obese figure, a result of their lazy lifestyles and excessive bathing. In *Rose and Amélie*, the prostitutes are plump, caricatural figures with long slits for eyes. Shown playing cards or possibly gambling, the women participate in morally suspect behaviors associated with degeneracy and abnormal mental pathologies, as women

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31. As noted by Michelle Facos, a reoccurring trope in symbolist imagery is a manipulation of form or spatial ambiguity, making it quite unclear if the viewer is witnessing a «real» scene or if the scene serves as a memory or psychological state: Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 25–27.
were considered more susceptible to gambling mania.\textsuperscript{35} Like the card-playing prostitutes, the woman in \textit{Jealousy in the Bath} is shown participating in reprehensible behavior since bathing with a male companion defied the decorum of morally sound bathhouses.

\textbf{III. 3}

\textit{Edvard Munch, Rose et Amèlie, 1893. Oil on unprimed canvas, 78 x 109 cm. The Stenersen Museum, Oslo. Photo: Svein Andersen / The Munch Museum.}

However, this bather does not fully conform to Munch’s prostitute type; she lacks the slit-like eyes and more thoroughly caricature-like face. She is given blonde hair, often reserved for the virginal, young character in Munch’s compositions,\textsuperscript{36} and her recumbent pose corresponds to many of Munch’s mermaid scenes. John Zarobell notes the psychological engagement enacted between the viewer and Munch’s mermaid type, as often her body lingers in a transitive state, retaining suggestions of both an aquatic tail and terrestrial legs.\textsuperscript{37} This figure is liminal, the ultimate version of an amphibious woman; amphibious literally means “of two natures.” She belongs to sea and land, never fully joining either realm, remaining unattainable for the male figure (or viewer).\textsuperscript{38} In \textit{Jealousy in the Bath}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ibid.
\end{itemize}
the woman’s lower half is depicted in a similar transitional state, with water blurring her body so that the legs never fully form and retain tail-like elements. Like the sword-wielding statue this bather has the potential for danger through her association with the prostitute type, viewed as occupying a primitive stage of female evolution, and the femme fatale imagined as exceedingly sexual. She also serves as the elusive mermaid, psychologically and physically unattainable for the male viewer. Munch juxtaposes these two oppositional female tropes, allowing this bather to retain a dual nature, operating outside of any one feminine type.

Since both the statue and the woman retain volatile gender identities, they conjure a sense of anxiety as they approach the exposed Munch stand-in. Sword, pillar, and statue all displace the phallus from the masculine body onto inanimate objects. The potential for bodily dislocation also appears on the back of the male figure; the dark outlining around the spine and shoulders mimics buttock and breast-like features, reiterating the breasts of the woman and statue. Visual elements in Jealousy in the Bath, destabilize the gender of both bathers and undermine the viewer’s ability to identify a comprehensible femininity or masculinity within the scene.

In discussing Paul Cézanne, T.J. Clark suggests that psychoanalysis in its earliest manifestations is embedded within the artist’s late bathers. He proposes that these paintings “show bodies thoroughly subject, open to fantasy, deformed and reconstituted at every point by the powers of the mind.” Perplexing bodies especially populate The Large Bathers (1895–1906, Barnes Collection), as figures reading largely as female take on masculine or phallic qualities. In discussing this painting, Clark suggests that one of the female figures is invested with a phallus, enacting a pre-oedipal phase for the male viewer (and Cézanne) in which the mother still physically (both internally and externally) and symbolically retains the male phallus, thus investing the woman with power. With the woman in possession of the phallus, the painting is arrested in a moment of overwhelming male castration anxiety, in which the fear of losing the phallus is both physically and psychologically palpable.

I argue that Jealousy in the Bath can be understood similarly, as visualizing male castration fear for fin-de-siècle viewers anxious about their own masculine identities and the increasing presence of often ambiguous women in public spaces. The male bather’s

41. Ibid., 147–9.
42. I draw from Clark’s use of psychoanalysis here not to psychoanalyze Munch himself, but to use psychoanalysis as one way to think through the crisis of masculinity at the fin-de-siècle. The perceived degeneration of men, supposedly brought on in part by the figure of the New Woman and the increasing presence of women in public spaces, allowed for a certain fear of women in new social roles. The crisis in masculinity was fed by fear that men would not know what “type” of woman they might be engaging with. I use psychoanalysis here as a methodology to think through how a painting might render visible a psychological fear faced by many fin-de-siècle men as women began to move through spaces they did not traverse previously. Women’s ambiguity in public spaces, or a man’s inability to “know” or classify these women exacerbated the crisis in masculinity. Psychoanalysis can allow us to understand what these paintings might do for a fin-de-siècle male viewer at a time when masculinity was perceived as degenerating or under attack. See for example, Sharon Hirsh, “The City Woman, Or the Should-be Mother,” in Symbolism and the Modern Urban Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 163–216.
body is susceptible to the castration fanaticized throughout the canvas in the phallic displacements. Dislocation of the phallus from the male suggests a dispossession of power, leaving him “feminized,” the quintessence of degenerate masculinity. Munch externalizes a subjective psychological crisis faced by many men at the fin-de-siècle and in doing so depicts the potential for gender role reversals for both bathers. Nonetheless, the transferal of the phallus onto inanimate objects allows neither bather full possession, but rather the phallus remains floating. The precarious woman is not inherently dangerous, yet she has the potential to be if she gains control of the phallus. Although in *Jealousy in the Bath* both masculinity and femininity appear unfixed, the potential for new gendered identities is limited. Insecure masculinity is depicted as a unidirectional effeminization of a once virile masculinity. Functioning outside of a singular female trope, the woman does achieve some emancipation. However, her potential to achieve symbolic or real power is dependent on divesting the male of the phallus, reenacting a traditional power play that pits masculinity and femininity as inherently oppositional.43

**FIN-DE-SIÈCLE MEDICAL MILIEUX AND DEGENERATE BATHERS**

*Women in a Swimming Pool* is stylistically inconsistent, and the scene appears disjointed as Munch handled the surface of the canvas and the women’s bodies differently throughout the painting. A blue line divides the right side of the canvas with its fleshy figures depicted in predominantly pink, red, and orange hues from the left half of the canvas with more pronounced green and blue hues, starkly outlined bodies, and large segments of unpainted canvas. A figure in the center of the canvas about to enter the pool with a line of dark paint visible through her body straddles the two halves of the canvas.

Like *Jealousy in the Bath*, *Women in a Swimming Pool* contains a certain anxiety over the painted form. Bodies overlap and conjoin, and all figures are rendered anonymous except for one woman in the foreground. Yet even in her individuality, her body disintegrates, amalgamating with the body behind her. In discussing Cézanne’s *Large Bathers* (Philadelphia Museum of Art) Clark states that the “double figure,” or figures that overlap and conflate, demonstrate Cézanne’s understanding of bodies in two ways:

… [the first being that] our representations of bodies…is some such process of interchange and duplication, of some unstoppable weird empathy, of our somehow putting an internal sense of what being in the body feels like into our picture of how another body looks … [the second, is that] bodies can never be made to exist at a determinant distance in representation …44

43. There are certainly problems with psychoanalysis as a methodology for thinking through the formation of gender since the Oedipal phase in psychology is reliant on a male/female binary. However, I use psychoanalysis to examine these paintings because of the insistence on an inherent gender binary prevalent at the fin-de-siècle and because of the potential the methodology holds for thinking through the crisis in masculinity. For more on the gender binary and the Oedipal phase, see: Judith Butler “Longing for Recognition,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 131–151.
These paintings envision the peculiar nature of visually realizing the sense of what being in a body feels like, a task impossible to realize, resulting in bodies that never settle into a specific part or figure. Munch’s figures, like those of Cézanne, remain unstable, either cropped from the painting, fusing with the canvas, or intermixing with another body. Often figures cannot be differentiated from one another. The canvas thus serves as a kind of skin. This is not to imply that *Women in a Swimming Pool* was inspired by Cézanne’s work, but to suggest the painting reflects a similar anxiety about the profound bizarreness of bodies.

Many of the women, including the sole figure in the pool, the woman entering the pool, and the women in the background, are merely outlines with one unmodulated color serving to signify skin. Limbs of the women walking in the background blend into the canvas. Fleeting references are made to Orientalism through the plethora of nude female bodies, a trope of excess common in European images of harems. The bathers appear to be situated in a public pool or possibly a harem scene. Yet the inclusion of the white columnar dresses, which also appear in *Nurses Folding Sheets* (Private Collection), give the sense that this scene is in a sanatorium or a clinic with clothed patients or nurses present. Sanatoria often included bathing activities as therapeutic approaches to nervous and mental illness, and Munch was interested in depicting images of institutionalized medical practices. If this scene depicts a sanatorium, it may have held profound meaning for Munch because he often visited medical institutions and in 1908 checked himself into a clinic for his alcohol dependence. Nonetheless it would have been rare for the artist to witness women in such a setting as they were often gender-segregated.

The three bathers closest to the foreground are executed more realistically than the other bathers. Only one of these three women is given facial features, yet her skin tone is the same as the larger figure standing behind her, giving the illusion that the two bodies dematerialize into one another. Noticeably plumper than the other bathers, the larger woman with her back to the viewer has a vertical line defining her back, buttocks, and legs, stably fixing her physically in the scene. She has an inexplicable head and hairline, giving the impression that she is either balding or has a tonsure, and her neck is so large that it merges into her head and shoulders. The third figure in the foreground is a woman with darker skin cropped out of the canvas so that only her posterior and head are seen. Sinuous shading appears to isolate her from the other bathers and the watering activities. She is subtly Orientalized, particularly when compared with *Blond and Dark-Haired Nude* (1902–3) (ill. 4). The central figure looking at the pool might be the same model as the blond-haired model staring at the dark-haired woman. Both figures have the same hairstyle, makeup, and positioning of the head. Comparable to the aesthetic employed in *Women in a Swimming Pool*, the pink flesh of the blond figure blends with the background of the canvas.

45. Ibid., 157–8.
This technique mutes the flesh of the blond-haired figure while accentuating the darker complexion of the other model, exoticized through her full eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, skin, and her necklace, similar to jewelry visible in other Orientalist paintings.50

Allison Chang situates *Blond and Dark-Haired Nude* alongside Munch’s images of double female nudes, influenced by French pornographic images depicting lesbian couples. Often, the darker skinned woman is understood to be the dominant lesbian partner, associated with deviant sexuality and contrasted with the submissive light-skinned partner who has been corrupted by the “other.”51 Through inclusion of the blond-haired model in *Women in a Swimming Pool*, the cropped figure with noticeably darker skin might be iden-

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50. For example, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ harem scene *The Turkish Bath* (1862) The Louvre.
tified as her companion from *Blond and Dark-Haired Nude*. Often included in Orientalist painting, the single non-white body exoticsizes the scene, insinuating the deviant sexuality of the white bather, the erotic object of the male gaze.\(^52\) Emphasis on the buttocks of the bathers further insinuates their aberrant sexuality as larger buttocks were understood as a sign of “primitive,” grotesque female sexuality.\(^53\)

The intimacy implied by the gaze of the blond model in *Blonde and Dark-Haired Nude* is not present in *Women in a Swimming Pool*. Instead each woman remains oblivious to the viewer’s gaze and the other bathers. Although the space is convoluted, the multiple references to medical practices and sexual degeneration imply that these women are not symbolic of the ideal femininity. The connection between bathing and mental degeneracy is made stronger by the fact that public baths in France were sometimes attached to asylums, combining mental and physical “cleansing” for the urban poor in one space.\(^54\) Often, Munch employs a caricature-like quality to denote the mental and sexual degeneracy of figures, as seen in his prostitute type and images of women with syphilis.\(^55\) Although it is unclear who these women are and where they are located, their caricature-like bodies prevent the figures from representing idealized femininity; in fact the only figure realistically depicted dematerializes into another figure. Munch employed the technique of bodily dematerialization in another medical scene, *Women in the Hospital* (1897) (*The Munch Museum*), in which the form of the central female figure begins to disintegrate into the canvas. Allison Morehead argues that this woman is in the process of losing her subjective identity, deforming into an object of study.\(^56\) Functioning in a similar manner, the central figure in *Women in a Swimming Pool* may possibly be understood as in the process of disintegrating, slowly joining her more degenerate bathing companions.

The perspective employed in *Women in the Swimming Pool* implicates the viewer more actively in the bathing activities than *Jealousy in the Bath*. The composition is tightly cropped, bringing the viewer directly into the foreground. This perspective suggests a gendered power dynamic with the viewer serving as the medical professional or patron in a sanatorium, brothel, or harem scene. Morehead has noted that although Munch empathized with the subjects of his artworks in institutional settings, he more often, especially in the 1890s, identified with the medical professionals.\(^57\)

Yet the close cropping creates an intimate proximity to the bathers, integrating the viewer into the unstable bathing scene. This intimacy provides the potential for a viewer to occupy the place of the observed as well as observer, threatening the bourgeois masculinity of the fin-de-siècle viewer as he is close to physical contact with the sexually degenerate “other” or effeminized as the deviant woman.

52. Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” 49
57. Ibid., 169.
CONCLUSION

It is challenging to conclude this article when I have argued that these paintings lack resolution. It is this exact inability to pin down the watering activities of the women that makes them fascinating, especially within the context of a fin-de-siècle crisis in masculinity. Munch’s interior bathing scenes make palpable many of the fears confronting the masculine viewer who already perceived himself as degenerating and weak, especially in regard to the increasing public role of women. In the bathing scenes, the women’s bodies remain volatile, oscillating between different types of femininity. Through the opaque spaces and characterization of the feminine body, the women depicted, like women at the fin-de-siècle, transgress a singular “type,” wavering between ideal woman, *femme fatale*, and odalisque. In the scientific and medical milieux that constrained the female body to fixed tropes, these paintings offer an unstable femininity, showcasing not only Munch’s ability to conceive of multifaceted women, but also his understanding of bathing locales as sites where new gendered identities are encountered and negotiated. An unknowable or ambivalent femininity is central to these encounters. Yet unlike some of the male figures in Munch’s oeuvre, who seem likely to achieve liberation through their equivocal masculinity, these women do not. In *Women in a Swimming Pool* the type of femininity rendered remains analyzed under an empirical and eroticizing gaze of a presupposed masculine viewer, despite the potential to render that gaze volatile. In *Jealousy in the Bath*, the floating phallus could just as easily be re-obtained by the male bather as his female companion. Furthermore, the phallus as a measure of control reiterates a power dynamic in which one partner maintains superiority over the other partner. The phantasy of female possession serves as a reminder that the gender binary is inherently hierarchical.

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