

LES FLEURS DU MAL

March 3 – April 9, 2016

*Beyond ennui, past troubles and ordeals
That load our dim existence with their weight,
Happy the strong-winged man, who makes the great
Leap upward to the bright and peaceful fields!*

*The man whose thoughts, like larks, take to their wings
Each morning, freely speeding through the air,
– Who soars above this life, interpreter
Of flowers' speech, the voice of silent things!*

- Charles Baudelaire, *Elevation*, 1857

Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil), features the work of 19th Century Symbolist, Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), alongside works by modern artists – Balthus (1908-2001), Marc Chagall (1887-1985), Salvador Dalí (1904- 1989), Max Ernst (1891- 1976), René Magritte (1898- 1967), Henri Matisse (1869- 1954) and Francis Picabia (1879-1953) — and contemporary artists — George Condo, John Currin, Wade Guyton, Damien Hirst, Elizabeth Peyton, and Richard Prince.

Taking as its starting point the work of Gustave Moreau, the exhibition presents the artist as a pivotal figure in the rise and development of Modernism. Teacher of Henri Matisse and Georges Rouault, Moreau introduced a new language of painting through his reinvention of the History painting genre, and his transformation of biblical or mythological narratives that once served very particular purposes, into secular compositions. Appropriating iconographic elements belonging to distinct characters, stories or parables, Moreau transcended the preexisting didactic or ecclesiastical function of images, to create a new stable of archetypes that embodied a modern spiritualism.

An avid writer throughout his life, Moreau contended that “The artist becomes sublime: he forgets nature in its physical and vulgar manifestations and gives himself up to the manifestation of dream and the immaterial;” further stating that this could be achieved by a focus on “pure pictorial beauty.” Heralding a shift in artistic focus to emotional expression, the individualized experience of the viewer that tapped into consciousness or subconsciousness, one can see in the work of Moreau, and his writings the seeds of Fauvism, Expressionism and Surrealism.

This exhibition takes its name from the seminal publication by French poet, Charles Baudelaire, forefather of the Symbolist movement, whose prose profoundly influenced the course of literary and artistic meditations on Modernity. Throughout the poems, Baudelaire rigorously explored metamorphoses of sensorial experiences, the nebulous space between beauty, and the uncanny, and the human condition amidst the rise of modernity.

Baudelaire's pursuit to express modern existence resound in each work presented in the exhibition, and serve as the threads that tie together Gustave Moreau, the modern masters and the contemporary artists. At its core this exhibition serves to illuminate an alternate blossoming of Modernism, and to shed light on those who continue to challenge and shift its path today.