

MARTHA
JUNGWIRTH

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Press conference	28 February 2018 10.00 am
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Curator	Dr Antonia Hoerschelmann, ALBERTINA
Works	50

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Martha Jungwirth

2 March – 3 June 2018

Martha Jungwirth (*1940 in Vienna) is viewed as one of Austria's most important contemporary artists, and in this retrospective, the ALBERTINA Museum is concentrating on the masterpieces from its own collections as well as on previously unshown, privately owned works—all of which represent key output and important work groups ranging from the artist's beginnings to her latest projects. Martha Jungwirth's fascinating oeuvre revolves around the coloristic possibilities of both watercolor and oil painting, the latter of which she is fondest of doing on paper. The artist has been experimenting with the most varied bases and pigments since the very beginning of her career.

Between Abstraction and Representation

Quite soon following graduation from her studies at the Academy (now University) of Applied Arts Vienna (1956–1963), Jungwirth began showing her pencil drawings, her abstract and color-sensitive watercolors, and her idiosyncratic oil paintings in Viennese galleries. From the very beginning, she experimented with materials—with her papers, her pencils, and the physical qualities of various pigments. These early works, situated at the border between abstraction and representation, are impressive for their subtle use of color and the artist's highly varied, passionate yet fragile brushstrokes. Even back then, it was about more than just a picture's subject, which served merely as the real starting point for a transformation into something more essential.

Martha Jungwirth first became known to a broader public in 1968 in conjunction with the exhibition *Wirklichkeiten* [Realities] at the Secession, for which she was the only woman artist who had been invited. "To be state of the art was to be a conceptual artist," Jungwirth remembers. "And against that backdrop, *Wirklichkeiten* was an occasion for a whole lot of painting. That exhibition ended up proving that it indeed was still possible to paint and draw—very well, in fact."

Compositions with the Body

Themes prominent in Jungwirth's 1970s works are household items as well as the sexualized female figure. It was early on that she began employing large-format sheets of paper as a painting surface equal in status to canvas as a matter of course, thereby anticipating the equality of autonomous drawings with painting and other media that now goes without saying in contemporary art. It was from quite early on, therefore, that she refrained from subjecting her artistic creativity to the aesthetics of a limited range of materials.

The 1980s saw Jungwirth begin uniting abstraction and representation in large-format watercolors, the motifs of which seem to float or hover above the picture's surface. The filigree connections between the motivic elements here arise in a rhythmic, intuitive, and unplanned creative process.

ALBERTINA

The artist works on compositions from all sides, with her sheets of paper typically positioned on the floor. The subject's color becomes an emotional color, transferring that which is visible into a dense, unique, and unmistakable pictorial language of the utmost expressiveness and sensitivity. "Painting is a physical, concentrated activity," says Martha Jungwirth, "and a final manifestation: I rarely paint over something ... it's either right or it's not right—and mostly, it's right.

Household and Big City

It was in the mid-1970s that Jungwirth created her series *Indesit*. These large-format works on paper represent the experiential backdrops of her impressions from a trip to New York: named for a producer of dishwashers, they also remind one of a steam vent on a city street. They show the noise, the lights, the city's multicultural inhabitants, the reflective building facades, and the artist's fascination with the city's structure of long, straight streets with their ends typically visible in the distance, streets along which the social milieu changes from block to block. Later on, in the 1980s, Jungwirth increasingly turned to the creation of large-format watercolors and oil paintings with the paint applied in a pastose manner. Acrylic paint, on the other hand, is something to which she has always held a strong aversion.

Urban Portrait from Above

In the important series of large-format watercolors featuring Vienna's *Spittelauer Lände* (on the right bank of the Danube Canal in the city's Spittelau neighborhood), Martha Jungwirth captures the big city's weather, its noise, movement patterns' swell and ebb, and its lighting conditions. The flak towers visible near the Danube Canal amount to more than just a city portrait, much rather being a psychological diagram, a spiritual score in which the whiteness and emptiness of the paper's surface are just as important as the visible brushstrokes and blotches as well as the traces of running, dripping paint—witnesses to the working process and to time's trickling away—dried into the paper like wrinkles on a face, visible in permanence. The intensity of color and filigree transparency of these watercolors, as well as their energetic lightness, calls to mind Jungwirth's credo of avoiding conscious thought while in the midst of the working process itself.

Dynamic and Monumental

The more recent works by Martha Jungwirth provide an impressive demonstration of her unrelenting drive to continue her artistic development, with her newest output being characterized by an intensely colorful mode of oil painting on large sheets of thick white paper. Their dynamism and monumentality are striking, as is their subtle handling of strongly colored lines and surfaces. Martha Jungwirth will be receiving the Oskar Kokoschka Prize simultaneously with her presentation at the ALBERTINA Museum, further underlining her currency and relevance as an artist.

Wall Text

Martha Jungwirth ranks among Austria's most important, also internationally renowned artists. Like only a few others, she has fathomed the coloristic possibilities of watercolor and oil painting in her oeuvre that oscillates between abstraction and representational art. She is not concerned with portraying reality but with intuitively reflecting it. It is a unique atmosphere springing from ephemeral transparent color spaces and dense impasto compositions that Martha Jungwirth has brought forth in her rich production for almost five decades now.

Born in Vienna in 1940, Martha Jungwirth studied at the Academy of Applied Arts, at which she also taught from 1967 to 1977. In 1968, she—as the only woman in a loose group of artists—overcame the division between Fantastic Realism, abstract painting, and Vienna Actionism strictly adhered to until then. In an exhibition titled *Wirklichkeiten* (Realities), she and her artist friends, relating to outsider art, revolted against the end of painting propagated by Actionism, installation art, and minimalism in the late 1960s.

A trip to New York in 1974/75 triggered far-reaching new artistic impulses. Decades before the equal treatment of monumental, autonomous drawing and painting, which has been a matter of course for quite some time now, Martha Jungwirth made large-format drawings of trite household objects like an Indesit Italian dishwasher. As symbols of woman's confinement in the postwar era, the ostensibly innocent kitchen utensils of these drawings, which were exhibited at the documenta in 1977, vacillate between grotesque fetishes and collapsing objects.

Her extensive journeys that led her from Istria and the Cyclades as far as Bali were an important source of inspiration for the artist. The reflection of these journeys, an escape from security into an unknown reality, sometimes manifested itself in monumental aquarelles only later in the artist's studio in Vienna. Light-flooded color chords, gossamer webs of strokes, blots, and blotches, and motifs floating on the paper that originate from the physical feeling of rhythmic movement and spontaneous sensorimotor functions characterize these masterpieces.

In recent years, Martha Jungwirth has also returned to oils, yet remained faithful to paper as a substrate. Impasto layers of paint, a change between fullness and emptiness, between opaque density and filigree transparency distinguish this most recent group of works. Never-seen-before color combinations on seemingly carelessly torn-off paper and abstention from a compositional order bear witness to how much Martha Jungwirth's work owes not least to chance as an expression of the dynamics of modern man's existence: "Because that's the way life is: with all its heights and strokes of fate, luck and misfortune, frustration, anger, rage, and defiance." (Martha Jungwirth)

Works

Wirklichkeiten

In 1968, the Vienna Secession staged the group show *Wirklichkeiten* (Realities), which featured the Austrian artists Wolfgang Herzig, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Peter Pongratz, Franz Ringel, and Robert Zeppel-Sperl next to Martha Jungwirth, the only woman artist chosen by its curator Otto Breicha. The presentation of this group “that was no group” comprised positions beyond the camps prevailing and polarizing the art scene in Vienna at that time: beyond Art Informel as represented by Arnulf Rainer, Wolfgang Hollegha, Markus Prachensky, and Josef Mikl on the one hand and Fantastic Realism and its protagonists Ernst Fuchs, Anton Lehmden, Wolfgang Hutter, and Arik Brauer on the other. Jungwirth’s works of these years focus on the sexualized female figure as their subject as does the collage presented here.

Indesit

Essential impulses for Martha Jungwirth’s reorientation as an artist sprang from a stay in New York, which she visited with her husband Alfred Schmeller, then director of the zoer Haus (today Belvedere 21), Vienna’s museum of contemporary art. It was a trip that profoundly impressed and inspired her. The steam rising from the city’s sewer manholes conjured up associations with Hades, with the oracles and myths of ancient Greece, but also with cooking processes. A work by the American artist Arshile Gorky and a large-format charcoal drawing by the architect Mies van der Rohe, which Schmeller and Jungwirth saw in New York’s Museum of Modern Art, encouraged the decision for large formats. After her return to Vienna, the artist dedicated herself to a series of large-format drawings titled *Indesit* (*Dishwasher*). Technoid grid structures turn into (bone) skeletons; amorphous forms are overgrown with figurative elements. Graphic and painterly elements overlap. Large-format paper and canvas were already on a par as substrates at that time. Martha Jungwirth anticipated the equal treatment of independent drawing and painting that has become a matter of course in today’s contemporary art. In 1977, she presented some works of this series at the documenta 6 in Kassel.

Spittelauer Lände

In 1993, Martha Jungwirth was offered a studio of her own. The comprehensive and important series of large-format watercolors titled *Spittelauer Lände* that shows the Augarten flak towers as its central motif also captures the weather, the noise, the swelling and subsiding motion, and the light of the metropolis. Otto Breicha remembers the genesis of the series: “She presented the motifs as perceived from the window of the high-up workroom given to

her: details of the landscape on the opposite side of the canal, the flak towers in the near Augarten, traffic events on the bank vis-à-vis. She rendered these cityscapes along the canal more impressively—due to the lighting conditions almost downright impressionistically—as she did other subjects, modulating them with a rich register of greens and grays [...]. Many of the works dear to her (the dearest!) sprang from defiance and anger, from frustration and rage (also at herself). This is how she, responding to all sorts of things, paints what crowds in on her. And as an expectation held by others, or as a task she takes upon herself. Everything has gone together once again: occasion and impulse, motifs and relevant circumstances. She says that the mushroom architecture of the flak towers from the world war was her starting point, powerful vertical axes for her pictorial perseverance, imposingly static in their vagueness.”

The works of the series *Spittelauer Lände* are more than a city portrait. They unfold a psychological diagram, a score of the soul in which the white void of the substrate is at least as important as the colored strokes and blots and the traces of oozing paint reminiscent of the working process and hinting at time slipping away, like dried-up face wrinkles in the paper, irrevocably visible. The colorful intensity, the filigree transparency, and the equally energy-charged lightness of these aquarelles recall Martha Jungwirth’s credo that one should not think when working. Painting in watercolors calls for the utmost concentration, the greatest imagination, and the ability to transfer “the aesthetic idea” to paper without any compromise.

The Travel Watercolors

Travel watercolors have a long, remarkable tradition in the history of art, its beginnings marked by Albrecht Dürer’s fascinating aquarelles that idealized the landscape; the twenty-three-year-old artist made them on his trip to Italy, returning with them to Nuremberg in 1495. The genre’s tradition spans from Dürer to Paul Klee’s significant watercolors painted in Tunisia. In these sheets, the artist discovered his own colors and tones in an interpretation of landscapes and buildings that is also tangible for the viewer. Since—or even before—Guillaume Apollinaire’s appeal made more than one hundred years ago that painting should not borrow from the real world but bring forth new realities, or Paul Klee’s dictum “Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible,” the aquarelle is regarded as one of the best-suited media when it comes to creating color tones in pure spontaneity and thus oppose reality with an autonomous pictorial reality of its own. Watercolors may also give rein to the idea to let nature cooperate and have its way—like in the case of Emil Nolde who allowed frost, snow, and rain to get involved in a semiautomatic process or that of the Norwegian Edvard Munch. For Martha Jungwirth, the paper’s character and peculiarities take the part of nature. Determining how the paint will react, the paper plays a decisive and independent role in the creative process.

Istria

Travels are sources of inspiration for Martha Jungwirth, or, as she once said, “escapes from painting.” The works are not always made on site but sometimes only after the artist’s return to her studio. This also makes it easier to work large formats. Jungwirth translates the quintessence of her impressions into light-flooded chords of color. Off her own bat, she copes with the task of all art, i.e., merging color movements within one picture to create “rhythms without end,” as Robert Delaunay demanded in the early twentieth century. Realizing a composition rich in color contrasts includes the option to endow the colors with a life of their own: the tones they encompass can and should address the realm of emotions.

The 2000s

Still preferring paper as a support, Martha Jungwirth began to work increasingly in oil in the 2000s. While she chooses dark brown kraft paper in one instance, she relies on a yellow variant for another series. Most recently, she has shown a penchant for thick, white, very fragile large-format sheets. Working in oil offers her the possibility to explore different qualities from those provided by delicate aquarelle painting. Thick strokes of paint may overlap each other, leaving the sweep of the brush visible. Tightly packed impasto areas and layered colors allow for an oscillation between abundance and emptiness, density and transparency, a fathoming of paint and substrate. Martha Jungwirth extracts the essence from reality, condenses it, and develops a compact version of it that turns the core of her subject into a completely new whole in an unmistakable pictorial language.

Nabokov

Martha Jungwirth’s most recent group of works draws on photographs the artist took in the backyard of a house when she visited Saint Petersburg in the summer of 2017. A shabby wall shows rests of colored areas that are almost entirely decomposed and only visible as delicate pastel hues. These traces of the past have provided the starting point for the present series *Vladimir Nabokov: Speak, Memory*. Jungwirth has also relied on different formats and supports for this group of works. We come upon white and brown paper, with and without traces of yellowing, with slanting, frayed margins—unembellished things as the basis for a transformation of surfaces into those special realities that open up to the viewer when confronted with Martha Jungwirth’s works.

The Peculiarities of Paper

Martha Jungwirth's affinity with worn, wasted, exhausted material becomes particularly obvious in the paper and cardboard sheets she uses as supports. Time, the past, that is, has already left its traces on them: frayed margins, sheets obliquely torn from kraft paper rolls. The paint's liquidity, washing paint off the ground, and applying new paint, as well as the working process, are not without consequences: the paper goes wavy, is cracked and torn—this is all part of it. Each paper has its qualities; one soaks up paint like a sponge, another has puddles of paint forming on it that take time to dry and wrest special results from the ground. Sheets of old paper, rests of rejected rolls, widely travelled Nepalese samples, discarded cardboard reverse sides of old frames: each peculiarity becomes an essential messenger in Jungwirth's artistic universe that, grappling between chance and calculation, brings forth its own realities.

The Working Method

Photographs made in the 1970s already show Martha Jungwirth sitting in the middle of a large sheet of paper and spreading herself out gesturally on it in all directions. The artist adhered to this method of work for the large-format aquarelles she did in the 1980s. Regardless of whether it was a large or a small format, Jungwirth would sometimes turn a work upside down in retrospect to redefine top and bottom. The paper transforms into a score of her perception, reacting through its tones, the structure of its blots, and, at the same time, becomes a resonating body of the inherent feeling for the visible. "My aesthetic principle is already in my mind before I start. Often, it's a long way before it will be transferred to paper." Trance is of no importance at all, the artist maintains, but one should deliberately take care to avoid thinking when painting.

Quotes

my painting is bound to me, to the moment, to the supple hand, the sharp eye, the good legwork, to uncontrolled drifting, to the moment of happiness. a flow undisturbed by reflection, my painting is action and passion: a dynamic space.

I always need a real point of departure to transform. The motifs are completely peripheral, as I'm not interested in portraying something.

When outward movement, movement of the body, and inner movement coincide, and this coming together works out well, then begins painting.

my pictorial reality is charged with passion, a language tied to the body, to dynamic movement.

a web of related streaks and blots, quick, spontaneous, blind, immeasurable, an irreproducible space for action.

I had always started from a blot until then. I succeeded in bringing line and blot together in the Indesit series for the first time: the line of the hard pencil and the soft dust of pastel. The blot was now given an outline.

the ape in me: back to the old brains, to the sensorimotor.

to before spoken language

to before perception

to before memory

to before the obtrusiveness of object

to before euclid where the straight lines meet in a vanishing point:

not thinking while painting.

My art is like a diary, seismographic. This is my working method. I am completely concerned with myself. Drawing and painting are a movement that passes through me.

The picture is an intelligent structure of blots, nothing stuck. It is the fluid, the transparent, and the open that matter. I am not interested in the sublime but in the worn, the unembellished, the uncensored.

Biography

- 1940 Martha Jungwirth is born in Vienna on January 15
- 1956–1963 Studies at the Academy (today University) of Applied Arts under Prof. Carl Unger, graduates with diploma
- 1958 Participates in the group show Die Jungen (The Young Ones) in the Vienna Secession
- 1967–1977 Teaches at the Academy (today University) of Applied Arts
- 1961 Monsignore Otto Mauer Award
- 1966 Joan Miró Award
- 1968 Participates in the group show *Wirklichkeiten (Realities)* curated by Otto Breicha that features Wolfgang Herzig, Kurt Kocherscheidt, Peter Pongratz, Franz Ringel, and Robert Zeppel-Sperl next to her in the Vienna Secession
- 1974/75 A trip to New York with her husband Alfred Schmeller, director of the zoer Haus (today Belvedere 21), Vienna's museum of contemporary art, provides artistic impulses that bring forth new subjects and large-format drawings such as the series *Indesit (Dishwasher)*
- 1977 Participates in the documenta 6 in Kassel with three large-format drawings from the series *Indesit (Dishwasher)*
- 1980 Scholarship awarded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)
Makes a number of large-format aquarelles in these years
Undertakes numerous trips in Europe and to Asia
- 1990 Makes comprehensive portrait series and travel watercolors after her husband's death
- 1991 Teaches at the International Summer Academy in Salzburg
- 1993 Large-format watercolors for the comprehensive and important series *Spittelauer Lände*, in which Martha Jungwirth focuses on movements and light conditions of the metropolis along the Danube Canal near the Augarten flak towers
- 2010 Increased recognition following the presentation of the Essl Collection in Klosterneuburg curated by Albert Oehlen
- 2012 Austrian Decoration for Science and Art
- 2014 Major retrospective in the Kunsthalle Krems, Lower Austria
- 2018 Oskar Kokoschka Prize awarded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research