

FLORENTINA  
PAKOSTA

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## Exhibition facts

Press conference	29 May 2018   9.30 am
Opening	29 May 2018   6.30 pm
Duration	30 May – 26 August 2018
Venue	Propter Homines
Curator	Elsy Lahner, ALBERTINA
Works	110

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# Florentina Pakosta

30 May – 26 August 2018

To mark the 85th birthday of Florentina Pakosta (\*1933 in Vienna), the ALBERTINA Museum is mounting a large-scale retrospective totaling over 100 works. Over the many decades of her career, Pakosta has continually and consistently championed feminist positions and concerns.

In parallel to this exhibition, the ALBERTINA Museum is working together closely with the artist to produce a full catalog of her works in order to provide a basis for future research and analysis of her oeuvre.

In contrast to other representatives of the feminist avant-garde, Florentina Pakosta refrains from dealing with her own body as a projection surface, instead preferring to use the bodies of powerful men. In her *Satirical Works*, she criticizes patriarchal power structures by way of exaggeration. From the very beginning, here, the role(s) of women and their inequality with those of men are clearly in focus. This theme runs throughout her entire oeuvre like a golden thread: in surreal studies of the human body, individuals melt together with the accessories of their attributes—thus morphing into hybrid beings that consist partly of toilet bowls, scissors, scalpels, or weapons.

## The Physiognomy of Power

This exhibition draws a broad arc from the 1970s to the immediate present, a period that has borne witness to Florentina Pakosta's unbroken political and social activism. Her oeuvre concentrates largely on the medium of drawing. In terms of content, the spectrum of Pakosta's topics ranges from meticulously formulated physiognomic studies and surreally alienated bodies to monumental portrait-drawings. In a surrealistic manner, she combines her physiognomies with vices, saws, or knives, also elongating lips into birds' beaks or placing objects upon her figures' heads as strange trophies that at once demystify and unmask these caricatures of male power. And in larger-format drawings, she devotes her attention to the grimaces and masks worn by males as part of their gender-coded wielding of power in a way that echoes the works of sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783).

It was only during the late 1970s that Pakosta began working on canvas, and it was several years thereafter that color finally made its first appearance in her output. And her 1980s *Menschenmassen* (Human Masses) and *Warenlandschaften* (Merchandise Landscapes), for their part, begin to feature the individual's vanishing into the masses and the disappearance of the subject.

## Merciless Gaze

Again and again, we encounter self-portraits showing Florentina Pakosta in poses that are at turns serious, self-confident, or pugnacious. 1976 saw the completion of a self-portrait behind a barbed wire fence, shut out, an observer from the outside, denied access to the art world. In her self-portrait *Zungenschlag* (Punching Tongue), on the other hand, she portrays herself with her mouth open, an arm with a clenched fist extending from it.

Florentina Pakosta reverses the traditional division of roles between men and women. For centuries, male artists had portrayed women as objects or muses. It was the male gaze upon breasts, genitals, and feminine curves that formed women's art-historical image, preserving it for posterity. Florentina Pakosta turns things around: she trains her artist's gaze on the male, perceiving his will to power, to dominance. And in one series of drawings, she even concentrates exclusively on male genitals, focusing directly on them and only them—a perspective that effectively demystifies virility.

## Abstraction and Color

Pakosta's mid-1980s output gradually turns away from black-and-white figurative works in favor of a geometric and abstract visual language. Her consistently *Tricolor Paintings* (*Trikolore Bilder*), a series of works that she has continued into the present, feature confrontations between colors that clash so energetically that they are almost painful to look at.

Her output's development from figurative portrayals to a mode of painting that is entirely free of figurative elements and consists only of colored, geometric, and linear grid-structures is surprising. But these two differing visual worlds are united by one powerful commonality: their consistent linkage with present-day social conditions. Even her abstract works reveal structures of masculinity and aggressively dominated, impenetrable networks—a courageous and radical step that, for Florentina Pakosta, by no means entails a break with her previous output: "When their interplay is successful, the three colors demand from the viewer emotional flexibility, associative ability, imagination, and the dismantling of ossified thought-models and prejudices."

## Wall Texts

### Hands

In a number of works, Florentina Pakosta deals exclusively with hand postures, particularly with gestures of dominance and authority as expressions of male power. But the artist also drew her own hands in various positions. As isolated motifs, they speak a powerful language of their own: the clenched fist as an expression of determination or aggression; the hand with spread fingers, which, when turned outwardly, puts the brakes on things and decelerates them; the slightly cupped hand facing upward, conveying vigor and relevance.

Similar to her depictions of faces, Pakosta explores the wide spectrum of possible expressions in these works.

### Facial Formations

From the mid-1970s, Florentina Pakosta began her exploration of emotional states in large chalk drawings. She concentrated completely on the face that looks frontally at the viewer. She was mainly interested in spontaneous facial expressions directly reflecting emotions. On the other hand, an expression can also be mimicked intentionally, with a particular goal in mind. When are facial expressions genuine and when are they just a rehearsed mask deviating in fact from the way one is actually feeling? Into what role has someone slipped deliberately in order to achieve a certain effect? The artist primarily observed the masks put on by people in positions of power— almost exclusively men at the time.

### Satirical Works

In her Satirical Works, Florentina Pakosta carried her series of the Facial Formations further, increasingly exaggerating expressions as the faces gradually became deformed. A protruding mouth has been elongated to form a ludicrous, almost obscene beak. Objects are fused onto faces, taking on the functions of body parts. Instruments of power including saws, scissors, and revolvers no longer accompany protagonists as mere attributes: they have literally been written all over their faces. Heads are securely fastened by clamps or can be grasped by a practical handle or regulated by a control knob.

### Merchandise Landscapes

Shoes, hats, keys, clothespins, or empty paint tubes overlap while overgrowing the canvas or paper in a chaotic all-over: everyday objects, mass-produced articles, disrespectfully piled up, carelessly scattered or left behind, probably already discarded. A society producing and consuming such an abundance of things invites grim conclusions. The individual object, which probably used to be of personal significance, gets lost in a uniform mass.

## Human Masses

In this group of works, Florentina Pakosta deals with the phenomenon of human masses, depicting densely packed crowds from a slightly raised perspective. Uniformly dressed in suits, the bald-headed figures in black and white appear to be mere copies of one and the same man. But the artist does not explicitly seek to represent a male crowd. She simply wishes to illustrate uniformity, the dissolution of individuality within a mass. She, too, joins this human crowd as a bald-headed figure.

In these pictures, she addresses the power individuals represent and experience as a group: how a weak self can become strong when multiplied—how the individual hides behind the mask of a powerful crowd.

## Tricolor Paintings

From around the mid-1980s onward, Florentina Pakosta, having won a certain reputation as an artist, was finally able to make a tolerable living by her profession and no longer depended on her parents' support. Only a few years later given the political upheaval around 1989, though, she chose to embrace an entirely new form of artistic expression. Moving away from her figurative work in black and white, she gradually adopted an abstract language of form.

In her Tricolor Paintings she eventually arrived at a new symbolism that better suited her purpose. The series for which she had meanwhile become famous and for which she was held in high esteem were only continued sporadically. However, this courageous and radical step did not mark a break with her previous approach. The concern of her art, engaging with pressing socially relevant themes, has remained the same.

## Movement in Space

Florentina Pakosta subdivides her Tricolor Paintings into four groups of works. The group Movement in Space comprises works dealing with the effects of forces in empty space. This can refer to the universe, to virtual space, or simply to room for possibilities or a field of tension. The structures within these spaces condense to form points of intersection; beams of energy converge toward a center; beams cross while sounding the space around them. The artist uses these patterns to visualize such themes as war, social conflicts, or the distribution of power.

## Aggressive Trajectories

In the artist's series of the Aggressive Trajectories, the focus is on emotional movement. Similar to flashes of lightning, the jagged zigzag lines almost threaten to burst the edges of the painting. Yet these uncontrollable forces remain captured within the picture's boundaries. Referring to numbers, the titles of these works suggest that movement can be calculated, but what is actually depicted here is the incalculability of emotions.

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The smooth, regular, and almost mechanical application of paint seems to contradict the title of this group of works. When realized on canvas, the movement appears to be tamed and restrained. However, the artist's strong and aggressive gesture frequently becomes visible in the very first preliminary studies, which have been spontaneously and expressively committed to paper in pencil or with thickly applied, soft black chalk.

## **Collapse and Groundedness**

The series entitled *Collapse and Groundedness* comprises those works that are built from the bottom up. They depict accumulations still reminiscent of the *Merchandise Landscapes*—structures directed upward, either piled up as fragile configurations or already collapsed. The artist has in mind social and political constructs as well as real buildings after wars, terrorist attacks, or environmental catastrophes.

## **Views, Grids, and Fences**

In the group of works entitled Views, Grids, and Fences, the artist's focus is less on space as such, but rather on what blocks our view—on what prevents us from looking beyond: an obstacle that gets in our way and thwarts our efforts to assess a situation realistically; something that manipulates us or keeps us in check.

The patterns of lace doilies in the background refer to a domestic environment where such forms of violence—oppression, appropriation, manipulation—are exercised. Other figures carry objects on their heads as strange trophies, making them more laughable than intimidating.



## Quotes

from „Was man nicht sagen darf“ (Ritter Verlag, 2004) & „Vorsicht: Mensch!“ (Verlag Bibliothek der Provinz, June 2018)

My work is primarily motivated by human behaviors. It means a great deal to me to observe people's reactions, which are most distinctly reflected on the human face, in the context of their causes and effects. I'd compare it to an adventurous journey through vast expanses.

Contrary to the frequently cited opinion that artists only work for themselves and don't seek to address an audience, I believe that every picture is a means of communication, containing and transmitting content and information. Each picture is a deliberate statement inviting the spectator to enter into a dialog and consequently aims to have a psychological, political, and ideological impact.

Physiognomy has always attracted many intellectuals. They sought and still seek to solve the riddle of facial expressions and read the other person's psyche. This endeavor has frequently led to major misinterpretations and theories verging on superstition. Attempts to assess the human character solely on the basis of facial expressions can lead to unexpected and dangerous surprises. As a result of my own experiences with physiognomy, I regard all of these theories that seek to establish a connection between facial proportions and a person's character with great skepticism, for all too often deliberately biased opinions, prejudices, and defamations play a crucial role here. On the other hand, I see a connection between someone's state of mind and their mobile facial musculature. Facial features frequently mirror emotional states.

One of the less dominant themes of my work is still life or, more precisely, things. Their nature is as fascinating to me as is the human psyche, and to explore them is similarly enticing. It seems to me that the passive, static, and frequently long life of some objects conveys a sense of immortality – a soupçon of infinity. Plain objects whose existence can last over several human generations tell all those who understand their language about things past from the distance of a long, neutrally lived life.

Today the term “still life” seems absurd and is belied by such things as blaring portable radios, clattering food processors, and screeching hair driers, all of which would perfectly lend themselves to creating a modern still life. Car driving, vacation getaways, and shopping are expressions of new “comforts.” Millions of objects incessantly move along assembly lines, leaving factories as merchandise and filling the shelves, sales counters, and windows of gigantic supermarkets around the globe. Having been more or less useful to large masses of consumers, they end up in huge waste deposits – the slaughterhouses of things – in order to give way to new, more modern and more fashionable objects.

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Most of my pictures form a unit of three colors that specifically relate to one another. One of them always functions as a bracket that defines the composition and the rhythm of the picture and keeps it together. Mostly, this color makes no demands on itself in terms of beauty and brilliance. It is the dark basis that symbolizes stability and serves to structure the picture plane.

The second color provides the fundamental tone and dominates the picture. Nevertheless it depends on the third color, without which it would only give off a miserable twilight and be unable to fully come into its own.

The third color must not be chosen at random to be arbitrarily added to those other two, which already belong together. Above all, it must not have the same qualities innate to the second color, for this would lead to a war between the colors and a reduction of aesthetic pictorial values resulting from it. The third color is primarily responsible for the dimension of depth, so that it must be a master of illusion and deception. It must know how to transform an ordinary picture plane into some deep, infinite space in which the spectator's eye will inevitably get lost. It must know how to tell us about the transience of life and of things. In their felicitous combination, the three colors demand from the spectator emotional flexibility, associative abilities, imagination, and the willingness to discard fossilized thought patterns and prejudices.

1944. A bright beam of light shot through the night sky, moving silently forward and aiming possessively across the skies. Then a second beam came from the other side, crossing the first before more beams followed from left and right to join the first two, and then even more came. They pierced and sliced up the deep sky, creating a lucidly glorious image of rays. Soon afterwards bombs fell onto the city, houses burned and collapsed, there were dead bodies everywhere.

In the 1950s, disregarding prevalent art currents, I was interested in things outside the social norm. I considered outcasts, prostitutes, and mental patients suitable models, whose existence questioned everything that was orderly and regulated. Tramps and vagabonds piqued my curiosity. On the other hand, I shunned well-dressed people, as the monotony and soberness of their attires reminded me of an obsession with uniforms. Only slowly did I manage to overcome my dislike of straight lines, which I felt were completely devoid of aesthetic qualities. As my early pictures of heads and figures were also meant to convey psychological and social aspects, I tried to get to know my models well. When my fascination with the marginal groups of society subsided and I eventually discarded them as being much too romantic, I also gave up my softly flowing painting and drawing surfaces.

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There are men dropping bombs onto cities and killing the civilian population. There are men knocking on doors and picking up people who will never come back. There are men forcing women to please them with sexual favors in a barter exchange who then mob them and take them to court under a false pretext when they have successfully fought back. All of them are honored and promoted. — There are men like Mahatma Gandhi, they are killed. All these men have mothers, wives, and sisters.

I began to realize that the concept of the ‘freedom of art’ means a gender-specific freedom that undemocratically excludes a whole group of artists—namely women.

Enough with cozy, flattering, beautiful colors! Every color should be a dangerous poison!

When I recently happened to observe a gesticulating woman through the window of a phone booth, I particularly noticed the movements of her hands. They obviously corresponded with the rhythm and content of her words, which I was unable to hear. As I missed the acoustic part, the play of her hands took on a life of its own and gained in importance. I could deduce from her hands what the woman was saying and her emotional condition.”

In 1989, Europe’s political and therefore also its social landscape changed suddenly and unexpectedly. The impossible had become true: a new, hitherto unknown way of life began to take hold. New joys and hopes on the one hand and risks and fears on the other made themselves felt – it was soaring high and hitting rock bottom at the same time. Gradually, I realized that the familiar form of my paintings and drawings was barely adequate to convey these new emotional patterns. I thus sought to find colors and forms that would reflect my new sense of existence – I strove to arrive at a symbolism that would be emblematic of the freedom of new thoughts, of new rights for men and women, of outer space and our planet Earth. However, I also wished to make room for the traumatic memories of a child faced with its bombed home in air-raided Vienna in World War II.

A linear movement strives, in the form of a multilayered event, to escape from the edge of the painting into the infinitive space beyond. Associations with space travel and unknown planets should be awakened. The eschewal of a gestural application of paint as well as a reduced color palette are compatible with the content of the image.

## Biography

Florentina Pakosta was born in Vienna on October 1, **1933**. Her father was an independent journalist, her mother ran a confectionery. The traumatizing childhood experiences during World War II, the confrontation with soldiers, air raid sirens, and bomb attacks influenced her future work as an artist.

In **1952**, she undertook a study trip to Paris, where she attended courses at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Against her parents' will, she studied painting and graphic art at the Prague Art Academy from 1952 to 1956. In her drawings she explored the physiognomy and facial expressions of mental patients and homeless people. She came into conflict with the political system in Czechoslovakia while assisting a refugee and was detained for several weeks. She then returned to Vienna

Between **1956** and **1960** she studied painting under Josef Dobrowsky at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts as the only woman in her class. In her sketches she studied the milieu of Viennese pubs around the Prater. In 1959 she decided in favor of her career and thus against marrying an artist colleague.

A scholarship enabled her to study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1963, where she witnessed the political activism of artists that followed in the wake of the Algerian crisis. Back in Vienna, she applied for membership at the Vienna Secession and the Künstlerhaus. However, both these artist societies in fact did not admit women at the time. She began to realize that the art world was a man's world to which few women were granted access. With her work, she responded to this deplorable situation in particular and to the discrimination and oppression of women in general. In 1965 doubts about her own identity and severe poverty led to a fundamental crisis. Drawing her self-portrait day after day helped her cope with her miserable situation.

In **1971** she was finally accepted as a member of the Vienna Secession; later on she would be the first woman to sit on the association's board—a function she held until **1983**.

Starting in **1972**, she began to explore the work of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt in her cycle of etchings entitled *Facial Formations*. In the following years, she also did a number of large chalk drawings dealing with manifestations of male power. From 1977 onward she produced satirical work addressing feminist issues. She now took to employing the stencil technique.

She organized the exhibition *Women Secessionists* in **1978** at the Vienna Secession. For the first time in its history, exclusively works by women members were on display.

In **1979** she began exploring the subject of gestures in a series of drawings entitled *My Hands*; the theme of the human crowd became another focal point.

In **1988** she took up work on her cycle of the *Merchandise Landscapes*, from which she subsequently developed the series of the *Tricolor Paintings*, which she has continued to this very day. These paintings mark her abandonment of figurative drawing and her embrace of abstract geometric painting. She has distinguished between her "first oeuvre" and "second oeuvre" ever since. Florentina Pakosta lives and works in Vienna.