

MARIA LASSNIG

Dialogues

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Opening	4 May 2017 6.30 pm
Duration	5 May – 27 August 2017
Venue	Tietze Galleries for Prints and Drawings
Curator	Dr Antonia Hoerschelmann, Albertina
Exhibits	80
Catalogue	The catalogue is available for EUR 29,90 (German/English) in the Albertina's museum shop and at www.albertina.at
Contact	Albertinaplatz 1 A-1010 Vienna T +43 (0)1 534 83-0 info@albertina.at www.albertina.at
Opening hours	Daily 10 am – 6 pm, Wednesdays 10 am – 9 pm
Press contact	Mag. Verena Dahlitz T +43 (0)1 534 83 - 510 M +43 (0) 699 10981746 v.dahlitz@albertina.at Mag. Ivana Novoselac-Binder T +43 (0)1 534 83 - 514 M +43 (0)699 12178741 i.novoselac-binder@albertina.at Mag. Fiona Sara Schmidt T +43 (0)1 534 83 - 511 M +43 (0)699 12178720 s.schmidt@albertina.at Mag. Barbara Walcher T +43 (0)1 534 83 - 512 M +43 (0)699 10981743 b.walcher@albertina.at

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Maria Lassnig – Dialogues

5 May – 27 August 2017

Maria Lassnig (1919–2014) numbers among the most outstanding and important artists of the recent past. In the oeuvre that she built, Lassnig strove consistently to put her very own perception of her body and emotions to paper. The pictures she created revolve around deep-reaching sentiments and sensations.

Three years after Maria Lassnig's death, the Albertina is paying homage to Lassnig's drawn work with a retrospective showing that will bring together around 80 of the artist's most evocative drawings and watercolors. In this presentation, heretofore entirely unknown works on paper reveal themselves to be key statements that, together with more familiar output, shed new light on her concept of "body awareness" and afford new insights into the Austrian artist's diverse oeuvre.

Looking Inward

It was long before body consciousness and relations between women and men became central themes of the international avant-garde that Maria Lassnig made her own body the focus of her art. The central aim of her "body awareness paintings" was to visualise bodily emotions and explore bodily perception. In a way that was at once humorous and serious, and full of yearning yet merciless, the artist set out to put how she perceived herself to paper. It was thus what she *felt*, and not what she *saw*, that Lassnig visualised. "You paint the way you are," said the artist, thus confirming the self-contradictory way in which she engaged in unconditional dialogue with both external and internal realities.

The insistent portraits that Lassnig created as a school student in Carinthia had already borne witness to her outstanding giftedness: her questioning gaze—acutely observant, mercilessly critical, and initially assisted by a mirror—conspicuously dominated her portraits of herself and would accompany her through all the decades of her work. The self-portrait was to remain the artist's central theme, a genre with a long art-historical tradition to which she would lend entirely new dimensions.

It was early on, in the late 1940s, that Lassnig created her first "body awareness paintings"—which she initially termed "introspective experiences". In this placement of the female body at the centre of her creative work, she foreshadowed any and all comparable stances in Europe and America far in advance. Her symbolic language and outlines not only defined the shapes of the depicted objects, but soon came to also convey tension in a highly potent, condensed manner.

Artist-as-Seismograph

The late 1960s saw Lassnig move to New York. The city's pulsating art scene and the feminist stances and groups to be found there stimulated her to forge ahead along new paths: she attended an animation course, but instead of the day-job at Walt Disney Studios for which she had been aiming, this led to animated films in which she used "body awareness drawings" to process private life events, yearnings, and experiences. In 1980, following a subsequent stay in Berlin, the artist—by then 60 years old—accepted a professorship at Vienna's Academy of Applied Arts in *Theory of Design – Experimental Design* with a focus on painting. After returning to Vienna to take up her post, Lassnig's exploration of bodily sensation advanced to the neural pathways. Her depictions speak to a high degree of inner tension that allowed her to react like a seismograph. Numerous works make a theme of the frequently cruel treatment of animals and nature, depicting animals alone or together with human figures—which were often self-portraits. Here, the two levels of reality—that which is seen and that which is internally perceived—exist side by side.

An Uncompromising Mode of Work

"The drawing is closest to the idea," said Lassnig. And it was in this spirit that her final years saw her create primarily pencil sketches. These represent something like a distilled essence of her creative output and at the same time touchingly document how she deliberately came to terms with her weakening body—in part manifested by her more filigree and tremulous strokes—in order to mercilessly and relentlessly lend expression to her feelings via the tip of her pencil.

In her art, Maria Lassnig remained free, innovative, visionary, and uncompromising to the very end. And today, her independent contribution, which bears within it her determination and pugnacity, her vulnerability, and her brutality and toughness towards herself, is finally beginning to gain broader recognition in an international context.

An exhibition of The Albertina Museum, Vienna in cooperation with the Kunstmuseum Basel.

Wall texts

Early Years

Maria Lassnig's earliest works from her youth follow entirely in the tradition of academic realism. Yet before long, the artist distanced herself from the required tone-on-tone solutions, relying instead on experimentally explored, subjectively felt colors. She responded to the radical confrontation with international contemporary movements following Austria's artistic isolation during her years as a student in World War II with an enthusiastic exploration of the ideas that were new to her: Both Carinthian colorism and Cubism, Surrealism, and – from 1951 on – French Tachism as well as Abstract Expressionism have left their clear marks in Lassnig's works.

The artist was mainly concerned with portraiture at that time: caricatural representations of peasant girls, her beloved mother or images of her father, who remained unknown to her for a long time, and, especially, herself. Abandoning the conventional framework of the genre particularly in her self-portraits, Lassnig averted her gaze from the external reality and turned it inward. She already produced her first body sensation drawings – still labelled “introspective experiences” – in the late 1940s. Lassnig's feelings come across as sensorily perceptible subjective emotions.

Self-Portraits

The subject that dominates Maria Lassnig's work is the self-portrait. Her knowledge of the traditions of visual art and her extraordinary talent allowed her to transgress the narrow boundaries of the genre from the very beginnings of her career. Her attentiveness to body awareness and the concentration on her own body and feelings ensured a hitherto undreamt-of range of innovative possibilities of representation. The visualization of the inner world of experience entitled the artist to render the felt self in form of Tachist “dumplings” or as a Surrealist lemon, for example, and even the combination of the realistically viewed and introspectively felt body turned out to be a feasible approach. The focus on self-portraits testifies to an obsessive involvement with her own person and pitiless self-observation but is always also to be read as a form of role-play: Lassnig relied on portraying herself to define her attitude to – and her understanding of – herself and her environs. She could thus express her love of nature and animals as well as her unease about a technologized world, traditional role concepts and relationships between the sexes and her powerlessness in the face of them.

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New York

When she moved to New York in 1968, her „introspective“ art found no sympathy and met with rejection. Criticized for her lack of talent, Lassnig – deeply offended and isolated – reacted by turning toward an „American“ realism, as she put it: She tried to prove her skill by realistically rendering her body in conjunction with American everyday objects and consumer goods. She also dedicated herself to pop art subjects and techniques and attended a silkscreen-printing course. Lassnig did not drop the subject of body feelings and sensations – renamed „body awareness“ in New York – and continued to explore it especially in drawings and watercolors. These body sensation drawings also provided the basis for the animation films she made after having attended a relevant course at the city’s School of Visual Arts. These films immediately brought her great respect and appreciation. Her approach shows an increasing concatenation of realistic motifs and internally felt forms.

Berlin

Maria Lassnig interrupted her stay in the United States in 1978, taking up quarters in Berlin with a one-year scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service. She thoroughly explored the possibilities of landscape drawings and watercolors and entered into an intense dialogue with Oswald Wiener, an Austrian writer who dedicated himself to the psychology of thought processes. Under his influence, the artist came to develop an interest in issues of cognitive science, addressing questions of perception and self-observation in order to raise her continuing search for the nature of body awareness to a scientific level. She translated her findings into body sensation and perception studies.

Back in Vienna

When she was offered a chair for Theory of Design—Experimental Design with a focus on painting and animation film at the Academy of Applied Arts, Maria Lassnig returned to Vienna in 1980. That same year, she and VALIE EXPORT represented Austria at the Biennale di Venezia. The financial security attained with the professorship allowed her to travel more often. Thematically, she increasingly centered on nature and animals; stylistically, she gradually turned her back on a “realistic” approach to representation. Featuring backgrounds framed in color, her drawings came to show a more painterly quality.

On Drawing

„The drawing is closest to the idea,“ Maria Lassnig stated already early on in her career. What she had in mind was not only capturing first ideas on paper that were to be articulated in the form of paintings at a later point in time. Lassnig’s drawings fascinate us because of their precision, immediacy, and independence rather. The artist thematized the very act of drawing, which she repeatedly described, in numerous sheets: The drawing hand is banned on paper in large format from the perspective of the draftswoman, which assigns the viewer the role of looking over her shoulder and catching glimpses of the nature of her creative process.

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Rarely from the 1970s on and more frequently since the mid-1990s, Lassnig framed the background of her drawings with loud – often yellow – acrylic paint. Though this step undermines the key feature of graphic works, the economy of formal means, and thus the autonomy of drawing the artist insisted on, bringing the genre through its pictorial character closer to that of painting, it also offers an additional level of interpretation and extends the subject by the dimension of color sensation.

Late Works

Maria Lassnig's oeuvre encompasses approximately eighty years. Just this enormous span of time suggests different stylistic phases and periods of development. The artist consistently and uncompromisingly explored her very own subject of body awareness to the end, unwaveringly focusing on her feelings and her perception of her sensations even in her last years. Her late work is marked by the continuing exploration of her field of subjects and its completion. The resulting wealth of pictorial and formal solutions reveals a partly humorous, partly oppressed and oppressive involvement in human existence and evidences an astounding alertness that is in stark contrast to her pen's increasingly fainter and shakier trace. Maria Lassnig produced an important late work. In the history of art, only a circle of great masters had been able to boast a late work of substance until then: Maria Lassnig was the first woman that succeeded in joining their ranks.

Quotes

When, in my painting, I became tired of analytically depicting nature, I searched for a reality that was more fully in my possession than the exterior world, and I found it waiting for me in the body house in which I dwell, the realest and clearest reality, I only needed to become aware of it in order to be able to project its imprints as fixed focal points onto the picture plane. You can become aware of your body through pressure, through tension or by straining one part of it in a particular physical position; in other words, awareness is expressed in sensations of pressure or tension, in sensations of fullness or emptiness, etc.

There are too few words and that is why I draw.

The drawing is closest to the moment. Every instant has only one possibility.

A figure on a picture does not yet tell a story; two figures tell a story and many figures present a drama.

It is even harder to explain the colors of body awareness than to portray body awareness graphically, because the latter find more abstract expression in contour lines than in painterly form. Therefore I shall simply describe them here:

The forehead is given a thought color; the nose, a smell color; back, arms, and legs are given a flesh color. There are colors for pain and colors for agony, colors for nerve fibers, colors for pressure and fullness, colors for stretching and pressing, colors for hollowing out and bulging forth, colors for crushing and burning, colors for death and decay, colors for fear of cancer – these are the colors of reality.

The drawing is closest to the idea.

Describing a feeling by graphic means seems to be an impossible, romantic, at any rate super-subjective undertaking. But I have always regarded it more as a science, comparable to Cézanne's visual sensations.

Each drawing is a would-be oil painting, for I never repeat any drawing as an oil painting, they are autonomous.

People [...] have never believed a woman as much as a man, but have always said that she will, according to tradition, get married anyway. Children and painting – for me at any rate, that would have been impossible. But I regret every kiss I have not given. That is why I am sometimes moved to tears when a child strokes me. Or a cat rubs itself against my legs.

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Art is a demanding lady. You have to devote yourself entirely to her, because she is incredibly jealous. If you deceive her, she will wreak vengeance on your life.

Things haven't changed for 45 years now – that I start out from the same reality when I am painting and drawing: from the physical event of bodily sensation. It is still not very easy to find the places where sensation is concentrated, where it is separated from the empirical memory through the eyes.

I never counted the years. I was never young. And now I am not old.

Biography

- 1919 Maria Lassnig is born in Garzern near Kappel am Krappfeld in Carinthia on September 8.
- 1925–1940 Moves to Klagenfurt after her mother's marriage to the baker Jakob Lassnig. After graduating from high school in 1937, she studies to become a primary school teacher. Teaches at various primary schools in the Metnitz Valley in Carinthia.
- 1940–1945 Studies painting at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (Wilhelm Dachauer, Ferdinand Andri, Herbert Boeckl). Returns to Klagenfurt after receiving a diploma in 1945. Dedicates herself to Expressionism and Surrealism.
- 1951–1952 Moves to Vienna, joins the artist associations *Art Club* and *Hundsgruppe*. Several stays in Paris together with Arnulf Rainer in 1951/52, where she discovers Surrealism and Art Informel. Close contacts with authors of the Wiener Gruppe and the artists around the Galerie St. Stephan.
- 1960–1968 Moves to Paris. Leaves stylistic constraints behind. The line pictures she produces in Paris are a crucial step for the development of her body awareness paintings.
- 1964 Her mother's death causes an existential crisis.
- 1968–1980 Moves to New York. The lack of appreciation her work meets with leads to an enhanced realism in her painting. Attends a silkscreen-printing course and an animation film course. Co-founds *Women/Artist/Filmmakers, Inc.* in New York and receives an award for her film *Selfportrait*.
- 1980–1989 Appointed head of the masterclass for *Theory of Design—Experimental Design* at the Academy of Applied Arts Vienna with a focus on painting and animation film.
- 1980 Presents her work together with VALIE EXPORT in the Austrian Pavilion at the Biennale di Venezia.
- From 2000 Achieves international attention. Solo exhibitions in important museums such as at the Serpentine Galleries, London, in 2008; at mumok, Vienna, and the Ludwig Museum, Cologne, in 2009; at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich in 2010; at the Neue Galerie Graz in 2012; at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg, in 2013 and finally at the MoMA PS1 in 2014.
- 2013 Receives the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Biennale di Venezia.
- 2014 Maria Lassnig dies on May 6 in Vienna at the age of ninety-four.