

Maria Lassnig

Be-Ziehungen

5 May – 23 September 2018

Exhibition texts

Maria Lassnig (1919–2014) is undoubtedly among the most influential artists of the twentieth century; her body-centric painting occupies a central position in the development of contemporary art. Since the late 1940s, she was one of the first to reflect on the female position in art with what she called *Körpergefühlbilder* (body awareness paintings), and in particular openly dealt with the influence of the female body on the life path and biography of a female artist. At first she called her work based on bodily experience “introspective experiences.” In close cooperation with Johanna Ortner from the Maria Lassnig Foundation in Vienna and its chairman Peter Pakesch, an exhibition has been compiled for St. Gallen which offers a concentrated look at the development of Lassnig’s oeuvre. The title refers to a series of large-scale paintings by the artist which were created beginning in 1992, and simultaneously points to the formal and conceptual connections that permeate her entire work through a wide variety of media. For the first time, the exhibition traces these aspects, presenting her important late work from new perspectives. Fantastic early works in the tradition of modernism and pictures that were largely created in Vienna up to 1960, which could be associated with Art Informel and Tachism, form basic structures of fragile interrelations to which Maria Lassnig continually refers.

Her works contain delicate balances—especially in the “line paintings” created in Paris beginning in 1960—profound sensations and the visualization of her own bodily perception. Humorous and serious, analytical and poetic at the same time, she captures her life in pictures in a web of associations.

Room 1

The exhibition begins with *Selbstportrait mit Sprechblase* from 2006, when Maria Lassnig was 87 years old. This late major work in the artist’s now world-famous expressive style is surprising, since it is combined with two works that seem to be far apart in form and style, and yet there are similarities. *Static Meditation III* was created in 1951/52 and shows an abstract image with several overlapping frames in light blue and two shades of green with rounded corners, which extend to the edge of the picture and span an empty space that is set in dynamic motion.

In a steady movement of the eye that follows these paths, a center is repeatedly circled around. The title indicates that the picture marks a path from outside to inside. Thirty-eight years later, in 1989, the artist continued to deal with the subject and placed a very comparable motif in front of a surface divided into purple and yellow, which is immediately read as an atmospheric landscape with an infinite depth. An optical phenomenon seems to float above the landscape. Only on the left edge of the picture does a gray, even surface stick out, which acts as a visual anchor and fixes the picture so that the viewer suddenly sees a cube and the internal framework seems to turn dynamically. Now looking at *Selbstportrait mit Sprechblase*, it becomes clear that the artist uses the same formal means to outline the brightly colored face in a single framing light-green line. Once again, the picture is dynamic, since the viewer’s gaze circles around the face on these paths and the two shortened legs also seem to run, while the parallel double contour of the profile indicates a movement, like the blurred areas that we have learned to read as movement in photographs. The blue eye fixes on the viewer with a wink. And thus, in Maria Lassnig’s paintings, we are always directly involved as observers. Her works can hardly be approached from an inner distance; the viewer is always directly addressed and involved in the work.

Room 2

The works in the following rooms are organized mostly chronologically and follow Maria Lassnig's work from 1950 to 2007, with two large-scale works that break with this linear sequence in order to show the underlying structures and fantastic transformations. The exhibition formulates a holistic view of her pioneering work, despite all the apparent stylistic changes that one could find in it. However, "view" is an inadequate word, since it often signifies a fascinating exploration of one's own body awareness, and Maria Lassnig puts equal emphasis on a realistic depiction of a world of objects and fantastical views of an inner world.

Violette Form from 1951 shows Lassnig's immersion in modernism, in which she outlines a balanced organic form that extends to the edge of the picture. This might recall Sophie Taeuber-Arp, especially at the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, which owns *Gelbe Form* (1935), one of her greatest works.



Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943)
Gelbe Form, 1935
Oil on canvas, 60 × 55 cm
Kunstmuseum St. Gallen
Donation from Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, 1966

Maria Lassnig takes the measure of this great artist, achieves her level conceptually as well as formally, and adds a new, more physical element to the texture of the purple so that one wishes that the artist had moved in the direction of Hard-Edge painting. Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015) did just this, with geometric surfaces in intense colors that meet in hard and sharp contours. Maria Lassnig, by contrast, quickly moved on and at the same time created informal pictures that dealt with the then-current *École de Paris*. For her subsequent work, she developed this into the concentration of forms in the center of the picture and at the same time created an atmospheric pictorial space.

Kinderwagenform is a mischievously outlined painting that is like the cocoon of an insect attached to the blue diagonal line in the upper right corner of the picture and seems to bounce slightly due to the double contours—like the stroller referenced in the title. Maria Lassnig was thirty-two years old in 1951, which in the 1950s was the age above which women were no longer recommended to be pregnant. The idea of whether or not this was the case may be speculative, but in any case the artist puts us on this very personal path with her choice of title. And this process happens repeatedly in Lassnig's radically personal work. "All my life I've been busy gaining my self-confidence through painting," is one of the artist's familiar quotations.¹

The informal paintings and *Blaues Selbstportrait*, in which late Cubist facets of a head are shown in front of a luminous space, were created in Vienna. In 1960, Lassnig moved to Paris, then the world's center of art, which she had already visited in 1951 along with Arnulf Rainer (*1929, Baden, Austria) to meet the Surrealist André Breton (1896–1966). In addition to the contemporary avant-garde, Picasso, who was at the height of his fame as the leading painter of the twentieth century, also lived at this time. The painter and the model were one of his central themes, and Maria Lassnig interpreted it as only she could. In a painterly manner and equal to Picasso in her radical formulation, she shifted the focus to the female perspective on this scene. "I am the woman Picasso,"² Lassnig declared later in her life. The mustached musketeer and the beautiful woman from Picasso's iconography are easy to discern in the painting *Zwei Nebeneinander/Doppelfiguration* (1961).

¹ Lettner, Natalie, *Maria Lassnig: Die Biografie*, Vienna: Brandstätter, 2017.

² *Ibid.*, p. 303.



Pablo Picasso (1881–1973)
Le peintre et son modèle, 2 March 1963
Oil on canvas, 38 × 46 cm
Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, 1999
Donation from Erna and Curt Burgauer
© ProLitteris, Zurich



Maria Lassnig (1919–2014)
Zwei nebeneinander/Doppelfiguration, 1961
Oil on canvas, 97 × 120 cm
© Maria Lassnig Foundation

Rot-blaue Figuration from the same year is already not as easy to read and develops its complex penetrating forms and compressed body parts that are characteristic of Lassnig's work in the large-scale painting *Blau gekreuzte Figur* (1961, Kunst Museum Winterthur) into autonomous pictorial structures. Her knowledge of American Abstract Expressionist painting by artists such as Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) is apparent. The studio on Rue Bagnolet in Paris, which she bought in late February 1961,³ made it possible for her to work on larger canvases and now allowed a body-centric, free, painterly gesture. The artist traverses the pictorial space with a single brushstroke in pure, unmixed colors, literally portraying the process of painting. She calls these works "line paintings."
"Expansion, the great paraphrase—this was already an important artistic concept in 1961. The shoulders stretch two meters from one corner of the picture to the other; the middle of the body is narrowed to an hourglass, or stretched from one door to the other."⁴



Maria Lassnig (1919–2014)
Blau gekreuzte Figur, 1961
Oil on canvas
194.5 × 130.5 cm
Kunst Museum Winterthur
Purchase, 1990

The large-scale work *Fernsehkind* (1987) falls out of the chronological sequence of the exhibition and looks twenty-five years ahead at a work that paralleled the depiction of a realistically figuratively portrayed imagery of television with the correlating emotional world in light of visible horrors. Maria Lassnig was fascinated by the colorful world of television, which she encountered in New York to a degree that only became prevalent much later in Europe.

³ Ibid., p. 156.

⁴ Maria Lassnig, quoted in: Drechsler, Wolfgang, "Über die innige Verbindung von Maler und Malerei," in: *Maria Lassnig*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 20er Haus, Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1999, p. 23.

The observing eye lies at the center of the image, while the artist's body is depicted very compressed and inserted into the painterly form of a subtle, vibrating television image so that it actually sits in the middle of the picture.

Hasenbild (1962) and the painting *Frau und Mann* (2007) seem to be closely related, although they are separated by forty-five years of work. Maria Lassnig has an encyclopedic visual memory, so that basic structures that she once developed are always available, can flow seamlessly, and run throughout her entire work.

The untitled painting from 1965 is part of a cycle in which the artist deals with the death of her mother: "I have come closer to the great myths, probably also due to the death of my mother last year."⁵ In the center is a standing portrait of Maria Lassnig, which is overlapped by a lying figure without a face. One foot of the lying figure wears an elegant shoe, while the other is depicted only by the bones. The reference to the deceased mother is obvious, just as the outlined figure in the upper left corner of the picture could be interpreted as a Charon with oars—the old man that ferries the souls of the dead across the river of the underworld. However, the identity remains fluid, and the light square in front of which the scene takes place can certainly be understood as a lying canvas, given that the artist had occasionally painted lying on the floor in the 1960s. There is also a self-portrait of the artist, which shows her with a balancing rod, like the outlined figure in the upper left of the picture.

Room 3

At the age of forty-nine, Maria Lassnig once again pushed into the unknown and moved to New York in 1968. Here she broke new ground in painting, relatively unnoticed by the New York milieu,⁶ began to make films, and discovered the women's movement, in which she actively participated. *Dreifaches Selbstbildnis* does without black and is entirely painted in green tones. It shows the artist standing from the front, confidently holding a cigarette, sitting, and in profile as a sequential series of outlined figures, which can be read as a representation in a painting behind the posing Lassnig. Her experiments with film at this time are visible, as is a realism close to the photographic image. It is no coincidence that the English title is *New Self*.

After a stay in Berlin thanks to a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in 1978, in 1980 she returned to Vienna. The move took place after she was appointed to the University of Applied Arts in Vienna as a professor of the master class for design theory—experimental design with a focus on painting and animation.

In the 1990s, Maria Lassnig's "drastic pictures" began to deal with great existential themes. In the last room of the exhibition, they are deliberately hung close together. *Farbenfresser* and *Selbstportrait als Einäugige* (1997) are from this period of her work and show the compressed shape of the body as an existential cipher, like in the central *Fernsehkind*. The figure in *Selbstportrait als Einäugige* relentlessly observes itself and the environment.

The three paintings from the series of *Be-Ziehungen (Schicksalslinien)* from 1994 form a condensed space along with the abstract *Breitseite* (1987) and *Generationsfußtritt/Generationsprobleme II* (1998/99). The pictures are directly linked by the "lines of fate" that Maria Lassnig references in the title of the first work. The bodies are condensed and shortened and are kept in a fragile and threatening balance in the pictorial space by the monochrome lines as if on sticks. The body, once uniform, is broken up into many fragments. Some can be identified based on what has already been seen in the exhibition, and some lead through cuts to the next painful boundary. *Breitseite* can also be read as a single brushstroke in this context, which encompasses a body while remaining an empty space.

⁵ See note 1, p. 186.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Generationsfußtritt/Generationsprobleme II is the concluding key work, in which Maria Lassnig is shown three or four times, depending on the point of view. A substantial wrestling match is under way. The fact that every generation of artists reacts to the previous one and tries to uproot its implacable standards in order to create something new is one of the central engines of art. As a painter, Maria Lassnig was one of the most radical and innovative: “All my life I’ve been busy gaining my self-confidence through painting.”



Maria Lassnig (1919–2014)

Generationsfußtritt/Generationsprobleme II, 1998/99

Oil on canvas

205 × 153 cm

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