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Dispatulo

Press Release

Online Exhibition

Maria Lassnig. Me, Encircled by a Fly



hauserwirth.com

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The work of Maria Lassnig, one of the most significant painters of the contemporary era, is marked by its unrelenting probing into themes of the body and its meaning. The online exhibition, 'Maria Lassnig. Me, Encircled by a Fly', is a special selection of the artist's works on paper and canvases between 1987 and 2005. It explores this preoccupation with the physical presence of the body – a concept the artist coined as 'body awareness'. 'I searched for reality that was more fully in my possession than the exterior world', Lassnig remarked. 'I found it waiting for me in the body house in which I dwell, realest and clearest reality...' Taking its title from an eponymous self-portrait painted in the 1990s, the presentation considers myriad interpretations of the physical that Lassnig depicted throughout her oeuvre.

The exhibition is presented in close collaboration with Peter Pakesch, Director of the Maria Lassnig Foundation, who explains: 'From the outset of her career, Maria Lassnig explored physical sensations and the possibilities of perception of her own body as paradigms for artistic expression. She saw everything through this relationship

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between the body as the primary medium: the medium of perception, as well as the medium of action. It is a body that suffers, acts, represents, presents, forms and distorts itself, and perceives... The body dissolves, metamorphosing into mythology or machines, and reassembles itself in constantly new ways.'

The presentation coincides with the new publication 'Maria Lassnig. Letters to Hans Ulrich Obrist. Living with art stops one wilting!' by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König. Obrist states in the preface of the book: '[Lassnig] sees transcendence as beginning with the body. It is based on the relationship between the body and the image, and is translated into what she calls 'body awareness' paintings and drawings....physical manifestations of a steady resistance to the repetitive and the static.' Hauser & Wirth has collaborated with Obrist on a series of new online interviews and readings of the artist's letters on hauserwirth.com to celebrate its release. Participating voices include readings from artists Camille Henrot, Nicole Eisenman, Julie Mehretu, and an interview between Obrist and curator Kimberly Drew.

One of the earliest paintings on view takes the body and the machine as its subject matter. 'Motorrad im Wald / Motorradfahrer (Motorcycle in the Forest / Motorcyclist)' (1987), depicts Lassnig, almost 70 years old at the time of painting, travelling at speed through an Austrian mountain-top on her motorbike – an active and dynamic figure merging with the machine. This unification of the body and the motorbike fascinated Lassnig: 'Motorcycling fosters my self-confidence because I have to overcome a threshold of fear, also because it's new and makes you feel as if you're swooshing ahead under your own power – and yet still close to the meadows and trees.' The painting adeptly addresses and interprets the physicality of this experience.



'I have absolutely no obligation to express myself in words if I can do it better with a pencil'

– Maria Lassnig

In 'Januskopf / Tag- und Nachtgedanken (Janus Head / Daytime and Nighttime Thoughts)' (1987), themes of the body within classical mythology come to the forefront. Lassnig paints herself as Janus, the two-faced, Roman god of new beginnings and endings in lurid hues of purples and pinks. This use of light and dark colour in combination with the abstracted body effectively conveys a psychological portrait, pointing to the alteration of happiness and depression throughout the artist's life.

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Despite being known for her large format oil on canvas works, the medium of watercolour was a continuum in Lassnig's career. Pencils, chalk, and watercolours were the artist's constant companions that allowed her to directly grapple with psychological turmoil and the infinite possibilities of the body, whether in singular or multiple iterations. Lassnig presents herself as an abstracted figure surrounded by a buzzing insect in 'Ich von einer Fliege umkreist (Me, Encircled by a Fly)' (ca.1990-1999). Here the human form takes on the weight of Lassnig's subconscious in an ironic and humourful twist. The immediacy of watercolour, pencil and paper made it possible for Lassnig to project her unconscious in a more direct manner. 'I have absolutely no obligation to express myself in words if I can do it better with a pencil', she once remarked. The works in this presentation are testament to this sentiment.



About the artist

Born in Carinthia in Southern Austria in 1919, Maria Lassnig's work is based on the observation of the physical presence of the body and what she termed 'body awareness painting' ('Körperbewusstseinsmalerei'). She devoted much of her oeuvre to recording her physiological states through a direct and unflinching style, believing that 'truth resides in the emotions produced within the physical shell'. Utilising contrasting colours such as greens, pinks and blues, as well as strong body shapes to give her paintings a powerful, even drastic impact, Lassnig looked to herself, a female artist in a predominantly male world, as her primary subject. She described her process as follows: 'I step in front of the canvas naked, as it were. I have no set purpose, plan, model or photography. I let things happen. But I do have a starting-point, which has come from my realisation that the only true reality are my feelings, played out within the confines of my body. They are physiological sensations: a feeling of pressure when I sit or lie down, feelings of tension and senses of spatial extent. These things are quite hard to depict'.

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Under the umbrella of Hauser & Wirth's new global philanthropic and charitable initiative #artforbetter, we are donating 10% of gross profits from sales of all works in the online exhibitions to the COVID-19 Solidarity

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Maria Lassnig
Untitled
2005
Pencil, watercolour, acrylic on paper
49.8 x 69.7 cm / 19 5/8 x 27 1/2 in
Photo: Jon Etter

Maria Lassnig
Motorrad im Wald / Motorradfahrer
(Motorcycle in the Forest / Motorcyclist)
1987
Oil on canvas
205 x 140 x 2.3 cm / 80 3/4 x 55 1/8
x 7/8 in

Maria Lassnig
Januskopf / Tag- und Nachtgedanken
(Janus Head /Daytime and Nighttime
Thoughts)
1987
Oil on canvas
114.5 x 100.5 x 2.5 cm / 45 1/8 x 39 5/8
x 1 in
Photo: Roland Krauss

Maria Lassnig, studio Feistritz,
Metnitztal valley, Austria, July 1991
Archive of the Maria Lassnig Foundation