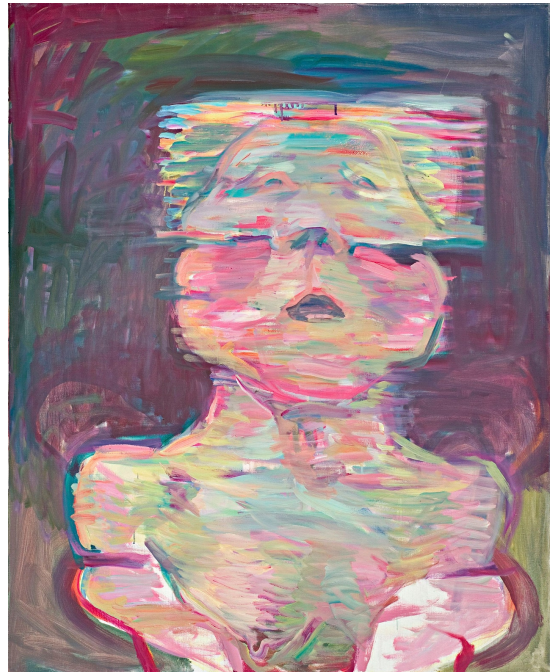


“Transparent Self-Portrait” (1987), by Maria Lassnig. The Austrian painter is having her first New York museum show, at the age of ninety-four.

Maria Lassnig is “the perfect artist for the age of the selfie,” says Peter Eleey, who has curated a survey of the Austrian painter’s self-portraits. The idea is counterintuitive: the ninety-four-year-old artist never relies on photography, unlike many contemporary figurative painters. She uses her imagination and what she calls “body awareness,” a unique approach to Expressionism that she hit on in 1948. Simply described, she paints from the inside out, taking cues from her body’s sensations. If Lassnig doesn’t feel her ears as she’s working, they stay out of the picture. The same goes for her hair. She seems to be aware of seeing and breathing; her faces tend to have eyes, mouths, and noses. The results can suggest an Alice Neel portrait of an extraterrestrial.



For all their startling interiority, Lassnig’s figures also convey the sense of being seen. Take “You or Me” (2005), in which she presents herself with a gun in each hand, one pointed at her temple and the other aimed straight at the viewer. Eleey says that Lassnig’s paintings pinpoint “the problem between how we perform ourselves versus the way that we feel” that’s endemic to social media. And Lassnig’s oeuvre is prescient in other ways, too, incorporating cyborg-like imagery. In one work from 1987, a transparent screen floats in front of a face: Google Glass avant la lettre.

While she’s not actually uploading selfies, Lassnig has gained more followers in recent years—in 2008, London’s Serpentine Gallery organized a critically acclaimed retrospective, and last summer she was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. Her influence is evident in New York in the paintings of Charline von Heyl, Dana Schutz, and Amy Sillman.

The heightened appreciation comes after decades of a career largely limited to Central Europe. Lassnig was born in the rural Austrian state of Carinthia in 1919, and displayed a knack for drawing as a young girl. As she wrote in a whimsical autobiographical poem from 1992: “God didn’t make me a beauty, let’s face it, but He gave me the gift with a pencil to trace it; like a latter-day Dürer or some other big cheese, all I portrayed proved

easy to please.” She attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna during the Second World War, when the Nazis had banned Expressionists like Max Beckmann and Oskar Kokoschka for being “degenerate” and only sanctioned realist painting. (The earliest work in the show is a deft, academic self-portrait that her teachers compared favorably to Rembrandt.) Lassnig has written that she developed her body-awareness technique to “go beyond skill, beyond the security of the real, into uncharted territory.”

Lassnig still paints in her Vienna studio, but she no longer travels, and she won’t see her show in New York. She lived in the city for more than a decade, beginning in 1968, during the heyday of minimalism, when figurative artists were *personae non gratae*. She experimented with filmmaking and continued to paint—in obscurity, but never alone. Maria was always there, watching. ♦