

Maria Lassnig's Triumphant "Little Films"

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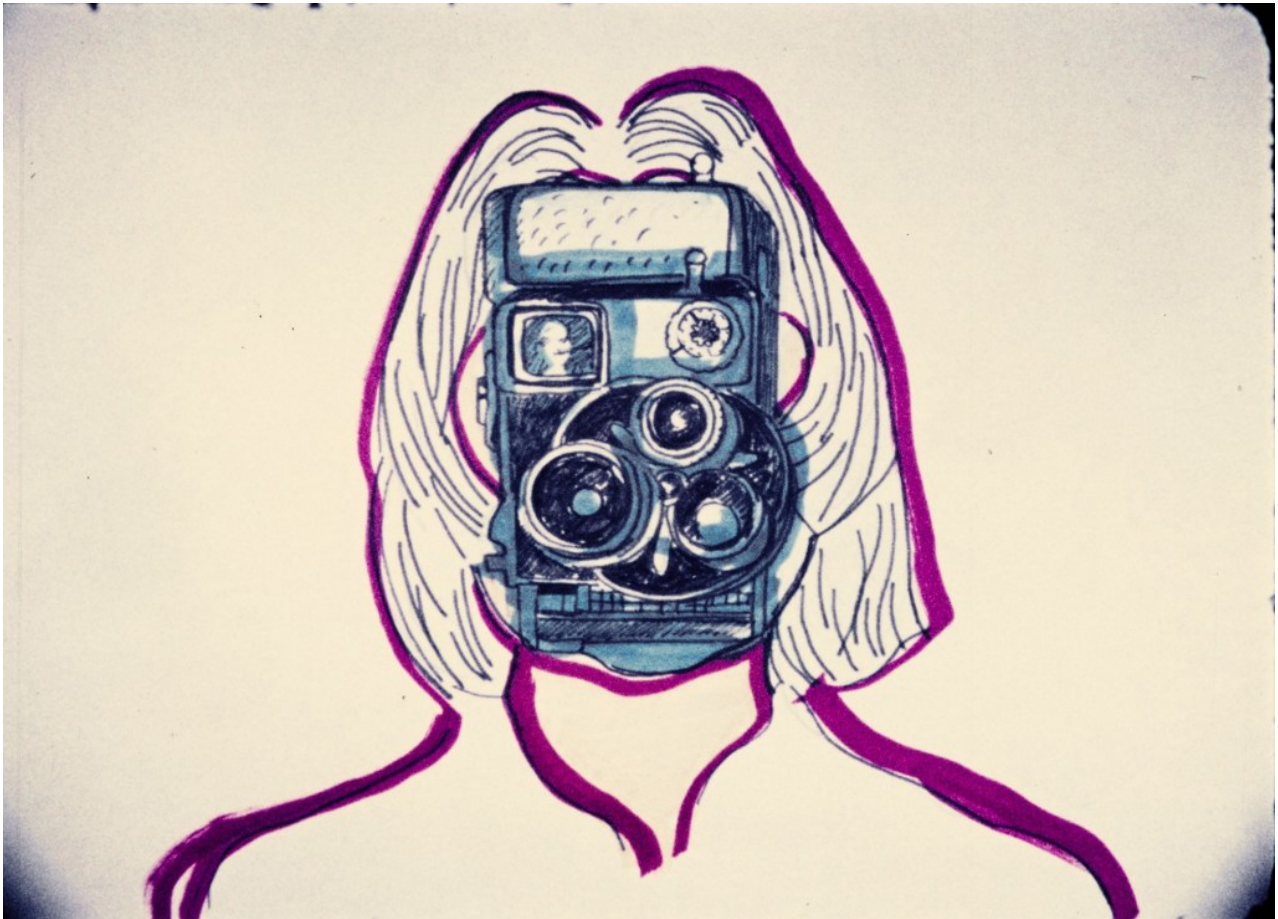
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Sleeping with a Tiger, dir. Anja Salomonowitz, AUT 2024 (© coop99 Filmproduktion)

BERLIN — In a delightful scene in Anja Salomonowitz's hybrid feature film, *Sleeping with a Tiger* (2024), about the life of Austrian artist Maria Lassnig, the artist, who'd left Austria for New York in 1968, strolls into an art gallery with her latest figurative paintings. It's the infamous walk-in that many young artists dread. Except Lassnig is in her 40s. The perplexed gallerist tells her that he's got no use for her — galleries are showing Minimalism and Pop art. Perhaps she could make "little films"? And so she did, some of which are playing, along with Salomonowitz's biopic, at this year's Berlinale Forum.

It's best to see both the biopic and the shorts to appreciate Lassnig's uncanny talent for marrying morbidity and frolic, rigor and wantonness. In the shorts program, the artist's "Ballad of Maria Lassnig" (1992), co-directed with Hubert Sielecki, is a spoof on the biography genre: Lassnig sings off-key to folkish tunes about her conservative upbringing. Salomonowitz fleshes out this working-class background in her film through the figures of Lassnig's illiterate grandmother and her mother, a baker who repeatedly urged her daughter to marry. Both films refer to the Nazi censure of what they deemed "degenerate art" — Lassnig by singing of "Kunst fascismus," Salomonowitz by showing an art academy covered in swastikas (she studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1941 to 1945). "Ballad" is ultimately Lassnig's deadpan warning for the art world not to write her out — she's suffered opprobrium, sexism, and ageism, but art keeps her young.



“Selfportrait,” dir. Maria Lassnig, 1971 (this and all following images © Maria Lassnig Stiftung, courtesy sixpackfilm)

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Salomonowitz matches Lassnig’s dark humor, but also her despondency, punctuating both with surrealism — for instance, in a scene where Lassnig’s artist beau, Arnulf Rainer, ditches her at a private art viewing, tiny ants carry her cumbersome canvas home. In another scene in the film, a nonplussed Lassnig tells video artist Valie Export (who steals the spotlight at the 1980 Venice Biennale) to turn down the volume on a screen showing images of an exposed vagina, so that visitors can take in Lassnig’s equally soul- and flesh-baring paintings.

Birgit Minichmayr’s compelling incarnation of the artist in *Sleeping with a Tiger* frames her as a lonely artist who favors a monk-like routine and experiments with her own body and volatile feelings. The film leaves viewers with a bittersweet taste: dead at 95, Lassnig seems only half-crowned, despite her Venice Biennale Golden Lion award in 2013. By then, perhaps, the wide recognition she’d craved, and the fanfare she enjoyed — though seemed loathe to admit it — reminded her of what she’d sacrificed.



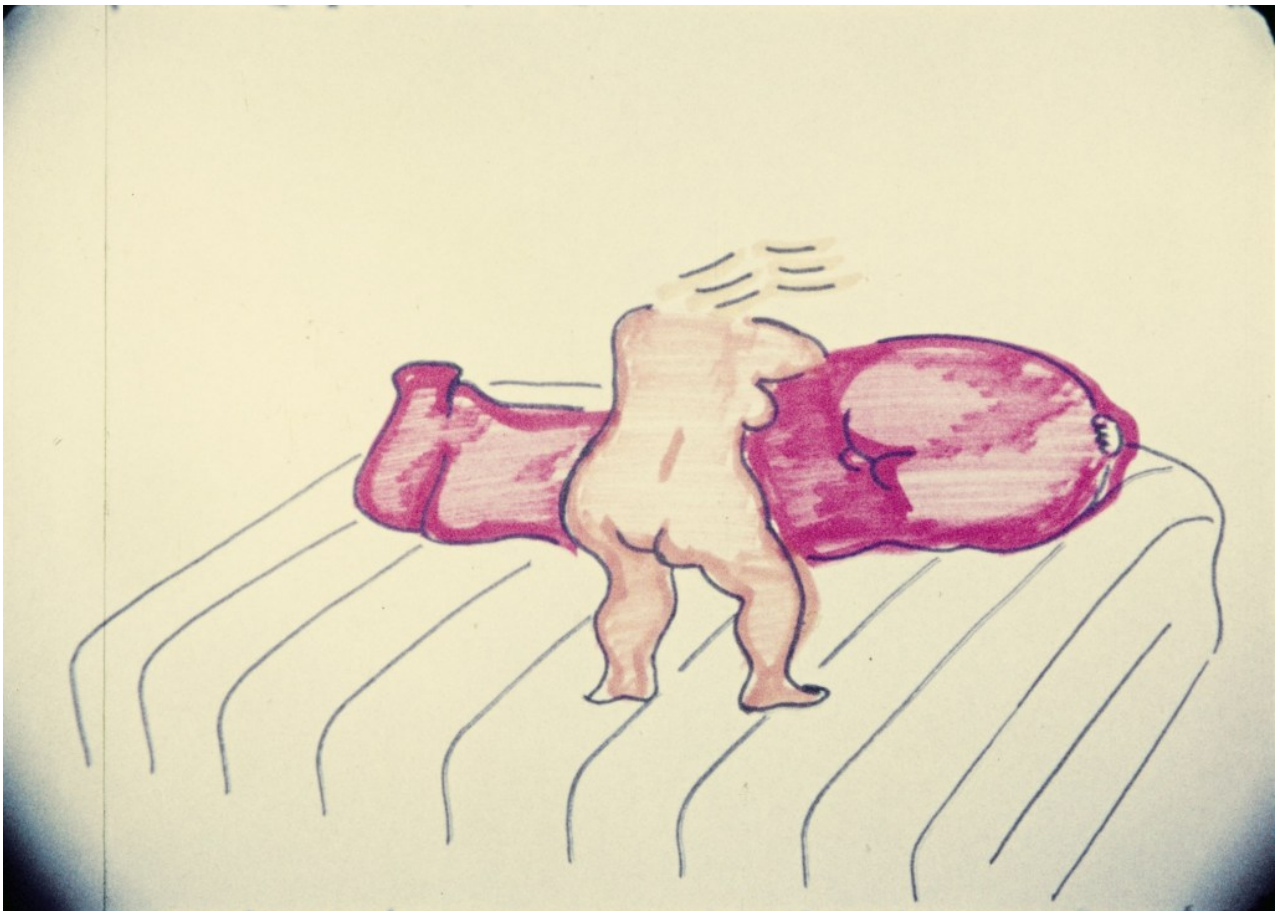
Still from "Art Education," dir. Maria Lassnig, AUT, USA 1976

Her "little films" are irreverently funny, despite their darker undertones. The partly animated "Art Education" (1976) spins vignettes about male dominance in the art world (when a maestro scolds his model for being "too fat," she blows the wig off of his bald head, and takes his place at the easel). "Art Education" and "Palmistry" (1974) ridicule stereotypes of women as sexually naïve, and male partners' emphasis on virginity. Lassnig weaves in soundbites of feminist theory, but her staccato delivery is so odd that "Palmistry" is clearly a parody. Syncretic forms and linguistic swagger satirize modernist idols Picasso and Magritte, while Lassnig, with her incredible feeling for rawness, comes across as the true contemporary of Francis Bacon.

As Lassnig says in the voiceover for "Selfportrait" (1971), she was "depressed, not suppressed." The film's rhymed ditty, "stamped, I didn't mind / strangled, I didn't mind / I still love mankind, but I am tired" perhaps best expresses her flinty spirit. The film also speaks to the power of simple gestures: As she evokes death, "until you will be gone with the wind," the self-portrait that she's animated on paper suddenly disintegrates. The tiny lines that filled in the contour of her face fly off en masse, as if blown by a cruel gust, contorting her visage until she's no more than a series of horizontal lines. Her perfect fusion of figure and line, pushing past the limits of logic, creates novel forms. Her "little films" are a triumph.



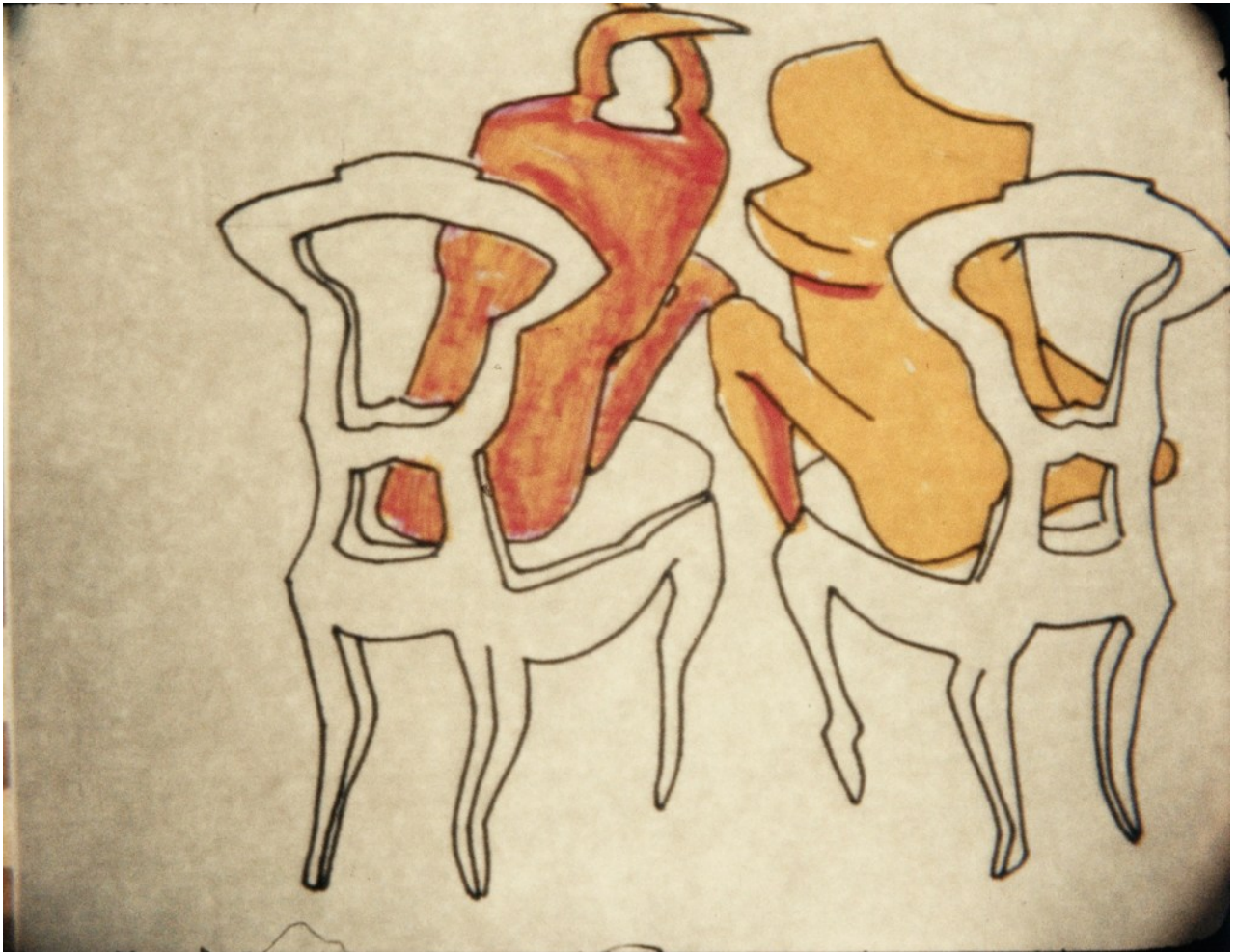
"Palmistry," dir. Maria Lassnig, AUT, USA 1973



"Couples," dir. Maria Lassnig, AUT, USA 1972



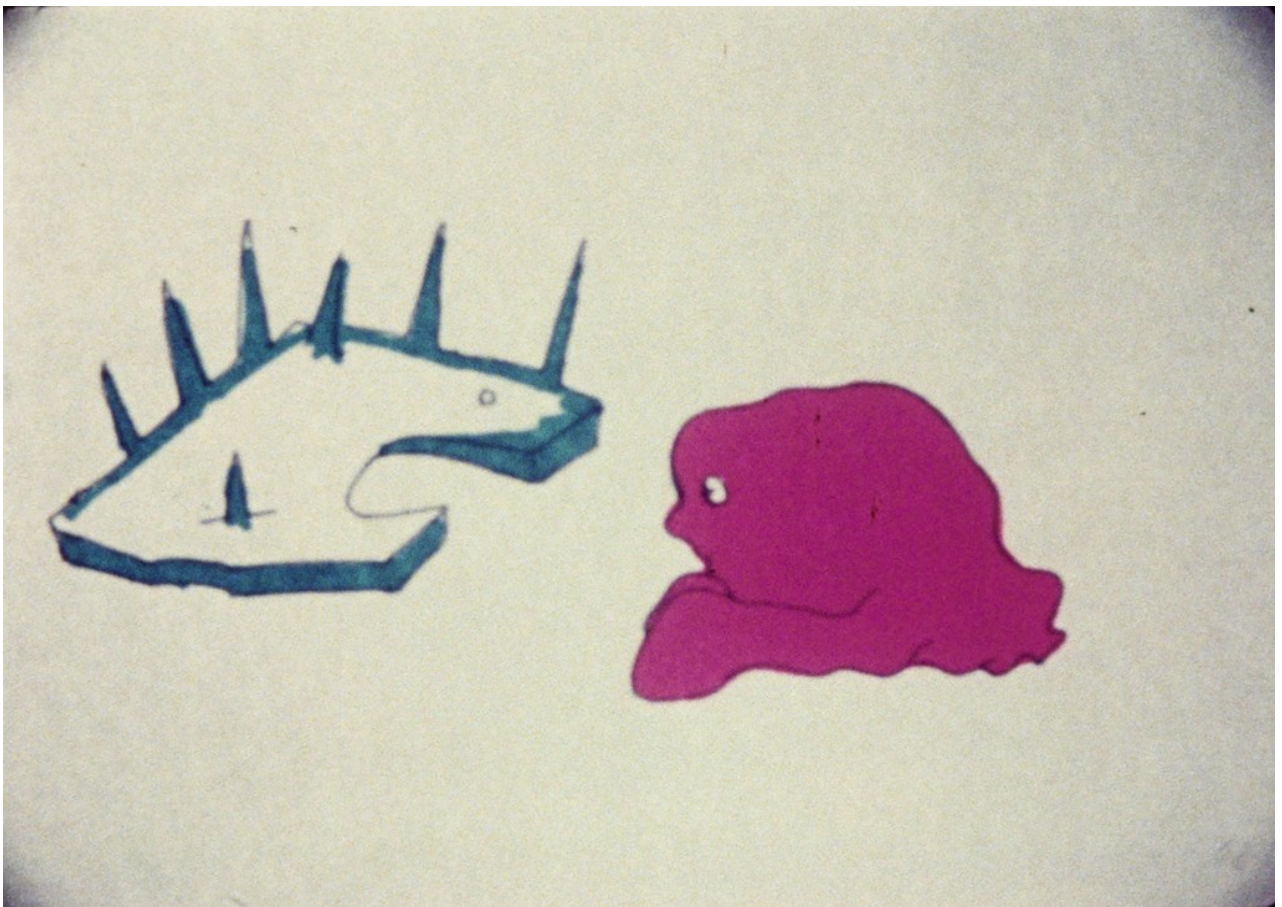
"Iris," dir. Maria Lassnig , AUT, USA 1971



"Chairs," dir. Maria Lassnig, AUT, USA 1971



"Baroque Statues," dir. Maria Lassnig, AUT, USA 1970



"Encounter," dir. Maria Lassnig, AUT, USA 1970



"The Ballad of Maria Lassnig," dir. Maria Lassnig and Hubert Sielecki, AUT 1992 (© Hubert Sielecki / Maria Lassnig Stiftung)

Sleeping with a Tiger screens on February 21 and 25 and Maria Lassnig's shorts program screens on February 20 and 24 at the Berlinale.
