

A Biopic of Painter Maria Lassnig Will Have Its World Premiere at the Berlinale

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The film festival will also host nearly a dozen of Lassnig's experimental film works.

by [Kate Brown](#) February 9, 2024

Maria Lassnig's figurative paintings, whose jewel-like and pastel hues belie the heavy psychological states of her self-portraits and subject matter, were late to gain the attention they deserved from the art world. But even less attention was given to her experimental film practice, which she nurtured alongside her paintings throughout her career.

These moving image works, as well as a new posthumous biopic, will be the focus of the prestigious [Berlinale film festival](#), which opens its 74th edition in the German capital this month. Anja Salomonowitz's feature-length biographic film on Lassnig, called *Sleeping with a Tiger* (2024), will premiere in Berlin on February 17.

Ten of Lassnig's short films will be shown concurrently as a part of the Berlinale's Forum Special section; the program will include Lassnig's earliest animated work, *Encounter* (1970), a one-minute stop-motion piece based on her drawings. The 1971 *Art Education*, which runs just under ten minutes, considers women's woeful place in art history, not as master of artworks but as its subjects and muses. Other films, like *Shapes*, explore the relationship between the body, sensation, and movement, a key focus of her painting practice as well.



Maria Lassnig, Maxingstrasse studio, Vienna, 1983. Photo: © Kurt Michael Westermann / Maria Lassnig Foundation.

In the tragically comic work *The Ballad of Maria Lassnig* (1982), the artist emulates with childlike storytelling and poignant wit the story of her entire life. Green-screened into a stop animation of her own drawings, Lassnig sings melodic verses that detail her birth and childhood, right up to discovery of art, continuing towards the end of her life.

"My childhood was a real life drama," she sings, gesturing her arms ironically with a flat singsong German. "The pots and pans went flying through the air... The poor child suffered from her parent's war." The artist died in 2014 at the age of 94.

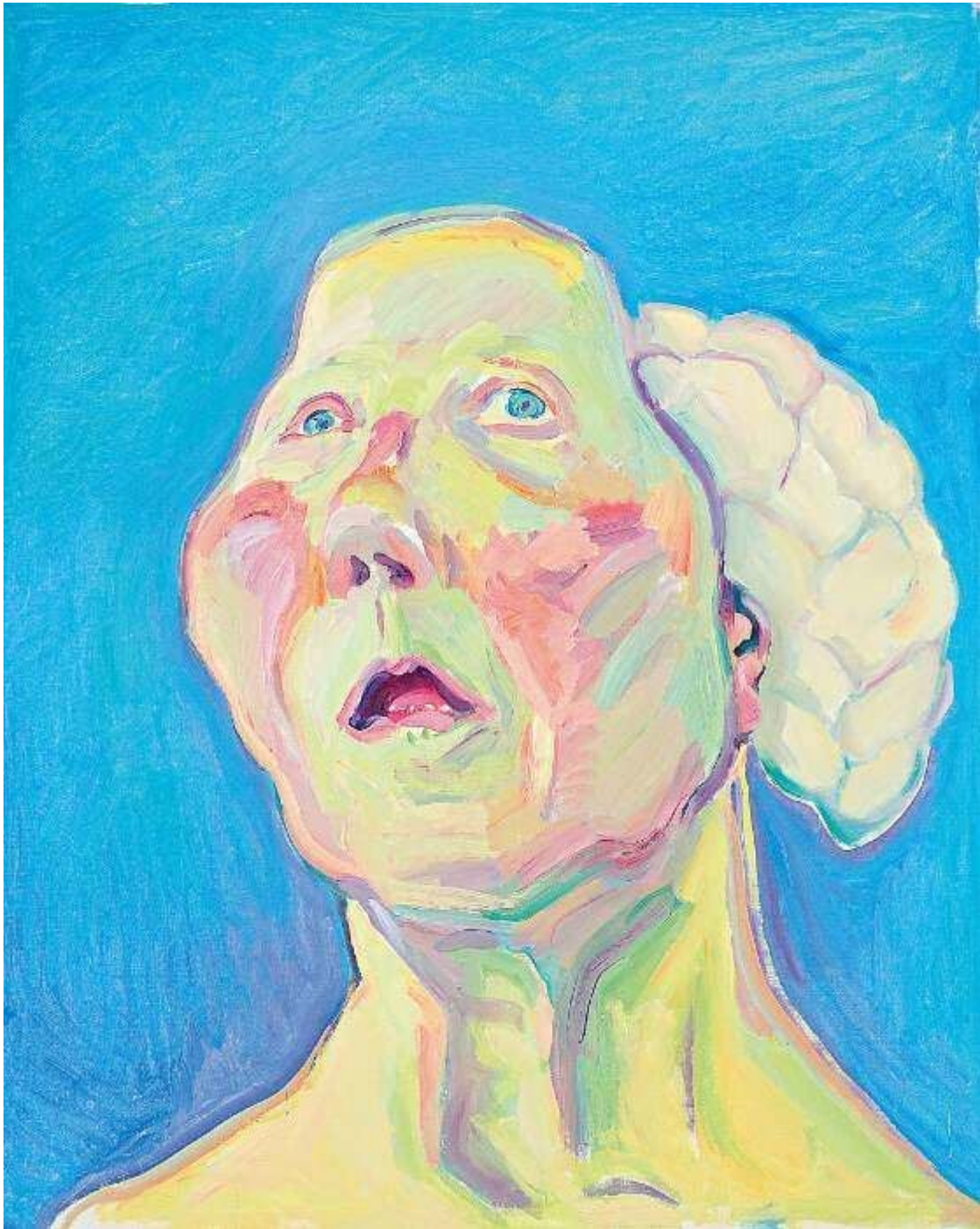
The Berlinale's section head, Barbara Wurm, described Lassnig's film works as "delightful frictions, lively criticism, wonderful ideas, hand-drawn, and self-sung."



Still from *Art Education*. © Maria Lassnig Foundation, courtesy sixpackfilm.

Sleeping with a Tiger, the biopic, charts the personal and artistic life of Lassnig (played Birgit Minichmayr), from her roots in rural South Austria to the art world of Vienna and its prestigious art academy. The film follows her rise to success, her relationships, and her navigation of the male-dominated cultural scene. The biopic presumably takes its title from Lassnig's 1975 self-portrait of the same name, where she depicted herself embraced by the giant animal.

Studio scenes in the biopic also capture her emotionally and physical invested self-portraiture style that incorporated her theory of "body awareness." Lassnig would tune into her body while painting, only depicting on the canvas what she could feel while she was working. This intense psychological process would sometimes involve lying on the floor across her blank canvas as she made her strokes. Often, her figures would have intense distortions or be missing body parts altogether. The effect is searing and Lassnig's portraits offer a clear window into an interior world, consciousness, and the artist's emotional states.



Maria Lassnig, *Dame mit Hirn (Women With Brain)* (1990) Maria Lassnig Stiftung.
Courtesy Stedelijk Museum.

Born in 1919, Lassnig was a key figure in the postwar Vienna art scene. Like many of her male contemporaries, she was influenced by Abstract Expressionism and action painting, but also by Surrealism due to her time in Paris when she brushed shoulders with Paul Celan and Andre Breton.

Since her death, the artist has had major solo surveys at Kunstmuseum Basel (2018) and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2019). Her works and films are largely held in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Albertina in Vienna. [Her biography](#) was published in 2022.

The Berlinale film festival runs from Thursday, February 15, through Sunday, February 25, 2024.