

The Feminist Artist Who Created The Selfie Nearly 100 Years Ago

F forbes.com/sites/gracebanks/2019/07/05/the-feminist-artist-who-created-the-selfie-nearly-100-years-ago

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July 5, 2019

Maria Lassnig was a selfie artist decades before it was a trend. The painter, who was born in 1919 in Carinthia, south of Austria, studied at The Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and was prolific in her creation of figurative painting — particularly figures of herself — from then on. But despite working pretty much non-stop after her studies in Vienna, Maria went largely under the radar for most of her life. She was left out of important conversations about figurative painting and her essential contribution to the mid century movement — she was overlooked.

In 2016, a major retrospective of her work changed all of that. But it was a overdue accolade that Maria was never aware of. She died two years before in 2014 and one year before she was awarded the Venice Biennale Golden Lion. Since the Tate retrospective, exhibitions of Maria's work pop up now and again. *Body Check* at the Lenbachhaus Museum (until 15 September) in Munich is one of those exhibitions. It shows Maria's work depicting bodies, particularly her own, and contrasts her work alongside figurative paintings by the German painter and sculptor Martin Kippenberger.



Maria Lassnig, *The Quality of Life*, 2001, courtesy Maria Lassnig Foundation

Viewing the show, it's hard not to notice that Lassnig was working in the realm of the female gaze almost a hundred years before it became a talking point. In the 1940s, she created a method that in German she coined as "*Körperbewusstseinsmalerei*", and in English "body awareness painting". Now, we're used to seeing work featuring menstrual blood and body hair by artists like Rupi Kaur and Arvida Bystrom, but Maria was one of the first women artists not to be coy in featuring blood, fat and the aspects of being female that artists comfortably share on social media now.

This approach continued to the end of her life. She painted *You or Me* in 2005, a painting that shows her naked posing with two machine guns. The painting *The Quality of Life*, made in 2001, has a similar mood and shows Maria naked in the sea holding a glass of wine. It's in paintings like these that Maria's feminism is radical — but her most cutting statements were in her *Kitchen War* paintings. In this series she criticises gendered roles in the home, with paintings like *In The Kitchen Bride* depicting the artist as a human cheese grater in the kitchen.



Maria Lassnig *Sprechzwang*, 1980, Privatsammlung, courtesy Maria Lassnig Foundation

Body Check at the Lenbachhaus Museum is a show you wouldn't expect to find in Munich, with cities like Berlin being thought of as the art centre of Germany. But the show is one of many signs that Munich's art scene is both established and growing. On the established side there are institutions such as the Pinakothek der Moderne, a post-modernist building designed by the German architect Stephan Braunfels. "There are 100 works by Cy Twombly alone here in Munich. I mean that's incredible!" Dr Corinna Thierolf told me. Corinna is the head curator of the museum, which was built in 2002 to house the contemporary art of the state of Bavaria. It now holds one of the biggest collections of contemporary art in the world including key works by Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, a founding member of the Die Brücke movement.



Cy Twombly's at Museum Brandhorst in Munich, Germany
Museum Brandhorst

Munich also has the power to pull in massive loans. Most recently they borrowed a painting by Caravaggio from the Vatican in Rome, *The Entombment of Christ*, for the exhibition *Utrecht, Caravaggio and Europe* at the Alte Pinakothek Museum — a show featuring work by Caravaggio and contemporaries of the artist inspired by his work known as Caravaggisti. The exhibition features works by artists including Bartolomeo Manfredi, Jusepe de Ribera, and Valentin de Boulogne, who were heavily influenced by Caravaggio. It's the first time the Vatican had ever lent to a Munich museum.

The exhibition of Maria Lassnig's work is part of a bigger effort by museums and galleries in the city to exhibit modern and contemporary art that appeals to a younger demographic. Alongside these institutions, hotels like the Bayerischer Hof, with a wing designed by Belgian interior architect Axel Vervoordt, are removing the connotations the city had as a home of stuffy classical art and design, leaving space for a new wave of contemporary culture in Munich.



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