

# Maria Lassnig's Body Awareness

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The Austrian painter Maria Lassnig shared the 55th Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement, awarded at the Biennale's June 1 opening, with the Italian artist Marisa Merz. For the 93-year-old artist, it is perhaps the crowning achievement of a long and prolific career.

Massimiliano Gioni, curator of "The Encyclopedic Palace," the main Biennale exhibition, which includes half a dozen of Lassnig's works, offered a statement in praise of the artist's "'body-awareness paintings,'" which, the curator said, she "has used . . . as an instrument of self-analysis." In his view, Lassnig "represents a unique example of obstinacy and independence that deserves to be celebrated." Although only a smattering of the artist's works are on display, they serve as a fair representation of Lassnig's prowess, and are one of the clear highlights of this year's exhibition.

Lassnig's paintings constitute a sort of autobiography, an attempt to render her inner states on canvas; as such, the selection of works featured in Gioni's exhibition are less portraits than wrenching excavations, united by their empty white backgrounds and a palette that prominently features a neon-ish sea green that is a bit reminiscent of the water in the Venetian canals.

One of the more famous works here, *You or I* (2005), positions a nude elderly woman before us. She has two guns in her hands, one aimed at her temple, the other at the viewer. Before we even notice the guns, however, we are attracted—and frightened—by the burning, paranoid look in her eyes. Another work from the same year, *Hospital*, is split horizontally into two sections. The bottom features two sexless, grotesquely decrepit bodies, while the top presents three heads lying on hospital beds, rendered in Munchian misery, with thin triangles—meant to scarcely imply surgical lights—the only thing hovering above them in this godless world.

It's true that, at times, Lassnig carelessly falls into cliché, as in *Death and the Girl* (1999), which depicts a female figure dancing recklessly with a skeleton. In any event, works like *Mother Nature* (1999)—featured most prominently here, perhaps because it so closely resonates with the embrace of naturalism that seems to be one of the underlying themes of "The Encyclopedic Palace"—demonstrate that Lassnig more often than not gets it right. Here, the nude female protagonist holds her hands out like some sort of Indian goddess. A forest has begun to sprout from her: pine trees pop out of her skull, giving her spiky hair. A chipmunk and deer frolic among the foliage she holds in her hands.

Despite her recent acclaim—Lassnig also has a solo exhibition on view in Berlin at Capitain Petzel Gallery (through June 18), as well as a retrospective that will soon be at Hamburg's Deichtorhalle (June 21-Sept. 8)—it is somewhat shocking that this artist, who has been active since the 1940s, is not better known. In this, she fits in well with Gioni's romantic yet admirable mission to bring the outside inside, redeeming one of painting's more original and enduring voices.

PHOTO: Maria Lassnig, *You or Me*, 2005, oil on canvas, 79 1/2 by 61 inches. Friedrich Christian Flick Collection.