



Maria Lassnig

Exhibition of Austrian painter opens new season at the CAC

MATT MORRIS // OCT 8, 2008

It is astonishing that Maria Lassnig, whose work is presented in an impressive solo exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), is widely unknown in the United States. She is an influential force throughout Europe, working in Vienna for the past few decades. At the age of 89, Lassnig is highly accomplished as both an exhibiting artist and as the first female

professor of painting in a German-speaking country. I've been familiar with her work as it appeared in several recent solo exhibitions at New York's Friedrich Petzel Gallery and in the traveling *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*.

Lassnig's exhibition at the CAC is a milestone not only because it is her first solo museum exhibition in the United States but also because it is a great start to the CAC's challenging 2008-09 season. For several years, I have waited to witness a dialogue between an exhibition of purely painting and Zaha Hadid's building. Two floors have been hung with soaring and moderately sized figurative paintings that are fresh and immediate. Incorporating the severity of Francis Bacon, the chromatic complexity of Alice Neel and Susan Rothenberg's thrill of the hunt, Lassnig might best the lot of them through the series of paintings that are sensed as much as seen.

On the evening prior to the opening, Hans Ulrich Obrist, a curator at London's Serpentine Gallery, spoke on behalf of Lassnig to explain her "body awareness" approach to painting. This means that the artist paints what she feels of her body as she works. In many cases, the figures are contorted, seemingly dismembered or summarized in the depiction of only a few of the body's parts in order to reflect her physical experience at the time she works. She allows the body's sensations to organize the picture's information in surprising configurations.

The viewer is engaged in direct, intimate play-by-plays through the paintings' physical presence and implied narratives. A cycle of paintings from 2003- 2004 depicts exchanges between a male and a female character. "Adam and Eve in Underwear (Adam und Eva in Unterwasche)" catches the couple entangled on the floor, each bare down to their waists. Elbows and hips press into crotches. But their libidos seem depleted, as if this is a fond but regretful memory. Similarly, in the 2006 "Sleeping Men (Schlafende Manner)," sensuous male nudes lie about and fold onto themselves, but not without a lingering sense of worry. Paintings such as these made me ache.

Slightly older paintings, one floor higher, interplay layered swaths of juicy color against haloes of off-white stains, setting the characters into slightly more surreal situations. The ashen head with outstretched tongue lying beside a table of desserts in "Madonna of the Pastries" is one of the many stunning, visual jolts.

More abstract are the paintings "Children as Warriors" and the compositionally Rubenesque "The Dream Couple (Das Traumpaar)." The figures here are reduced to angular, biomorphic shapes that overlap and poke (sexually) at one another.

These cartoon-like characters repeat in Lassnig's films like 1972's *Shapes*. I cannot overemphasize the hilarious, psychosexually direct qualities that are found in most of her films. Figures with jagged, drill-like points or basket-like orifices extending from their waists quiver and interact with one another in a series of gender-emphasized melodramas. From these films, the sense of humor in the rest of the exhibition becomes evident.

This exhibition boldly showcases an accomplished artist who manages to make painting thoroughly contemporary. Lassnig, like many important women artists of her age, has gone largely unappreciated for too long. Such a powerful exhibition of work will do a world of good in righting this historical discrepancy.

MARIA LASSNIG is on view at the CAC through Jan. 11, 2009.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13018882/maria-lassnig-review>