



Maria Lassnig: Happy Martian

Released September 1, 2023

Exhibition Period:
2023.9.2 – 2024.1.7

Location:
Central Gallery and New Gallery

Media Contact:
Danyu Xu
Deputy Director of Communications
+86 10 5780 0258
+86 138 1082 9590
danyu.xu@ucca.org.cn

Press material available at
ucca.org.cn/en/press

UCCA presents “Maria Lassnig: Happy Martian,” the artist’s first solo exhibition in China. Featuring works from all periods of Lassnig’s career, the exhibition is thematically structured to showcase her forays into abstraction, realism, and more, all rooted in her groundbreaking approach towards self-portraiture and the method that she termed Body Awareness.

Beijing, CHINA — From September 2, 2023 to January 7, 2024, UCCA presents “Maria Lassnig: Happy Martian.” The exhibition marks the first significant presentation of the work of Austrian painter Maria Lassnig (1919-2014) in China. Internationally regarded as one of the leading artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Lassnig regularly tried to paint the way her body felt, rather than how it looked. Though she lived most of her life in Austria, she spent significant periods abroad, including in Paris and New York. The exhibition features 36 paintings drawn from all periods of Lassnig’s practice along with a selection of important drawings, ranging from her early involvement with graphic abstraction to her “realist” paintings of the 1970s and her innovative late self-portraits. Organized thematically rather than chronologically, the exhibition showcases combinations of work across different decades to draw out connections in the artist’s thinking over her long career, which spanned more than seventy years. “Happy Martian” is curated by Peter Eleey, UCCA Curator-at-Large, and Antonia Hoerschelmann, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, the ALBERTINA Museum. It is organized in collaboration with the ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna, and the Maria Lassnig Foundation.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Lassnig pioneered an attentive method of self-observation that she called Body Awareness, attempting to paint the way her body felt to her from the inside. “The only true things are my own sensations,” she explained, “which transpire within the house of my body.” Lassnig studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna during World War II, after which she went home to southern Austria, where she maintained a studio until a scholarship allowed her to visit Paris in the early 1950s. She moved to Paris in 1960, but eventually decamped to New York in 1968 in search of better opportunities for women artists. She studied, lived, and worked there for more than ten years, turning toward representational figuration and experimenting with film. In 1980, she returned to Vienna to become one of the first female painting professors in a German-speaking country, and she lived there for the remainder of her life.



“Happy Martian” unfolds across UCCA’s New Gallery and Central Gallery. Entering through the New Gallery, visitors encounter four themed rooms, the first of which looks at doubles and duality in Lassnig’s practice, from the indeterminate oscillation between interior and exterior depiction in her self-portraits, to the motif of the couple, which echoes between the almost-abstract color patches of *Parents in Bed / Mum and Dad* (1955) and the expressive, contorted bodies of *Tragic Duet / Dramatic Duet* (1987). The next room highlights the artist’s use of animal subjects in self-portraiture, whether depicting herself as an animal or posing with one, like in *Taking the Bull by the Horns* (2003). Influenced by philosopher Jacques Derrida, who questioned distinctions between human and animal, Lassnig deployed animal forms in her art both to express different aspects of herself and voice solidarity with creatures threatened by environmental degradation. The remaining two rooms in the New Gallery provide a broad sampling of her investigations into Body Awareness. One space features a set of drawings on paper from the 1990s, in which Lassnig imagined the interior space of her head, exploring and mapping how she processed sensations including sound and smell. While some of these drawings offered her a chance to test out ideas before expanding them into large-format paintings, others exist as works in their own right, fascinating for their immediacy and intimacy. Her paintings investigating the body, meanwhile, take an almost empirical, even quasi-scientific approach. Depicting bodies in an embryonal state, creating organic-mechanical hybrids, and displacing internal organs (as in *Lady with Brain*, c. 1990-1999), Lassnig sought to bring inner experience into contact with the visible, outer world.

Artworks are arranged in the Central Gallery in a more opened-end manner, juxtaposing works from later in Lassnig’s life, in which she increasingly contemplated her own mortality, with key paintings from decades earlier. *Triple Self-Portrait / New Self* (1971) dates back to the artist’s time in New York, and displays the more realistic mode she adopted in America in order to, in her words, provide “proof for those doubting my faculties.” The motif of the nude, seemingly self-confident woman reappears in one of her best-known works, *Woman Power* (1979), in which a gargantuan version of the artist strides King Kong-like among Manhattan skyscrapers. Lassnig’s ambivalent reaction to the painting’s success speaks to her nuanced relationship with feminism—she was interested in the movement but did not want her work to be pigeonholed as “women’s art.” Nearby, *Touching the Afterlife* (2000) maintains her consistent approach towards portraiture while moving on to themes of death and loss, depicting herself together with artist Arnold Daidalos Wande, a lost love of hers who had passed away a decade earlier. Another painting from the same period, *Soon I Will Be Above the Clouds* (1999), strikes a similar note. Its composition



recalls Andrea Mantegna's Renaissance masterpiece *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c. 1483); Lassnig depicts her body in atmospheric bands that mimic the drapery over Christ's body. The painter's eyes peek out at the top of the canvas, creating a feeling of elegiac calmness that is less somber than her other works on the same subject.

The seduction of Lassnig's art derives from its stunning vulnerability. Depicting herself as a monster, machine, or alien, she left her anxieties and desires uncured and in plain view. Witnessing the dawn of space exploration, Lassnig identified with this discovery of new worlds, and she envisioned herself as an astronaut and "happy Martian" on her own interior journeys in the studio. She dedicated her work to "the description of the processes inside and outside [our]selves," emphasizing the disjunctions between her own self-image and the way she was seen by others—as a woman, as a painter, and as a person living through dramatic technological, cultural, and political developments. By bravely exposing personal traumas, fantasies, and nightmares in her paintings, she registered how the world happened to her. The result is a catalogue of allegories for the human condition that continues to deepen in its relevance.

Support and Sponsorship

This exhibition is supported by the Austrian Cultural Forum. Exclusive wall solutions support is provided by Dulux. UCCA also thanks the members of UCCA Foundation Council, International Circle, and Young Associates, as well as Lead Partner Aranya, Lead Art Book Partner DIOR, Presenting Partners Bloomberg, Voyage Group, and Yinyi Biotech, and Supporting Partners Barco, Dulux, Genelec, and Stey.

About the Artist

Maria Lassnig (1919-2014) was born in Carinthia in Southern Austria and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna in the midst of World War II. She lived in Paris from 1960 to 1968, and then in New York from 1968 until 1980, when she returned to Vienna to teach at the University of Applied Arts. She received a Golden Lion for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale in 2013, and at the time of her death in 2014 was the subject of an important solo exhibition at MoMA PS1 in New York. Since then, prominent shows of her work have been organized at Tate Liverpool (2016), Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw (2017), and the National Gallery, Prague, and Kunstmuseum Basel (both 2018). The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna, and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, jointly presented the major survey "Ways of Being" in 2019.



Exhibition Catalogue

The bilingual catalogue *Maria Lassnig: Happy Martian* is the artist's first book published in China. Comprehensive documentation of the exhibition accompanies essays by exhibition curators Peter Eleey and Antonia Hoerschelmann, art historian Michio Hayashi, and art critic Fiona He, exploring various facets of the UCCA show and Lassnig's practice. Due for publication in November 2023, the catalogue is designed by Lynn Lai and published by Zhejiang Photographic Press.

Public Programs

During the exhibition, UCCA's Public Practice Department will present a series of public programs examining Maria Lassnig's fascinating life, unique artistic practice, and her understanding of herself as a female artist. Programs include panel discussions, workshops, and film events. An opening conversation will be held in the UCCA Auditorium at 14:00 on September 2, 2023, moderated by UCCA Director Philip Tinari and featuring exhibition curators Peter Eleey and Antonia Hoerschelmann along with Peter Pakesch (Chairman, Maria Lassnig Foundation) and Matthias Mühling (Director, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich). For more information on how to purchase tickets, and for details on other public programs, please visit UCCA's official WeChat account.

About UCCA

UCCA Center for Contemporary Art is China's leading contemporary art institution. Committed to bringing the best in art to a wider audience, UCCA shares a wide range of exhibitions, public programs, and research initiatives to a public of more than one million visitors each year across three locations. UCCA Beijing sits at the heart of the 798 Art District, occupying 10,000 square meters of factory chambers built in 1957 and regenerated in 2019 by OMA. UCCA Dune, designed by Open Architecture, lies beneath the sand in the seaside enclave of Aranya in Beidaihe. UCCA Edge, designed by New York-based architecture firm SO – IL, opened in Shanghai in May 2021. Formally accredited as a museum by the Beijing Cultural Bureau in 2018, UCCA also operates non-profit foundations, licensed by the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs and the Hong Kong government. UCCA's commercial ventures include the retail platform UCCA Store, the children's education initiative UCCA Kids, and collaborations and projects under the rubric UCCA Lab. Opened in 2007 and revived by a committed group of Chinese and international patrons in 2017, UCCA works to bring China into global dialogue through contemporary art.

ucca.org.cn/en