

ARTS & THEATER

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At the Crocker, a daring artist worthy of lasting fame

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"Barcelona #2" by Claire Falkenstein



BY VICTORIA DALKEY

Special to The Bee

"If you're unwilling to ... go into the unknown and fail, you'll never do anything." - Claire Falkenstein



In her nearly 70-year career, Claire Falkenstein (1908-97) was willing to go into the unknown over and over. One of America's most innovative, original, uncompromising 20th-century artists, she determinedly followed her own path, producing works in variety of media that explore aspects of nature, movement and the idea of an expanding universe.

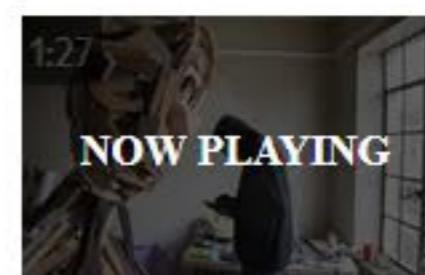


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Organized by the Pasadena Museum of Contemporary Art and on view at the Crocker Art Museum, “Claire Falkenstein: Beyond Sculpture” is the first comprehensive exhibition of her art since 1997. Featuring more than 50 daring and intellectually rigorous works in an amazing array of media from radical metal and glass sculptures to paintings, prints, jewelry, stage sets, murals and major architectural commissions, the show begins with a mini-survey of her works in the hallway outside the second floor gallery in which the bulk of the show is installed.

At its center is “Predator, 1963-64,” an abandoned shopping cart filled with meandering tangles of painted wire and metal, whose dark body opens up to release a white projection that juts like the jaw of some fearsome creature. It’s both frightening and funny, quirky in a way that seems wholly ahead of its times. Around it are works that range from “Orbit the Earth,” a monumental, nine-panel painting of a micro-macro universe inspired by the beginnings of the U.S. manned space program to “Corona,” a small and brilliantly colored sculpture made of brazed copper and fused glass.

The show inside the gallery is arranged roughly chronologically, beginning with “Self-Portrait: Skeptical at 19,” 1927-28, and culminating in a video about her work and her life. Born in the verdant, coastal town of Coos Bay, Ore., Falkenstein knew from an early age that she would be a sculptor and that nature – not the depicting of it but the creating of it – would be her subject.

When she was 12, her family moved to Berkeley, an area equally rich in natural beauty, where she attended a private school during her adolescent years before earning an art degree from University of California, Berkeley, and undertaking further studies at Mills College with Alexander Archipenko and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who influenced her work in an abstract, modernist direction.

A highly respected artist in the Bay Area, where she taught alongside Clyfford Still and Richard Diebenkorn at the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute), Falkenstein moved to Paris in 1950 where she exhibited with Hans (Jean) Arp, Lucio Fontana and Alberto Giacometti; rubbed shoulders with Constantin Brancusi and Henry Moore; and received prestigious architectural commissions, including a stunning set of garden gates, made of welded metal and Murano glass, for Peggy Guggenheim’s palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice.

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After returning to the United States in 1963, she settled in Venice, Southern California, where she continued making avant-garde sculptures and paintings and doing major architectural commissions in the Los Angeles area, including a rectory screen, entrance doors and 15 three-dimensional stained glass windows for St. Basil's Catholic Church on Wilshire Boulevard.

Works from her Bay Area period include "Barcelona #2," a surreal abstraction painted over a Spanish poster, "Aerial," a wall sculpture made of war surplus aluminum, and wood sculptures. "Vigilante Victim II," made of carved and painted redwood in 1940, is a powerful response to "the horror and despair" of learning about the lynchings of black men in the South.

"Leda #1," 1950, a small and spidery sculpture made of stovepipe wire, serves as a transition to works she made in France and Italy. Basing her sculptures, which she called "structures," on a visual vocabulary she invented that included "never ending screens" like the Guggenheim gates, lattice structures and topographical structures, she created unique works that, unlike Jeff Koons, she made with her own hands, welding bands of metal and inserting pieces of fused glass.

Works from her Los Angeles-area period include "Flower (Topology)," 1973, a quirky, kinetic bronze sculpture that makes sounds when it moves and "Emblem I," 1978, a shamanistic sculpture made of bamboo, linen canvas, paint and copper.

Because she was peripatetic, moving from city to city and because she was largely indifferent to the art market, Falkenstein hasn't achieved the lasting fame she so clearly deserved, a circumstance that "Beyond Sculpture" should remedy in the eyes of all who see it.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: BEYOND SCULPTURE

When: Through Dec. 31; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday

Where: Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St., Sacramento

Cost: \$10 to \$5; children 6 and younger and museum members are free. Every third Sunday of the month is "Pay What You Wish Sunday."

Information: 916-808-7000, www.crockerartmuseum.org