

WERNER FREI

The Modernist and his view ahead

Works from 1930–1980

06. March – 10. May 2025

The Galerie Fabian Lang and the estate of Werner Frei – his three daughters – are delighted to celebrate the life and works of this exceptional artist.

A perhaps forgotten master from Zollikon Zurich – who died in 1986 – whose oeuvre ranges stylistically from impressionistic portraits, landscapes and still lifes, to wild, tachistic abstraction, to a pioneering ‘Concrete Impressionism’ and Minimalism.

Everyone who has reported or written about him has emphasised not only his artistic courage and creative power, but also his modest and humane nature. Werner Frei was an eternally interested person and a seeker. In the visitor's text to his exhibition at ‘Althus’ in 1981, he wrote about himself: ‘By birth and descent, I am neither a rationalist nor a revolutionary. I am committed to evolution and am therefore more prepared for slow changes than sensational upheavals. [...] An innate sense of duty and responsibility, respect and tolerance towards every fellow human being are further factors that militate against radicalism and overly utopian flights of fancy.’ This wisdom could be applied all too well to the present day.

The press release for the Althus exhibition, which testifies to Frei's apt phrasing skills, also provides further revealing insights into the artist's approach. For him, and this is the most important key to analysing his works, pictures should say more than words. Only the viewer completes the picture, as he says. ‘The picture is a reality, a vessel, and it contains spirit and matter; it is like a person and demands dialogue.’

In keeping with his spirit, we will try to say as little as possible about the possible interpretation of the individual works and only use them to anchor them in an art-historical context. We therefore kindly request that you take the time to examine the works. ‘It's also good if we, the rushed beings of today, can grant ourselves a little time here too. (Werner Frei)

When you see all the works at the same time, as here in our miniature retrospective, one thing is particularly striking – the almost unbelievable range of the palette. It is rare to see artists with such a range. The exhibition begins on the right as you enter with a wall of paintings similar to the one he himself arranged for visitors in his studio shortly before he died in hospital. On the left are the oldest from the 1940s to the far right, with the last works from the early 1980s.

Many of the works are untitled. Frei was of the opinion that if you looked at one of his paintings ‘...with love and interest, it would also tell you its name without being written. (Hans Haab). Nevertheless, a few do bear a title. For example, one of his earliest works from 1949, *Porträt der Malerin H.L. mit ihren Katzen* (Portrait of the painter H.L. with her cats). It is painted with wild, direct impressionistic brushstrokes. In the shaky blurriness of the composition, one immediately recognises the supposedly dodderiness of this elderly lady. In the same year, Frei painted the work *Ode to Picasso* (1949). Braque and Picasso particularly excited him and, like almost all painters of the time, he orientated himself along the lines of these masters. Still, his own personality as a painter comes through unmistakably already here. To the left is the portrait of his daughter *Andrea* (1952), outlined with just a few brushstrokes. It has an almost Minimalist effect. A hint of what is to come? Before that, in 1951, he painted the mysterious works *Flötenspielerin* (*Flute player*) and *Musikstück* (*Piece of Music*), as well as the completely abstract *untitled* picture from the beginning of 1950, for which he engraved his composition directly into the plaster with a stick.

The exhibition also features rare examples of Frei's marvellous sculpting skills. Furniture, figures and busts that he created from time to time. The puppet theatre figures are Kasperlitheather figures that he created for his children. Today, only old black and white photographs bear witness to his costume creations and stage sets he made for the ballet school of the time. The small bust shown here depicts his first patron - Renee Etienne. An early work from the 30s. And in the middle of the exhibition, the colourful kidney-shaped table stands out, its top depicting an underwater scenario made of self-coloured glass mosaics. There is not enough space in this exhibition for Werner Frei's numerous art in architecture and public projects.

The juxtaposition of all these works illustrates the astonishing breadth of his oeuvre, but also in particular the creative courage to push in a new direction.

The 1950s were characterised by a style-defining abstraction. Did Frei keep an eye on the Abstract Expressionism developed in America in the 40s and 50s? He was never there. The transformation, in which the figurative was so reduced and slowly found its way back into abstraction, can be seen very clearly in the work of the abstracted cat *Untitled*, 1958. Again excitingly, he created works of both abstract tendencies of the time in parallel: works that show abstracted ('essentialised', condensed to an essence) objects, figures, spaces, as well as works that make autonomous use of visual, artistic means, without any mimetic reference to objects.

In the 1960s, the art movement of Tachisme and Art Informel spread from Paris to Switzerland and influenced the younger generation of artists in particular. Werner Frei also explores this new and controversial movement, whereby the painting process itself becomes the content of the picture. "They are pictures that are most like poems, intimations of moods and feelings that resonate in the viewer." (Elisabeth Grossmann, curator) Two other impressive, large-format works from the 1960s illustrate the above ideally - *Frühling (Spring)* from 1967 and *Gesichter (Faces)* from 1966. One is completely abstract and geared towards the mood and colour that captures you. In the other, one recognises vague features of beings and cavorting figures.

The last phase, if you like, became established in the 70s. Frei condensed more and more. The background colours are distinctly chosen, applied flatly to convey the mood, the lines above them precisely placed. Everything is reduced to the essentials, yet powerfully expressive and mysterious. And, above all, always ingeniously ambiguous. Who doesn't recognise comic-like facial features in the profile in *Tannenwaldrand* from 1981? For Frei himself, it was all about rhythm, colour harmony and emptiness. He created spaces and landscapes of colour. And you should immerse yourself in these spaces and landscapes. Or at least dip a toe into them.

A unique symbiosis of two contradictory directions - the Concrete form of Minimalism and the interpretative, emotive form of Impressionism. It is the birth of "Concrete Impressionism" for which Frei paved the way.

Werner Frei was an innovator, his ideas modern, his way of working forward-looking. The diversity of his visual language over the years is astounding. He sought truth and justice, as he said. His works are of a freshness and radiance that is unrivalled, and it is astonishing how much of it is reappearing stylistically in the works of contemporary artists today. He was a humanist, a philanthropist and someone everyone remembers fondly and, in particular, a genial artist.

Short profile of the artist:

Born in 1907 in Rickenbach, in the Zürcher Weinland. Self-taught. Life drawing at the Kunstgewerbeschule, ETH and the E. Wehrli painting school in Zurich. Then travelled through Paris and the south of France to inspire his art and create. In the 1940s, still attached to representationalism, he slowly but surely developed freer painting styles. From 1942 he worked as a freelance artist in Zollikerberg. After study trips to Rome, Berlin and London at the end of the 1940s, his works began to mutate. Numerous exhibitions in art spaces and galleries in Switzerland, in 1962 at the Shirokiya Gallery in Tokyo, Japan and art in construction projects for the SBB, among others. The highlight was a retrospective organised by the Kunsthaus Zurich with a focus on his last creative period at the Helmhaus Zurich in 1977.