

Claire Falkenstein (1908-1997)

"Well, if you look at my work, of course there's some influence. You can't just go through life not being influenced at all. But there is a kind of action always in my work that is of a kind of interior growth, rather than exterior association with some style or some subject. I've always worked out my own direction"¹

Celebrated for her exquisite structures of fused metal and glass, **Claire Falkenstein** was born in Coos Bay, a small Pacific lumber town in Oregon. As a child, she would often wake up early and ride her horse to the edge of the bay in order to watch the sun rise over the beach. This daily proximity to seaweed, shells, stones, and driftwood had a profound effect on her artistic vocabulary as an adult. Although she began sculpting as a child, Falkenstein did not intend to study art when she entered the University of California Berkeley in 1927. However, it soon became her passion, and in 1930 she graduated with a major in art and minors in philosophy and anthropology. That same year, the East-West Gallery in San Francisco mounted her first solo exhibition, a rare achievement for such a young artist. In 1933, Falkenstein received a grant to study at Mills College in Oakland with Alexander Archipenko, who introduced the principles of implied motion and spatial relationships in abstract sculpture. During her studies at Mills, she also worked with Bauhaus émigrés László Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes.

By 1940, Falkenstein was living in San Francisco and working predominantly in wood and ceramics, creating abstract, organic three-dimensional forms with moveable parts. Her work was first shown in New York City in 1944, when the Bonestall Gallery mounted a solo exhibition. In the late 1940s, she began teaching at the California School of Fine Arts, where she met Clyfford Still, whose abstract expressionist paintings had an important influence on her approach to sculpture, and she began to allow more room for the accidental and the spontaneous. Falkenstein's 1948 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art demonstrated her move towards a freer, open-form language.



photo by Paul C. Greene, San Francisco, CA; Courtesy of The Falkenstein Foundation

In 1950, Falkenstein moved to Paris, where her friends included American artists Sam Francis, Paul Jenkins, and Mark Tobey. A versatile, innovative artist, Falkenstein spent most of her career unaffiliated with specific art movements, and she attributes her confidence in this individuality partly to her time in Paris, explaining, "the French allowed a kind of individual action. They have the quality of centuries . . . of culture and of art and . . . [y]ou feel it within yourself when you're there. I felt it so strongly that right away my so-called "looking within" really worked. That's when I developed my own vocabulary." This vocabulary was the cornerstone of her mature style, and it consisted of five main elements: "the sign and the ensemble, the moving point and the lattice structure, the topological structure." She created some of her most important works in Europe, such as the *Sun Series*, sculptures of welded wire that revealed her fascination with the sculptural qualities of open and negative space. Her work was exhibited extensively, and she became the only non-German artist included in the 1952 Werkbund exhibition, revived for the first time since its suppression under Hitler.

Falkenstein returned to the United States in 1960 and settled in Southern California. Represented by Galerie Stadler in Paris and the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, she completed numerous public commissions around the world including the gates of the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni in Venice (now in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy). Her first public commission in Los Angeles (1963-1965) was a welded copper tube and glass fountain for the California Federal Savings and Loan Association. Known as the *Cal Fed Fountain*, the work used water as a sculptural element integral to the overall composition. This work forced Falkenstein



Claire Falkenstein (1908-1997), *Structure and Flow*, c.1965, copper, 26 3/4" x 36" x 24 1/2"

to think in terms of the construction and flow of sculpture, revealing her recurring interest in molecular structure, topology, and cosmology. The most monumental commission of her career was a series of welded doors and glass windows for St. Basil Church in Los Angeles. Completed in 1969, this series revolved around her notion of the "never ending screen," a sculptural element she developed and deployed throughout her career, even incorporating it into paintings and drawings.

In 1997, Falkenstein died at age eighty-nine, and soon after, The Falkenstein Foundation was created to preserve her legacy. Since then, her work has been shown regularly in group and solo exhibitions, including the 2015 exhibition **Pathmakers: Women in Art, Craft & Design, Midcentury and Today** at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC. In January 2016, Claire Falkenstein is on view at the **Peggy Guggenheim Collection** in Venice, Italy for **Postwar Era: A Recent History, Homage to Claire Falkenstein**. Currently, the **Pasadena Museum of California Art** is organizing a traveling retrospective, **Beyond Sculpture**, comprised of approximately seventy-five works, including sculptures, paintings, drawings, etchings, lithographs, jewelry, and watercol-

ors, as well as large-scale photographs of her major public commissions. Curated by **Jay Belloli**, a member of The Falkenstein Foundation board of trustees and an expert on Falkenstein's art, the exhibition is scheduled to open in April of 2016.

Falkenstein's diverse body of artwork is currently represented in public collections worldwide, including the Tate Modern in London; Centre Pompidou in Paris; Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; and the Museum of Modern Art and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, both in New York. A prolific artist, Falkenstein continued to work and exhibit for the duration of her nearly seventy-year career. **In 2014, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery proudly became the representative of The Falkenstein Foundation.**

¹ Oral history interview with Claire Falkenstein, 1995 Mar. 2-21, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-claire-falkenstein-12659> (Accessed July 2014).

² Oral history interview with Claire Falkenstein, 1995 Mar. 2-21.

³ Oral history interview with Claire Falkenstein, 1995 Mar. 2-21.



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