

# Tracing the arc of a neglected career

BY KIRK SILSBEE

One of the art world's more curious voids is the near total eclipse of Claire Falkenstein, an innovator with a maverick vision and a seemingly bottomless appetite for different media. That she produced a number of high-profile public works in Southern California makes the lack of regard for her contributions all the more shameful.

That's Falkenstein's gorgeous, hard-edged stained glasswork striping St. Basil's Catholic Church at Wilshire Boulevard and Kingsley Drive in Los Angeles. Her colorful steel-and-stained-glass wind-screens brighten up the New Town Center Court at Orange Coast Plaza. Her wave-like "Structure and Flow" fountain in front of the Cal-Fed Building on Wilshire was a 1960s landmark before it was demolished. Her similar copper-and-Venetian-glass fountain still gushes and sprays in front of the Long Beach Museum of Art.

The Pasadena Museum of California Art is addressing Falkenstein's shrunken profile in a big way. Though there have

The Pasadena Museum of California Art rediscovers a 20th-century sculptor whose work helped shape Southern California.



**THE PASADENA MUSEUM** of California Art is presenting a retrospective of the work of sculptor and artist Claire Falkenstein.

*Courtesy of the Pasadena Museum of California Art*

been a couple of shows in recent memory around the country, "Claire Falkenstein: Beyond Sculpture" (open through Sept. 11) is — incredibly — the artist's first retrospective. The accompanying catalog, by curator Jay Belloli and essayist Maren Henderson, contains the first Falkenstein monograph ever written.

Though known primarily as a sculptor, the show contains a fair amount of Falkenstein paintings —

from almost all points in her career. "Lumber Mill," a 1938 landscape, carries the dynamism and velocity of Italian Futurism, as do a couple of early ceramics. That sense of wave and flow, anticipating the Atomic Age and then providing a visual corollary, permeate the length of her prodigious output.

A native of rural Coos Bay, Ore., Falkenstein (1908-1997) had a pioneer spirit and wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty. "She

## INFOBOX

**What:** "Claire Falkenstein: Beyond Sculpture"

**Where:** Pasadena Museum of California Art, 490 E. Union St., Pasadena

**When:** Through Sept. 11. Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

**More info:** (626) 568-3665, [www.pmca.org](http://www.pmca.org)

was not a city girl," points out Belloli. "Her roots were in the forest and next to the ocean." When she began to work in metal, it was a point of pride that Falkenstein did her own welding.

"Not only that," Belloli maintains, "but it was a way to stay close to her vision. The St. Basil Church was an exception: The exterior glass panels run the height of the building, so she had to outsource it. But it's as close to her specifications as possible."

Falkenstein studied at UC Berkeley, majoring in art and minoring in an-

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thropology and philosophy. "She studied Einstein's Theory of Relativity," Belloli says, "and that's where you get all of those curves. Einstein said that light curves geometry; there's some geometry in her work but curves continue throughout her career — no matter what discipline she was working in."

Paint, paper, canvas, glass, wood, brass, obsidian, aluminum, copper, bronze, bamboo — Falkenstein used them all.

One of her sun sculptures — a giant ball of intertwined metal — hangs suspended near the doorway of the exhibition space at the PMCA. It's dense but open-aired, humming with a silent energy.

Belloli's 45-year career as curator has taken the Northern California native to Minneapolis, Houston, San Diego, Fort Worth and Detroit. When a position at Caltech opened up, he saw it as his destination. "My work has always touched on Southern California art," he explains, "but it has become that. I recognized L.A. as one of the two biggest centers for contemporary art on the planet; the other is New York. I studied very closely the great shows that Peter Schimmel has done for MOCA and Howard Fox's



*Courtesy of the Pasadena Museum of California Art*

**PRIMARILY KNOWN** as a sculptor, Claire Falkenstein also painted on canvas.

LACMA exhibitions. They've been incredible."

Falkenstein lived and worked in Paris and Italy in the 1950s, before she returned and settled in Venice Beach. "Her work was really formed in Paris," he says, "but her studio was cramped. When she opened her Venice studio, she understood how to do

sculpture commissions. Southern California offered her space and light and the opportunity to make fountain sculptures — water doesn't freeze here. This is where public art opened up for her."

**KIRK SILSBEE** writes about jazz and culture for *Marquee*.