

# 'Visiting blokes are advised

A naked 89-year-old Austrian has you in her sights at the Serpentine. And her brutality is brilliant, says WALDEMAR JANUSZCZAK

**A**woman points a gun at you as you enter the Serpentine Gallery. With her other hand, she points a second gun at her own head. So, is she going to shoot you? Or shoot herself? She is stark naked and sitting with her legs apart, so nothing is hidden. It's all very harsh and unsettling. Sagging breasts. An exposed oopsie. But you haven't yet heard the most extraordinary fact about this opening painting, which is that the artist who produced it is 89 years old, and this is her self-portrait. Seven years older than HM the Queen, yet here she is, naked as a porn star, forcing you to stare at her bits and pointing guns at you. Welcome to the startling world of **Maria Lassnig**.

Lassnig is Austrian; she was born in 1919 and studied in Vienna. Over the years, she has tried her hand at various branches of art — she makes films, she performs — but, at heart, she is a painter, and the Serpentine show, her British debut, is devoted solely to her latest pictures. So, this isn't a retrospective or a re-examination or anything as measured as that. This is an unleashing. An 89-year-old Austrian paint warrior, born in the age of Freud, toughened by a century of relentless conflict and now encouraged to flower, so very belatedly, by an art world that has suddenly developed a bewildering taste for older women, is being given her head. Visiting blokes are advised to bring a helmet.

The naked self-portrait with two guns, called *Cockily, You or Me*, turns out to be typical in its immodesty and its pinkness. Lassnig's art features lots of inventive nudity. Indeed, the opening wall text characterises her output as "body-awareness painting", as if her chief idea is to convey in pictures what it feels like to be inside an 89-year-old body. I buy some of that. But the overall



**'Creepy metaphor': Couple (2005), by Maria Lassnig**

Lassnig is a living link with art's past who has somehow survived into the present, where she has made herself popular, pertinent and — would you believe it? — fashionable. But this is also an impressive British debut because it is very varied. Directness turns out to be only one of her many modes. In the main gallery, the show acquires luscious full-colour backgrounds and grows all tender, even soppy, in a sequence of sad paintings featuring a couple wrapped spookily in sheets of plastic. Apparently, Lassnig had a moment of epiphany in a supermarket. Looking down at some fruit packaged in preservative plastic, she recognised a creepy metaphor for the distance between people.

Finally, there's a group of paintings in which she really shows her age — and reveals most clearly her ancient debt to surrealism, which she just about experienced

impression made by this magnificently splenetic show is not of a wise old-timer thoughtfully examining herself from within, but — and this is much better — of a totally fearless accoster of the rest of us, who is much too old to give a monkey's about how she comes across, watching the world, watching the battle of the sexes, running her jaundiced eye along us and not knowing whether to laugh, cry or shoot herself.

The self-portrait with guns is part of a large chunk of Lassnig's output in which big pink nudes act out scary scenes from the war between men and women against a background of pure white. Imagine the clientele of an Austrian bierkeller stripped naked and turfed out into the snow. No backgrounds. No clothes. Nowhere to hide. Lassnig says she dispensed with backgrounds because they were a distraction. Yet there's an

element of cruelty, also, to her approach. In one such picture, a plump Austrian hausfrau, stripped naked behind a row of cakes, is sarcastically dubbed the *Madonna of the Pastries*. Elsewhere, a fat bloke angrily scrunching up a toy globe is *The World Destroyer*.

Like her near contemporary Louise Bourgeois, with whom she shares a fierce sense of shamelessness to go with her seemingly unseemly fascination with sex,

first time around — by turning men and women into warring biomorphic blobs, threatening and poking each other. Pudenda become mouths. Phalluses become heads. Spikes enter holes. It's a garish anatomical free-for-all, inspired a touch too obviously, perhaps, by Picasso's surrealist phase.

Thus, the show switches modes with excellent insouciance. But, whether it is being blobby or direct, flesh-coloured or Day-Glo,

# to bring a helmet'

the feeling persists that what is being examined most keenly here is the relationship between women and men. Like *Bourgeois* again, Lassnig seems to have waited until her old age before getting fully in touch with the fears and feelings of a little girl. Given what has recently been happening in the cellars of Austria, the temptation to read some huge and hugely disturbing national uber-truths into her output is practically irresistible. As if on cue, in the show's creepiest stretch, a picture pops up of a middle-aged fat man molesting a child, then, in the next image, picking her up like a toy to have sex with her. The naked child has the features of the woman with the guns, so it's another portrayal of Lassnig, this time as an abused adolescent. Mockingly entitled *Don Juan d'Austria*, this unsettling picture was painted in 2001, and is clearly, and now scarily, by an artist who already knew something horrible and dark about Austrian men. Now we all know. She's a voice from the past that the present would be wise to listen to.

The Serpentine deserves plenty of hearty sub-Alpine slaps on the back for finally unveiling this spooky and gripping octogenarian (soon to be nonagenarian) talent. Lassnig's wild-eyed, untameable art seems to bubble up from the gut, from somewhere deep down where the instincts gather and ferment. She is one of those Austrian artists for whom the human body will always be a war zone and never a temple. Think Schiele. Think Kokoschka. Think — if you have the nerve, or at least a mop with which to soak up the blood — Hermann Nitsch, the beast of Vienna. And, although I hate to draw too weighty a national conclusion from the partial evidence of art, or to generalise too readily on the immediate, either being Austrian has a particularly powerful directional impact on the psyche of artists or I am going blind.

I was looking forward to **Gregory Crewdson** at White Cube. He began as a modest model-maker, creating weird little worlds out of matchboxes, toilet rolls and the like, which he would then photograph in such a way that their scale was disguised and their heft magnified. It was all very Blue Peter, but charming. Unfortunately, someone gave him a chequebook and his ambitions

ballooned. Blue Peter turned into a Spielberg movie. Beneath the *Roses* is a suite of moody photographs produced over three years in small-town Massachusetts by a cast of dozens of grips, electricians, photographers, best boys, lighting directors, set builders, actors, costumiers and their dogs, all of whom have been trying to squeeze a movie's worth of clout out of a single image. Against a

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background of harsh American architecture, the lights pick out an old woman writing a letter, a pregnant woman standing in the snow, a naked couple having sex under a bridge. The idea is that Crewdson supplies you with a central moment and you fill in the rest of the film. Yet so clichéd are the situations, so melodramatic the setups, so wasteful the production process and so tiny the

resonances, all this effort feels scandalously wasteful. □

*Maria Lassnig, Serpentine, W2, until June 8; Gregory Crewdson, White Cube, SW1, until May 24*

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View a slide show of works from Maria Lassnig's Serpentine exhibition, at [timesonline.co.uk/visualarts](http://timesonline.co.uk/visualarts)