

Extraordinary Austrian captures darkness and sexual dysfunction

EXHIBITION

Maria Lassnig

SERPENTINE GALLERY

IT is impossible to look at the uncanny paintings by Maria Lassnig on show at the Serpentine Gallery without recoiling with a little shiver of disgust. Born in Austria in 1919, and celebrated in continental Europe (though little known here), Lassnig presents a suite of recent paintings about child abuse which instantly call to mind the story of Josef Fritzl and his poor daughter that emerged from Lassnig's homeland last week.

In *Bugbear*, a corpulent and balding naked middle-aged man, his flabby flesh rendered in jaundiced yellows

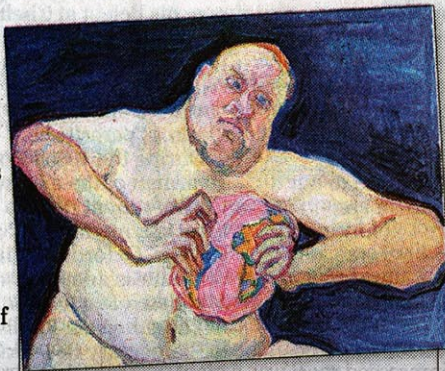
and sickly off-whites, crouches over a fragile young creature painted to look more like an inflatable doll than a little girl. In *Sports Master*, another man with similarly ill-defined musculature kneels in the centre, each fist holding aloft a disproportionately small girl dressed in purple gym kit, like a big-game hunter posing for the camera. With his close-cropped gingery beard and haughty stare, he is a dead ringer for that monster of the bedroom, Henry VIII.

Both paintings are disturbing, and typical of the way in which Lassnig, who represented Austria at the Venice Biennale in 1980, treats vulnerability and sexual dysfunction with visceral urgency. She refers to her work as "body awareness paintings", which means that, while she paints in a

naturalistic mode, she often distorts anatomy to convey a particular psychological effect. Thus the mouthless, splayed form of the little girl in *Bugbear*, which reminded me of Giacometti's menacing 1932 sculpture *Woman with Her Throat Cut*, represents her mute powerlessness.

At her most extreme, as in *Self with Dragon* (2005) or *Three Ways of Being* (2004), Lassnig twists figures into stunted, lumpen and afflicted forms that recall the deliberate dysmorphia of Francis Bacon. These unfortunate squat goblins are often crimson or bright pink and suggest sensations of humiliation, acute embarrassment and rock-bottom self-esteem.

Occasionally, the tone feels hectoring, as in the first image that greets us on entering the gallery – a



Lives crushed: *The World Destroyer*

strident self-portrait from 2005 called *You or Me*, in which the octogenarian Lassnig presents herself naked, holding a gun to her head and

pointing another automatic pistol straight at the viewer, holding us to ransom. An eerie green glow forms a penumbra around her head and torso.

But such provocation is only a by-product of the incredible energy that evidently still animates this extraordinary woman, who spent many years in Paris and New York before returning to teach at the Academy for Applied Arts in Vienna.

There's no denying that this, her first solo exhibition in the UK, is a difficult show. But out of the darkness and deformity, Lassnig creates striking expressionistic pictures that you won't forget in a hurry. *Until June 8. Details: 020 7402 6075*

Alastair Sooke