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Claire Falkenstein @ Crocker Art Museum

NOVEMBER 14, 2016



Predator, 1963–64.

Shopping cart with painted
wire and metal, 70 × 36 ×
89"

by **Julia Couzens**

Beyond Sculpture — a small exhibition indexing the restless experimentation of an artist inspired by nature and drawn to interrogations of structure and movement, line and play – seeks to reestablish Claire Falkenstein's once-vaunted position in 20th century American art. Like Bruce Connor, she was both

recognized and overlooked during her lifetime. She won the patronage of Peggy Guggenheim and helped define Los Angeles as the center of contemporary art on the West Coast in the 1960s; but at her death, Falkenstein (1908-1997) had faded to obscurity, eclipsed by the art world's insatiable appetite for the new. The exhibition, curated by Jay Belloli, interim director of the Pasadena Museum of California Art, focuses on the diverse materials and methods Falkenstein used to produce paintings, prints, jewelry, architectural commissions and sculptures. Sculpture, though, was the territory that Falkenstein's art most substantially enlarged.

The show includes significant pieces from Hauser Wirth Schimmel's ambitious inaugural exhibition (*Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016*). But it also contains notable absences, the most significant being the fierce-looking *Sun Series* as well as other important series for which no amount of photo documentation can substitute.



Body Centered Cubic,
1960, glass fused with
gold and iron wire, 29 x 29
x 29"

Nevertheless, *Beyond Sculpture* is rich with tactility, movement, and inventive work made ahead of its time. Along with such artists as Eva Hesse, Lynda Benglis, Jackie Windsor and Lee Bontecou, Falkenstein expanded the methodology of sculpture to include strategies of accretion, imperfection and open-handed play. She infused every scrap of material she touched with intuitive, organic expression.

The show is organized in two sections and unfolds in roughly chronological order. The first is a kind of preview, installed outside the main gallery. It includes the hugely compelling *Predator* (1963-64), a metal shopping cart eccentrically bundled in intricately fashioned nests and coiling blooms of painted wire. The piece is playfully functional to the extent it can be opened up like the gaping maw of a feeding beast. It has the obsessive look of outsider art but with certain key differences. Where an artist like Judith Scott might obscure the cart with layers of twine and yarn, Falkenstein gives *Predator* the translucency of an x-ray, turning it into a vaguely menacing and seductively mesmerizing Duchampian object.

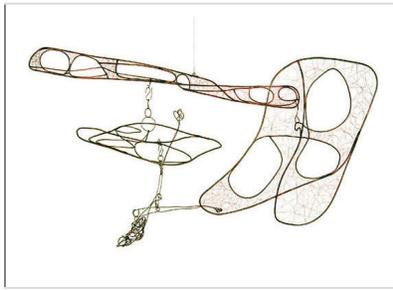
Though her reputation rests largely and deservedly on sculpture, Falkenstein began and ended her career making paintings. She cycled through Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, modernist abstraction and a sort of visionary field painting. *Orbit the Earth* (1963), inspired by newly manned spaceflights, is a massive, nine-panel painting just under 20-feet long made of thinly painted calligraphic daubs. Following a logic that Falkenstein referred to as “moving points,” it maps the world with obsessive whorls of silver and bronze. There are other paintings, from earlier and later periods, but this is one to see.



Orbit the Earth, 1963. Oil on
canvas, 84 × 238 1/2"

Falkenstein was born in Coos Bay, Oregon where she lived until her family moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when she was 12. But the time spent scavenging the beaches for shells, stones, beach glass, and driftwood remained an abiding influence on her visual vocabulary. We see it in *Interpenetration* (1944), a wall sculpture consisting of two pieces of carved wood, joined by rope threaded over and through its orifices. Although abstract, it alludes to the Northwest Native American woodcarving she likely saw as a child.

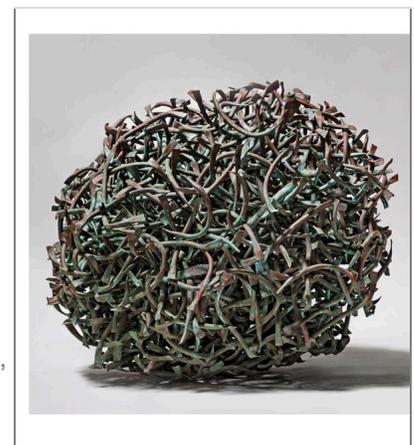
In 1950 Falkenstein moved to Paris where she lived for 13 years. French theorist and critic, Michel Tapié, endorsed her experimental work, and associated her with the radical group, *art autre* – “other art.” Rejecting ideas of style, aesthetics, and movements, he advocated for questions, not answers, and championed work that was in a continual state of transformation. This was key to Falkenstein’s growth as an artist, and coincided with her belief that art was a reflection of natural forces in flux. *Leda #1* (1950), and the wonderfully lyrical kinetic sculpture, *Suspension* (1958), both looping three-dimensional drawings in space, are good examples.



Suspension, 1958. Copper tubing and copper wire, 49 × 96 1/2 × 38 1/2 "

The latter, hung like a mobile, is a poetic matrix of motion, line and space. Falkenstein intended it to function as a performative device or prosthesis for human collaboration, an object a dancer might slither into or around. It was during this time that Falkenstein also began ambitious architectural commissions, most notably the garden gates to Guggenheim's Venetian palazzo. This work, together with her extraordinary sculptural jewelry, helped lay the groundwork for the craft-based practices now seen in much contemporary art.

Central to these efforts was an expanded notion of space. She spoke of her work as being connected to and commingling *with* space, not displacing it. Works such as *Body Centered Cubic* (1960), *Structure and Flow* (1957-61), *Point As a Set* (1965), and *Space Structure* (1978), express this attitude of dynamic expansion and porous connectivity. *Body Centered Cubic*, a particularly rich example, is an open-weave cube of linear thickets formed in gold and iron wire with dense clots of fused glass embedded like jeweled meteors. As she began to assemble work by joining components — making use of chance, imperfection, and accident — she considered her work to be “structures” as opposed to carved or modeled sculptures.



Point as a Set, 1965.
Welded copper, 34 × 34 × 34"

Flora (1973) another quirky object, might be used to perform experimental music. Constructed of bent and curving sheets of bronze, it evokes

Bontecou's vacuum-formed plastic flowers and multi-legged invertebrate. Its thin bulb-tipped rods sprout from a flat base, dangling on or near the curved sheets. A kinetic motor turns the base, causing the rods to clang against the petals, producing what must have been a great cacophony.

The exhibition ends with a suite of prints and a 30-minute video of Falkenstein talking about her work. The material inventions documented therein and throughout the show vanquish any doubts that may linger about her place in the pantheon of 20th century art.

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Claire Falkenstein: Beyond Sculpture @ [Crocker Art Museum](#) through December 31, 2016.

Images: The Falkenstein Foundation, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York and the Pasadena Museum of California Art.

About the Author:

[Julia Couzens](#) is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at the di Rosa Preserve. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

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