

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a solo exhibition of works by Viennese artist

**Martha Jungwirth**

May 1 – June 22, 2019

Opening Reception: May 1, 2019, 6–8PM

Fergus McCaffrey is pleased to present a solo exhibition of paintings by Viennese artist **Martha Jungwirth**, on view at the gallery's New York location from May 1st to June 22nd. This is the gallery's first exhibition with the artist, and will include four bodies of work that showcase Jungwirth's distinct approach to abstraction and coloration. The paintings on view all differently engage what the artist considers her most essential questions: "What do I do with reality?" and, "How do I render it in painting?"



Born in Vienna in 1940, Martha Jungwirth began creating vibrantly colored, idiosyncratic watercolors and oil paintings during a time when Minimal and Conceptual art—as well as the shocking, hyper-masculine performances of the Viennese Actionists—reigned in the Austrian art scene. Eschewing these trends, Jungwirth formed a loose coalition with four other painters, *Wirklichkeiten* (Realities); she was the group's only woman member. From 1968–72, these artists exhibited together and created gestural paintings notable for their intense pigmentation and forceful image repertoire. Jungwirth's work was included in the group's foundational exhibition, *Realities*, at the Secession in Vienna in 1968; shortly thereafter, she exhibited in *documenta 6* (1977).

Mostly painted horizontally on large sheets of paper, Jungwirth's paintings convey tactile sensations through brushstrokes, splatters, drags, scribbles, scrapes, and pours. Although her work has a palpable sense of immediacy and materiality, Jungwirth begins each painting with what she calls a conceptual "pretext"—an encounter with an external model, source, or pattern. These moments of inspiration derive from manifold sources: impressions from her wide travels, the faces and figures of friends and companions, paintings from art history, stories from Greek mythology, and contemporary political events. Essentially, a pretext need not be singular: a Greek myth might intermingle with an impression of her husband, curator and museum director Alfred Schmeller, as in *Proteus* (1984), which is included in the exhibition.

In *Proteus*, as in many of Jungwirth's paintings, mythical or universal subject matter is suffused with personal, emotional experience. An earthy green mass emerges from a tangle of grey, goldenrod, and moss-colored brushstrokes in the bottom-right corner of the canvas; the hunkering shape covers its face with its hand, as if hiding something or keeping a secret. According to Greek mythology, although the god Proteus had the gift of prophecy, he would transfigure into different shapes to avoid having to tell the future. In Jungwirth's hands, paint itself becomes protean: pools of watercolor merge with each other, allowing no distinct

boundaries or forms. Indeed, the myth of Proteus is a canny metaphor for Jungwirth's practice, which is a persistent and ever-morphing investigation of the ambiguous realm between abstraction, figuration, and pure invention.

A series of large-format watercolors included in the exhibition, *Die Windsbraut (The Bride of the Wind)* paintings (1983–84), take their inspiration from Oskar Kokoschka's 1913 eponymous work. As a child, Jungwirth



visited Kokoschka's retrospective in Basel, and she later taught at the International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, which Kokoschka founded in 1953. When visiting Salzburg at the invitation of friend and curator Otto Breicha, Jungwirth created a body of work based on Kokoschka's portrait of obsessive devotion. In Salzburg, Jungwirth developed an apartment-based studio practice in which her husband acted as an indifferent model: while Schmeller read or slept, Jungwirth painted, using impressions of his figure to form the basis for her large-scale watercolors. She created the *Die Windsbraut* paintings horizontally, stretching out long sheets of paper on the floor and methodically working their surfaces. Jungwirth noted, "If I had painted vertically, the paint might have dripped and dirtied the floor of the apartment." Despite her pragmatic reasoning, the ambition and scale of the *Die Windsbraut* paintings is hardly domestic. The visceral mess of color and gesture on paper directly counter the neat, constrained rationalism of contemporaneous trends in Minimal painting and Conceptual art, and challenge expectations of women artists prevalent in Vienna's conservative, Catholic culture.



In a series of recent large-scale oils on paper mounted on canvas, shocking lavenders, magentas, indigos, and pastel pinks jump from cardboard-brown paper grounds. In 2017, Jungwirth began ripping up the heavy paper that had covered the floor of her studio for years accumulating layers of paint and grime; she started improvising abstract forms on top of her studio detritus, layering thick swathes of

vibrant color atop a miscellany of marks, scribbles, and scuffs in a language akin to that of Cy Twombly or Dieter Roth. Only after completing the painting would the artist then mount the painting on canvas. Jungwirth's recent paintings are unique for their palette—vibrant, even tropical pinks and purples so singular and personal as to form a portrait of the artist's psyche. Jungwirth's distinctive palette also appears in a series of watercolors created in 2005 after her travels to Cambodia, on view in the exhibition. In these tall, vertical compositions on crisp white paper, soft billows of red, pink, and magenta float like florescent clouds above vertiginous nothingness.

Despite early acclaim for the artist's gestural abstract-figurative paintings, Jungwirth only recently came to international recognition in 2010 through a collection presentation at the Essl

Museum curated by Albert Oehlen. In 2014, a retrospective of her work was held at the Kunsthalle Krems, and in 2018, she received the Oskar Kokoschka Prize—the highest distinction for an Austrian artist—accompanied by an extensive solo exhibition at the Albertina in Vienna. Fergus McCaffrey's exhibition is the first solo presentation of her work in New York.

### **About Fergus McCaffrey**

Founded in 2006, Fergus McCaffrey is internationally recognized for its groundbreaking role in promoting the work of postwar Japanese artists such as Sadamasa Motonaga, Kazuo Shiraga and Jiro Takamatsu. The gallery also exhibits the work of emerging and seminal Western artists such as Marcia Hafif, Birgit Jürgenssen, Richard Nonas, Sigmar Polke and Carol Rama. In keeping with the gallery's commitment to Japanese art and culture, McCaffrey opened its Tokyo outpost in March 2018 with an exhibition of paintings by Robert Ryman. The gallery's 2019 program features solo exhibitions by Ari Marcopoulos, Patti Smith, and Jasper Johns, among others.

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### **Images:**

1. Martha Jungwirth, *Proteus*, 1984, Watercolor on paper, 85 3/4 x 58 1/2 inches (218 x 148.5 cm) © Martha Jungwirth; Photo: Lea Gryze, Berlin; courtesy of Galerie Haas AG
2. Martha Jungwirth, *Untitled (from the series "Die Windsbraut")*, 1983, Watercolor on paper, 46 3/4 x 130 3/8 inches (119 x 331 cm) © Martha Jungwirth; Photo: Lea Gryze, Berlin; courtesy of Galerie Haas AG
3. Martha Jungwirth, *Untitled*, 2017, Oil on paper mounted on canvas, 61 1/2 x 110 1/4 inches (156 x 280 cm) © Martha Jungwirth; Photo: Lea Gryze, Berlin; courtesy of Galerie Haas AG