

Press Release

Günther Förg. surface of bronze

Hauser & Wirth Zürich
Reopening Monday 11 May 2020
11 May – 31 July 2020



A survey exhibition of Günther Förg's sculptures, titled 'surface of bronze', reopens at Hauser & Wirth Zürich on 11 May, focusing on this artist's work from the mid 1980's through to 2008. The exhibition presents rarely, and never before seen, pieces to contextualise this important part of Förg's multifaceted, complex and varied practice. As an artist he insistently, and resolutely, questioned and expanded upon Modernism's formal vocabulary in a laconic oeuvre that encompassed painting, photography, drawing and sculpture. This presentation will highlight how he upturned and challenged classical bronze, translating it with his tactile, painterly and spontaneous methods. Förg's bronze sculptures do not reflect on an aesthetic order or classical perfection but display his delight in the act of making and in the sensual presence of the work. This is evident in the depressions, scratches and imprints strewn over the surfaces of his sculptures, which vary from intimate to monumental and from reliefs to free-standing.

The exhibition charts Förg's progression and exploration in the medium of sculpture. Inspired by his lead paintings, Förg turned his attention towards the three-dimensional in the 1980s, initially producing a suite of untitled bronze reliefs, composing the works directly with his hands in a nod towards gestural, abstract sculpting. These works display how he adapted the formal minimalist language he was utilising in his painting to his sculpture. This is clear not only in the intuitive, painterly quality of the surface, where the indentations and marks are reminiscent of a brushstroke, but in the motifs of lines, squares and rectangles – compositions that he was exploring concurrently in his lead paintings.

In 1990, Förg began to work on a series of masks, pieces that not only tested the possibilities and limitations of material but also owed a debt to the masks of André Derain and Jean Fautrier and the technical devices of Willem de Kooning. Their gauged, rapidly worked surfaces imply destruction, they are deliberately imperfect, highlighting Förg's interest in exploring an idea, more than in achieving an ideal of aesthetic pleasure and perfection. The palpable surfaces are smattered with Förg's fingerprints, chance circumstances and material

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accidents, pushing bronze far beyond its hierarchical and classical associations. These works also invite a relationship, it is unclear whether they offer or conceal an identity, abstracting the face with no trace of personal history, they are evasive of a fixed meaning leaving us, the viewer, to decide for ourselves.

Following the masks came torsos, and later fragmented limbs, though unlike classical sculptures they do not stand for idealised or heroic humans. These weighty sculptures take on meaning when displayed, their context is contingent on their surroundings, the architecture, those that perceive them, the history, time and locale of their placement. They are without direct reference, waiting to be filled. They have a fascinating tactile urgency and unmistakable immediacy, seen in the marks that Förg left when manipulating his medium. Squeezing and caressing, working rapidly and leaving hand prints or scrapes of the palette knife before casting them in bronze, the artist immortalises his spontaneous gestures in this material replete with monumental connotations.

The next series Förg turned to, was a group of square and rectangular forms with heavily textured surfaces sitting on roughly hewn bases or rooted directly onto the floor. In 2008, he enlarged these forms to a monumental scale, perhaps befitting of his material. These works transform their surroundings, exploring mass, volume, texture and the relationship between solid matter and empty space. They assert their own independence, like ancient monoliths, leaving us to wonder what lies beneath their drapery, what they hide. Again, by asking so much of the viewer, Förg brings his sculptures to life under our gaze and through our questions.

The works in this show demonstrate the free translation of creative and formal principles, from one medium to another, and highlight the tactile and ephemeral qualities so typical of Förg within his complex, personal vocabulary that operated outside of expected hierarchies. As the artist elucidated, 'The sculptures were already there and I tried to transfer them into painting with strong colours. It's a procedure, incidentally, that is typical of my work. I'm always moving between disciplines. Ordinarily, you'd start by making a sketch of a sculpture before you begin work on it; I find it easier to draw a sculpture that has already been made. Maybe because I am not a sculptor.' [1]

1.) Gavin Delahunty, Lisa Le Feuvre, 'Günther Förg: A Fragile Beauty', 2018, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, p. 115

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About the artist

Günther Förg's career began in the early 1970s, at the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich (1973 – 1979), where he studied under Karl Fred Dahmen, one of the most important and highly influential figures of Art Informel. Supplementing his understanding of gestural abstraction, Förg attended exhibitions at Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich, which played an essential role in the development of the West German art scene. The gallery presented a host of international artists, including Robert Ryman, Sol LeWitt, Blinky Palermo, and Cy Twombly, the latter two of whom Förg cited as seminal influences. Förg was included in his first group show at Galerie Max Hetzler, Stuttgart, in 1981, presented alongside contemporaries Martin Kippenberger and Albert Oehlen, whose shared artistic approach demonstrated a subversive reframing and critical understanding of modernist tropes. In rejecting formal adherence, Förg embarked on what would become a lifelong commitment to the conceptual and serial-matic advancement of art.

Förg's work is held in numerous public collections, including Broad Contemporary Art Museum, Santa Monica CA; Essl Museum, Klosterneuburg, AT; Fotomuseum Winterthur, CH; Kunstmuseum Basel, CH; Museo d'arte contemporanea Castello di Rivoli, Turin, IT; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, ES; Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main, DE; Museum of Modern Art, New York NY; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, CA; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco CA; S.M.A.K. the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art, Ghent, BE; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, NL; Tate, London, UK; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis IL; among others. Recent important solo exhibitions include the travelling exhibition 'A Fragile Beauty' at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Dallas Museum of Art in Dallas TX (2018), and 'Günther Förg. Works from 1986 - 2007' at Hauser & Wirth New York (2019).

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Gallery hours:

Monday to Friday, 11 am – 6 pm
Saturday, 11 am – 5 pm

www.hauserwirth.com

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Group of bronze sculptures by Günther Förg
Photo: Bernhard Strauss

Untitled (Mask)
1990
Bronze
44 x 30 x 30 cm / 17 3/8 x 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 in
Photo: Bernhard Strauss

Untitled
1988
Bronze
261 x 120 x 23 cm / 102 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 9 in
Photo: Bernhard Strauss