

Franz Gertsch (8 March 1930 – 21 December 2022) was a Swiss painter and print-maker who was known for his large format photorealistic portraits and detailed studies of nature.

Biography

Gertsch was born 1930 in Mörigen, Switzerland. Between 1947 and 1952 he studied with Max von Mühlenen and Hans Schwarzenbach in Bern and had his first individual exhibition at the Simmen Gallery there in 1951. In 1972, he took part in the documenta 5 in Kassel with his painting "Medici". He participated in the 1978 and 2003 Venice Biennale and had a solo show there in 1999.

Gertsch's woodcuts were first shown at the MoMA, NY, in 1990, curated by Riva Castleman.

His work has since been presented at several retrospective exhibitions, the latest due to open in June 2024 at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, Denmark, curated by Kirsten Degel. The exhibition will travel to Deichtorhalle, Hamburg, on view from 12 December 2024 - 4 May 2025.

Gertsch died on 21 December 2022, at the age of 92 in Riggisberg in Canton Bern.

Work

Gertsch is known for his realistic paintings and woodcuts for which he developed a new technique. The artist's first large sized realist paintings date from 1969, when he painted "Huaa...!", based on a film still showing a 19th century cavalry man the moment he's been hit by a bullet. "Huaa...!" initiated the turn to the artist's brightly coloured photorealistic works of the 1970s, which were often based on Gertsch's own documentary-style snapshots of family and friends. With these works, Gertsch gained attention as an observer of Swiss counter culture. His self-titled "situation portraits" includes the artist's depictions of his gender fluid friends getting ready for a party, which was called "a new art form" by the American psychologist and LSD guru Timothy Leary.

Following his participation in the 1972 documenta, Gertsch's new work featured more tightly framed figures. This phase of the artist's work ended in 1978–1979

with five portraits of rock musician Patti Smith. In these paintings, Gertsch presents the rock icon in a realistic and authentic way, crouching in front of an amplifier, leaning forward into a tangle of microphones, or seen from behind or to the very edge of the painting.

Moving between painting and printmaking, and portraiture and landscape, he maintained an investment in the photorealist image and its simultaneous citation and monumentalization of the photographic instant. Gertsch's figurative and photorealistic works can be associated with the European Pop art movement and with contemporary artists such as Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke in Germany, as well Chuck Close in the USA. Just like these three artists, Gertsch's point of departure is the photographic image. Focusing on detailed nature studies and close-up portraits, Gertsch however developed his unique style separating him from the social commentary and ironic motifs of Pop art.

From 1976 to 2013 Gertsch created a total of 28 paintings and 15 monochrome woodcuts; he worked on a single composition for up to a year. In 1986, Gertsch took a break from painting to master the woodcut printmaking technique, in which he has pioneered new territory. In his woodcuts, the artist is said to use colour expressive rather than realistically, in order to define anew the relationship between colour and three-dimensional space. The first motifs were monumental portraits of young women, the various prints were all in different colours and thus assumed the character of individual sheets. In addition to the detailed work in cutting the wooden plates, Gertsch's graphic prints entail time-consuming mixing and colour testing of binder and mineral pigments especially imported from Japan, and thorough testing of hand-made Japan paper for the best possible transfer of colour from the print plates to the finished result. Colour played a central role for Gertsch – to the artist, the photographic image becomes a bearer of abstract qualities in colour and space. In his own words: «The more I focus on the photographic image, the more I move away from it» – towards recognizing that colour and the work has their own life, separate from the motif.