



PALM SPRINGS  
ART MUSEUM

**Close-Up on Art**

Jack Fitzsimmons, Provisional Docent

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- *Changing Dimensions* 1948
- Claire Falkenstein, American, 1908 -1997
- Owned by the Palm Springs Art Museum, Gift of The Falkenstein Foundation
- Oil on canvas, framed by the artist
- 1948, San Francisco, California
- This object is a later example of Falkenstein's Abstract Expressionist painting style. Abstract Expressionism is non-representational, i.e., not based on external reality or natural forms. Painters in this movement championed bold, gestural abstraction in all mediums, particularly large painted canvases.

Claire Falkenstein was a prolific and protean painter, sculptor, jeweler, and educator. While still a student at UC Berkeley, Falkenstein had her first solo exhibition in 1930 at the East-West Gallery, San Francisco. Her career can be roughly divided into the work created while a resident in Berkeley and San Francisco in the 1930's and 1940's, then her immersion in the Modernist Movement in France and Italy from 1950-1963 and finally in Venice Beach, California where she remained until her death.

There is an analogous evolution in the materials and media she used, starting with painting and drawing in Berkeley and San Francisco. During her residence in northern California, her interest in sculpture began to develop as well, largely as a result of her collaboration with Russian émigré painter and sculptor Alexander Archipenko in 1933. Her interest in industrial processes and

technology arose from her growing familiarity with the Russian avant-garde, including the artists Naum Gabo and Gyorgy Kepes and reflects, as well, the influence of Bauhaus co-founder and artistic polymath László Moholy-Nagy.

Although she continued to paint when she arrived in Paris, she began creating open wire sculptures that foregrounded the presence of negative space, establishing the aesthetic vocabulary that she would use throughout her career. While in Paris, Falkenstein associated with Jean Arp and Alberto Giacometti and joined a group of artists, which included the American Abstract Expressionists Sam Francis and Paul Jenkins.

Upon returning to the States, she undertook a succession of private and public sculptural and architectural design commissions. Later in life, Falkenstein shifted away from large, physically demanding metal sculptures and returned to painting. Dr. Lynda Benglis, in her preface to the exhibition catalogue *Matter in Motion – Celebrating a Career in Painting and Sculpture* (2001) writes, “I admire her ability to go from one material to the next. She was consistently a very brave artist.”

Falkenstein stated that a professor at UC Berkeley taught her to “look within,” seminal creative and spiritual guidance that had, as she would later emphasize, “kept her going.” Her technical description of her work, both in painting and sculpture, was “topological structure” which she loosely defined as occurring when the surface becomes the interior. Both her guiding principle and her technical framework are evident in *Changing Dimensions*. In her comments about the piece during an interview in 2001, Falkenstein stated that the multiples of discontinuous abstract shapes, as well as the title of the work, reflect her growing dissatisfaction with her art which she felt had become “sterile.” The urgency to change artistic direction eventually culminated in her divorcing her husband of twenty-two years and her emergence as one of the great sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I was wholly unfamiliar with this artist despite the fact that I had seen and admired one of her most famous pieces, the iron and colored glass entrance gate to the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni which houses the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice, Italy. As a graphic designer, I was attracted to the piece largely by its hard but interacting edges and lines, but primarily by its rich colors, which were evocative of those used in the frescoes of Pompeii and Herculaneum – deep cinnabar and umber, muted saffron and aubergine.

There is no doubt that *Changing Dimensions* is a work of Abstract Expressionism and of a certain time period within that movement, but its use of recessive colors and carefully balanced composition reflects a deep understanding of classical painting tradition and the ability to create a sense of depth that I find both somber and dreamlike.

["Oral history interview with Claire Falkenstein". Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.](#) March 2–21, 1995. Interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom.

Henderson, Maren (2006). [Claire Falkenstein: Structure and Flow, Works from 1950–1980](#) (PDF). West Hollywood, California: Louis Stern Fine Arts.

*Claire Falkenstein - Matter in Motion – Celebrating a Career in Painting and Sculpture*. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York. 2001.

Tapie, Michael. [Claire Falkenstein](#). De Luca Art Monograph. 1958.