

Pico (Moving Point Series) - Claire Falkenstein, 1966

Acrylic on canvas

Spotlight paper by Susan Gresto, 2019



Artist's Background

- Claire Falkenstein, American, b. Coos Bay, OR 1908, d. Venice Beach, CA 1997
- Education: UC Berkeley (BA Art, Minors Philosophy and Anthropology), Mills College Master's Class with Alexander Archipenko
- Influences: Nature, Science, and artists Gaudi, Tobey, Still, Brancusi, Arp, Giacometti (although she wasn't specific about artists of influence, rather she stated, "I think I influenced a lot of people.")¹
- Art movement and groups affiliated with: Modern, Art Autre (French counterpart of American Abstract Expressionism), Gutai Group (Japan),
- Medium: charcoal, ink, wood, ceramic, metal and glass sculpture, print-making, oil and acrylic painting, jewelry
- Impact on art world: Respected by peers and promoted by art critic Michel Tapié, commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim along with numerous public art commissions - yet not well-known nor fully recognized for her avant-garde, prolific and varied body of work

Artist's Background

Claire Falkenstein was born in Coos Bay, Oregon July 22, 1908 and remained there until she was twelve. It was a very small community and her father was the manager of the local lumber mill. She recalls with fondness memories of time spent on the beach riding horseback and exploring shells, rocks, seaweed and driftwood. Her interest in these forms in nature certainly remained a part of her and later influenced her work.

As a young adult, Falkenstein studied at the University of California, Berkeley where she obtained a Bachelor's in Art and Minors in Philosophy and Anthropology. Both minors proved to be essential to her creativity. She stated, "study anthropology" that to become a good artist because she believed it help one gain an awareness of other cultures and different frameworks of thinking. Anthropology also exposed her to non-traditional materials and the unconventional use of them. Her study of philosophy drove the analysis and logic upon which she founded her work.²

Falkenstein had experienced early success in exhibiting solo in 1930 at the East-West Gallery of San Francisco - just as she had completed her degree. Her figurative drawings were the featured work in this exhibition and these proved to be a guidepost for her throughout her career. The drawings were created under the instruction of a substitute teacher that Falkenstein referred to as "a breath of fresh air" in comparison to the others at Berkeley who she reported handed out exercises and offered very little inspiration. This man's name was George Lusk and his particular influence on her was the advice to "look within" to which her immediate thought was, "Oh my God, he's given me freedom." From that point on, Falkenstein did not measure and copy the model as most other artists would, but "treated the model as a point of departure." She said, "They were drawings of such passion and expression of motion, of form, of everything you can think of."¹

After her studies at Berkeley, Falkenstein went on to a Masters class at Mills College under the teaching of Alexander Archipenko (a Cubist sculptor). This was her only formal training in sculpture. Apart from getting her interested in the use of clay, she recalled his influence was his emphasis on the importance of an artist's security.² Falkenstein did not expand on what this meant, but my interpretation based on her history is she related this to focus, confidence, independence and resolve - all traits she developed throughout her career. Additionally during her time at Mills, she met two other influential Bauhaus artists, Laszio Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes.

In the years leading up to 1950, Falkenstein married, continued producing, and taught at a few Bay Area schools including the California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco. Both Richard Diebenkorn and Clyfford Still were her colleagues at the school. Still became a life-long friend and he is credited for perhaps the only expressionist influence upon her.

Falkenstein focused her teaching and personal work on sculpture and her instructional approach was anything but traditional. She reportedly had total command over the workshop at the college. She taught students to use power tools not simply as equipment but as tools for

creativity. Her emphasis was on experimentation and the unconventional - just as she was approaching her own body of work at the time. During this early part of her career, Falkenstein created what she called "structures." She preferred this term over sculptures as it defined her work more precisely as the arrangement of and relationship between the parts or elements of something complex. Her intent to express the idea of new scientific theories and discoveries became more evident in her work.

By 1950, Falkenstein decided it was necessary to move to Paris in order to continue her growth as an artist. Her husband of twenty-two years did not share this vision and they amicably parted ways. For the next thirteen years, she experimented tirelessly and gained the attention and recognition of avant-garde art critic, Michel Tapié. Tapié was a huge supporter and promoter of Falkenstein, garnering her exhibitions and connections with other artists. While the New York School of Abstract Expression was on the rise in popularity in the U.S., Tapié was cultivating a parallel movement he called Art Autre (loosely translated to art of another kind) that Falkenstein's innovative processes and unique work exemplified.

In Paris, Falkenstein had the time, freedom and isolation she felt was necessary for her growth. One of her most significant achievements during this period was her ability to solidify her vocabulary as an artist. These symbols and frameworks for creating her work were the following:

1. the sign (a mark such as the U shape see in *Pico* and used frequently in her metal structures)
2. the ensemble (a grouping of signs)
3. the moving point
4. the lattice structure (never ending screen)
5. the topological structure ²

A noteworthy 1961 commission completed for Peggy Guggenheim articulated this vocabulary. *The New Gates of Paradise* were created for the Guggenheim Pallazzo in Venice, Italy and can still be seen today from the Grand Canal. The two gates are comprised of the lattice structure in iron and chunks of colorful Venetian glass. They each measure 12' x 4' x 6" and are a revolutionary approach to usual two-dimensional, solid gates. Guggenheim was so impressed by Falkenstein's ingenuity that she would say, "Now go home and do your knitting" (referring to her welding).²

In the early 1960s, Falkenstein returned to the United States and settled in her home studio situated on the boardwalk of Venice Beach, California. For the next few decades, she remained productive in her work and sales. Falkenstein regularly exhibited in galleries including her own, Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, Los Angeles. Furthermore, her work was shown in many museums with the majority of showings in the United States. One museum exhibition of particular interest for our docents is the "Claire Falkenstein in San Francisco, Paris, Los Angeles and Now" curated by Katherine Plake (Hough) in 1980 for what was then called the Palm Springs Desert Museum.

Upon Falkenstein's return to the states, her time was also filled with numerous private and public commissions. One of Falkenstein's most impressive works is the 1968 commission by Cardinal

McIntire for the fifteen stained glass windows in St. Basil's Roman Catholic Cathedral (on Wilshire Blvd. near downtown Los Angeles). Falkenstein uses her "never ending screen" motif in three dimensions and expands it upward to the sky. The windows, reaching eighty feet in height, are composed of colorful shards of glass and their angular and overlapping placement create a stunning kaleidoscope effect within. When the Cardinal first interviewed Falkenstein, he asked what about her proposed design was religious and she responded, "If the observer looks through interval after interval, between the sections of my never ending screen, the observer will find himself in eternity or infinity."¹ To Falkenstein's knowledge, these windows were the only completely abstracted cathedral stained glass to date.

Many public artworks by Falkenstein can be found as well on the property of Southern California universities, office parks and shopping centers. A sculptural fountain, *Structure and Flow No. 3*, created in 1972, is the centerpiece for the Long Beach Museum of Art, accentuating the restaurant named for her, "Claire's at the Museum." Another, *Sun Ribbon*, 1980, is at the foot of what is currently the WeWork Building in Costa Mesa, California. It was originally installed as gates opening into the adjacent Noguchi Garden, *California Scenario*. Later in her life, as the physical component of sculpture work became too demanding, Falkenstein again focused on her painting which she continued up until her passing at the age of 89 in 1997.

It's important to mention that Falkenstein's avant-garde jewelry was a part of her oeuvre nearly from the beginning of her career. Throughout her lifetime, she continued creating pieces that reflected her vocabulary and now, has been "discovered" by a more general audience.

Also worth noting are Falkenstein's recognition as "Woman of the Year" by the Los Angeles Times in 1969 and the prestigious award of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Fine Arts in 1978. Apart from this recognition, however, there has been little acknowledgement of the importance her work and her contribution to art history. Some reasons may include the fact that she was a female artist and her art was highly innovative, so her gender and technique were under-appreciated given the times. She worked independently and self-managed which resulted in isolation as an artist, lack of organized promotion, and poor timing in becoming associated with a particular artistic community or movement. Additionally, she resisted the notion of art as a commodity. Yet, her commitment and creative drive kept her successfully working until the end of her life. She had accomplished a sizable body of work (approximately 4000 works) which was progressive, experimental, varied and nonconformist. Falkenstein remained true to the idea of "looking within" as she remained focused, self-directed, and prolific over her lifespan which was completely devoted to her art.

Stated in a 1992 interview, Falkenstein declared, "I'm trying to think of achievement and what it requires. It requires time, it requires health, it requires all of your sensibilities, it requires money...if you don't look outside and expect somebody to give them to you, you get them for yourself. That's the important thing."¹

This is precisely what Claire Falkenstein did.

My Impressions and Analysis of this painting

Falkenstein's *Pico* was exhibited in the northwest corner of the Chase Gallery, with an eclectic grouping of art. It was the only piece from the 1960s, making it the only modern-era work displayed. I had not noticed this painting before, most likely because it was more subtle than the others in the room which included Bourgeois' *Spider II*, Campbell's *Exploded View*, and Shelton's *Littlesister*. It seems that while those pieces were shouting for attention, *Pico* waited patiently for an audience. But while it waited, it wasn't stagnant, *it was moving*.

On first glance of this abstract painting, one sees sweeping marks resembling calligraphy - as if the artist made several emphatic strokes to communicate she had completed the painting and *her work was finished!* It is much like the exclamation point at the end of the sentence! Then, upon closer examination, there are hundreds of tiny marks which "move" on the canvas with persistence, steadily marching in a multitude of directions. It's as if we look beneath the bold, expressive gestures to the percolating energy below which sustains them. If the painting was set to music, the numerous points would be the steady beat of Ravel's *Bolero*, endlessly wandering with the melody and then finally exploding in the climax of curved, expansive, strokes.

I resisted reading the information plate alongside the painting because I wanted to get to know the artist through this particular work first. Her color choice and technique provided many clues. Falkenstein chose a minimal, earthy palette of yellow-ochre and charcoal-gray to meticulously paint her marks. The tear-drop shaped points all have one thing in common, their linear pursuit of a destination that is seemingly unattainable. As these points move fluidly about the canvas, their color and patterns impressed upon me a reverence for nature. Is it reptile skin? Are they the unique fingerprints of a human? Perhaps they are lines in the sand? Whatever familiar image comes to mind, one thing is certain, it is impossible for the eye to land on any particular focal point. One might argue that the added layer of dramatic, sweeping charcoal-gray lines are the emphasis because of their scale and contrast. Yet, these lines also dance the eye around the canvas. Clearly, this artist is passionate about movement. Additionally, because of Falkenstein's careful calligraphic mark-making approach, I concluded this kind of abstract art-making is well thought-through and constructed. To me, she did not appear to be an abstract *expressionist* whose art was motivated by feeling alone.

As I struggled to gain a deeper understanding of this piece and the thoughts of its artist, I chose to create a small painting of *Pico* on my own. My purpose was to relate more to Falkenstein through her process. As an artist, I had many questions about this painting. What marks did she make first? Did she spend hours painting the moving points and then emphatically make calligraphic strokes as a finishing touch? Or, conversely, were the broad, sweeping lines acting as a foundation for the minute marks? Where did her paths begin? Where did they end? As I worked hours on a much smaller version (giving me a deeper appreciation of the time this larger piece required), I reasoned through her sequence and technique.

Falkenstein probably made the sweeping gestures before the detailed points. I believe this for a couple of reasons. First, in the original painting, the points appear to be painted on top of the larger marks. Second, as an artist, I can't imagine working in such detail and then taking the chance of destroying it with a few errant strokes. Therefore, I started my version of *Pico* with large calligraphic marks that satisfied me.

As I approached the next step of creating points moving on a line, I noted how Falkenstein created their shape, color, scale, variety and rhythm. While I found the experiment useful and meditative, I never really approximated her work. I noticed the difference in her marks from mine. Her points were shaped in a way that generated more energy. I think I was too cautious and interrupted the flow. She also kept to the movement in a path where, at times, I was tempted to simply fill the space. Her larger brushstrokes were evidently created with a dryer brush and more force to "squeeze out" the pigment on the canvas. Additionally, areas of her *Pico* have a brighter white contrast (note center and a few other scattered areas) and this, I could only assume from my examination, were "erasures" of points where Falkenstein had changed her mind. This led me to believe that she knew what curves and marks created maximum effect for this painting in her *Moving Point Series*.

Comparison with other pieces in the Museum Collection

Pico relates to the other pieces in its immediate vicinity of the Chase Gallery because of Falkenstein's visual representation of the "infinite." Not too far from the painting, stands Ahn's *Tunnel*, a sculpture which gives the illusion of light and space moving infinitely downward. Shelton's *Little Sister* is an elongated sculpture with a painted grid which "expands" the form upward, towering above the viewer. Other pieces in the Palm Springs Art Museum collection which correspond to *Pico* include Jean Arp's *Growth*. During her lifetime, Falkenstein had been acquainted with Arp and her work compliments his organic lines and movement. Also, *San Jacinto Mountains* by Eva Slater demonstrates Falkenstein's organized approach to creating movement, yet in a geometric fashion through an undulating grid. Slater's color palette is also minimal and her composition, two "layers." Finally, a comparison can be made to a recent local installation that is part of Desert X, 2019: Julian Hoeber's *Pavilion Going Nowhere No. 1*. Hoeber's structure is a mobius-strip, much like the topological structures Falkenstein created throughout her career which explored surface area and expanded the inside, outside.

Touring Questions

After spending a few moments following the sweeping broad strokes and tiny points moving about on the canvas, what music do you hear while looking at this painting?

What do the colors and many large and small marks made by this artist bring to mind for you? Is there something in this world that this painting reminds you of?

Having heard that the artist was influenced by nature and science, where do you see connections to those subjects in this piece?

After taking a moment to look around the gallery, do you think this painting belongs in this spot? Why? Why not?

What other pieces in the museum that you've seen today would you relate to this piece and why?

Bibliography/Sources

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