The Austrian painter Maria Lassnig (1919–2014) spent her life exploring what she called ‘body awareness painting’, much of which was savagely observed self-portraiture. Her paintings, drawings and films reveal an artist who was relentlessly devoted to examining the very human sentiments of being exposed and feeling vulnerable. 'I want to paint things that are uncomfortable,' said Lassnig.

How Embarrassing!

by Gilda Williams

Left: Maria Lassnig, Self-Portrait with Sausage 1998, oil on canvas, 125x100cm

Maria Lassnig in her studio in Feldkirch, Austria, 2010, photo by Sepp Dreissinger
functions, gestures and moods – she sometimes worked lying down alongside the canvas, or leaning against it, even sitting on it. She never worked from photographs, but relied solely on inner sensations, sometimes closing her eyes while painting. 'The hardest thing is really to concentrate on the feeling while drawing. Not drawing a rear-end because you know what it looks like, but drawing the rear-end feeling.' Her painting Hospital 2005 presents a row of half-naked aching bodies, their exposed state instantly bringing to mind those awful back-to-front, neck-tied hospital gowns that leave their wearers worryingly unprotected from behind. That queasy emotional cocktail – vulnerability, powerlessness, fear – was the mainstay of Lassnig’s art.

‘Embarrassment is a challenge. I want to paint things that are uncomfortable,’ the artist said. Her uneasy figures – such as the cowering creature in The Believers and Honest Believers 2002, sitting atop a stool in his pointy dunce cap, glaring at us in unfriendly horror – are rendered in acidic, poisonous shades. Greens are bluish; reds are greenish; yellows purplish. Hers are discomforting and unstable shades, as indefinable in colour as a bruise.

A trio of multi-hued figures – one pinky-green, another fire-engine red, the third a bloodless white – comprise the cast of 3 Ways of Being 2004: a line-up of pug-nosed, pin-headed, rat-tailed, pot-bellied, armless characters. Mouths are especially noxious, sometimes missing teeth (The Admiration 2008), or, as in Photography against Painting 2005, displaying hideous giant gnashers and a thick red tongue, hanging wetly like a bloodied slug.

Embarrassment is a uniquely human phenomenon, mysteriously conjoining body and mind. Our awareness of having exposed ourselves to ridicule prompts an uncontrolled physical response: we sweat, fidget, tremble and blanch. We quiver, fumble, twist our fingers and lower our eyes – all actions inventoried in Lassnig’s canvases. ‘Why should the thought that others are thinking about us affect our capillary circulation?’ asked Charles Darwin in 1872’s The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals, a question the eminent natural scientist never managed to answer. Actions that are acceptable in private can turn embarrassing if witnessed by others. Indeed, Lassnig’s people seem perpetually caught in some unseemly act: retrieving something from a lover’s nose; playing football without trousers; conversing with a pet hamster.

Like art itself, embarrassment requires being seen. Perhaps for this reason Lassnig pays so much attention to the eyes. They are enlarged, crooked, bloodshot and bulging. They are too close; too far apart; mismatched; lost in shadow. Eyes are disembodied and dangled overhead. They protrude like a frog’s, stare emptily like a bird’s. They come in standard-issue pairs but also singularly, such as the twisted cyclops of The Innocent Glance 2008. The word embarrass derives, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, from the French embarrasser: to block, hamper or impede. Indeed, sight in Lassnig’s figures is often blocked: eyes are veiled, pierced, shut tight, masked, encased and blindfolded.

Particularly in the late works, they can be erased altogether. However, the absence of any background...
Top: Maria Lassnig, Hospital 2005, oil on canvas, 150 x 200 cm

Maria Lassnig, Two Ways of Being (Double Self-Portrait) 2000, oil on canvas, 100 x 125 cm
means the figures inhabiting her canvases are always in plain view: she offers them nowhere to hide from us their candid display of human imperfection.

Not all of Lassnig's figures are pathetic. The undressed older woman sitting astride a motorcycle in Country Girl 2001 affords a certain narcissistic bravado. The Waltzing skeleton and his partner in Death and the Girl 1999 seem not to notice us at all, absorbed by a silent music. Emotions in her art range from desire, joy and curiosity to disappointment, injury and desperation. None the less, the gnawing feeling of embarrassment—prompted by our wayward physical bodies, our crippling emotional frailty—predominates. In My Teddy is more real than me 2002, a naked woman who looks remarkably like the artist (many of Lassnig's people resemble her, and she is a ruthless self-portraitist) cuddles an oversized teddy bear. The woman's skin is green and she looks mortified, as if we'd rudely surprised her in this compromising position.

Martin go in the corner, shame on you is the title of Martin Kippenberger's 1989 standing statue, a dejected figure facing the wall and banished—rather than installed—in the gallery corner. Kippenberger admired Lassnig's art, and his awkward figures borrow heavily from her. Both artists developed a kind of soul-baring self-portraiture that verged on confession, but Kippenberger's public shame is guiltier than Lassnig's. Where the latter's lonely figures whisper 'Look at me; I did something bad,' Kippenberger's cry 'Look at me! I am bad!' Lassnig's on-canvas transgressions are usually minor, but discomfort levels rise in a painting featuring a middle-aged man attempting some ungodly act on a doll-like figure, reassuringly titled Bugbear 2001. Frog Princess 2000 shows a woman pressing a frog against her genitals, while the unapologetic cook in The Madonna of the Pastries 2001 has mischievously replaced the newly-wed figurines atop a freshly baked wedding cake with a pair of dripping hypodermic needles.

Lassnig's art is often compared with the colourful work of young American painters Dana Schutz and Amy Sillman, but she can also recall German-born Jutta Koether. Best known as an abstract painter, in 2009 Koether gave a performance at the Reena Spaulings gallery in New York titled The Staging of Restricted Means in the Landscape Redefines the Terms of Pleasure of Painting. Ostensibly a lecture about her painting practice, the performance grows acutely embarrassing as the artist acts out her incoherent socio-artistic aspirations. She stomps clumsily around the gallery, fiddles with the lights, drops her notes, then crouches on the floor in the desperate attempt to reassemble them. Finally, Koether begins to shout the lyrics of Garbage Man,
by the punk band The Cramps. As the performance
units from boring to 'excercuting' – as one
audience member described it – we are reminded
of Lassnig's film Cantata 1992, her self-deprecating
autobiography, jauntily set to music. At one point the
Austrian artist similarly turns punk, sporting goth
make-up and a studded leather jacket while smoking
a cig. In their pursuit of the embarrassing, both
Koehler and Lassnig have intuited that a middle-
aged wannabe punk rock, singing tunelessly about
artistic frustration, is a guaranteed cringe trigger.

Ever since Jackson Pollock danced around
by the room dripping paint, the medium of painting
has offered tormented artists the ideal outlet to
release their angst messily; a wildly splattered
canvas willingly serves as emotional playpen.

Despite being laden with emotion, Lassnig's works
are none of the abstract expressionists' reckless
abandon. In fact, they are figurative, controlled,
safely draughted and finely coloured.

A classically trained painter, she excels at such
painterly moments as expressive hand gestures,
accurately foreshortened figure groups, convincing
shapery and pitch-perfect light and shadow.

Conceptual art-making predominated during much
of Lassnig's artistic lifetime, when painting itself was
seen as embarrassing, and many figurative artists
of the period – from Philip Guston to Carroll Dunham
– adopted, like Lassnig, a cartoonish style. As with
them, her body shapes are unnaturally distorted
and tinted, yet weirdly alive and familiar: perhaps
we recognise their humanity by virtue of their
tell-tale embarrassment.

In Erving Goffman's Embarrassment and Social
Organization of 1956, the sociologist theorised
that human interaction depends on the unspoken
imperative that we all go to great pains to avoid
embarrassment. And yet, as Michael Craig-Martin
has written: 'To be an artist, you have to make
yourself vulnerable in exactly the ways most people
spend their lives trying to avoid.' Are artists exempt
from Goffman's social contract? For most of us,
embarrassment is an undesirable presentation of
the self, to be avoided at any cost. The exasperating
force of Lassnig's art is that she elects embarrassment,
draggedly pursuing its sensations and giving them
shape thanks to her precise draughtsmanship and
virtuoso painting technique, preserving her fears
to the canvas forever.