

Cologne Museum Dives Into German Artist's Once-Lost Fantastical World

Ursula Schultze-Bluhm, painter of unearthly visions, was largely overlooked by the art world. Years after her death, she's getting a major retrospective.



Ursula Schultze-Bluhm was a prolific painter of expressive, colorful visions and mysterious beings, such as those in "Demon minuet" (1996). "The more fantastic," she once said of her work, "the more real they are." Museum Ludwig, Cologne

The New York Times - March 2, 2023
Online / Art & Design

Cologne Museum Dives into German Artist's Once-Lost Fantastic World / Andrew Russeth

Galerie Christophe Gaillard
www.galeriegaillard.com

By Andrew Russeth

March 2, 2023

For a half-century, the German artist [Ursula Schultze-Bluhm](#) made work that could astonish viewers. One critic proposed that she “would not have been allowed to paint in the Middle Ages” and “would have been burned.”

Her sinuous, wildly colored compositions, which she built with patterns of dots and lines, suggest deep-space marvels or activity under a microscope, with mysterious beings that dance, fly and metamorphose. Monstrous faces float across a black expanse in “Nightmares” (1961), while “The Unicorn” (1983) has the mythical animal growing from the thigh of a strange, humanoid entity. “The more fantastic, the more real they are,” she once said of her work.

Ms. Schultze-Bluhm, who went by just Ursula in her professional life, participated in big shows, like the quinquennial Documenta in Kassel, Germany, along with art giants like Andy Warhol. But after her death in 1999, at 77, “museum exhibitions did not materialize,” Renate Goldmann, the director of the Van Ham Art Estate, wrote in an email.

Today, “most of the younger generation don’t even know her name,” Stephan Diederich, the curator of the collection of 20th-century art at the Museum Ludwig said by phone.

On March 18, the Ludwig will try to remedy that; as the [TEFAF Maastricht](#) fair winds down in the Netherlands, across the border in Cologne, Germany, the museum will open the first [Ursula retrospective](#) in three decades. Running through July 23, it takes its name (“Ursula — That’s Me. So What?”) from the title of her last self-portrait, from 1995.

The New York Times - March 2, 2023
Online / Art & Design

Cologne Museum Dives into German Artist’s Once-Lost Fantastic World / Andrew Russeth

Galerie Christophe Gaillard
www.galeriegaillard.com

The New York Times



Ursula painting in a Frankfurt studio, circa 1966. "The picture is housed in my mind and waits to be released into the outside world, onto the canvas," she said of her process.



The freewheeling nature of Ursula's work may have acted as an obstacle to acceptance in the art world. "It's kind of hard because she doesn't fit into any canon," said Helena Kuhlmann, a curatorial assistant for the retrospective. F. Rosenstiel

The New York Times - March 2, 2023
Online / Art & Design

Cologne Museum Dives into German Artist's Once-Lost Fantastic World / Andrew Russeth

Galerie Christophe Gaillard
www.galeriegaillard.com

The New York Times

Occupying the Ludwig's largest exhibition space, the show will be a major celebration in Cologne, the city that Ursula called home for decades. It arrives as some in the art world aim to bring attention to long-marginalized women.

At last year's Venice Biennale, about [90 percent of the artists](#) in the main show were women, an unprecedented share, and many were historical figures. Chus Martínez, the head of the Institute Art Gender Nature at the FHNW Academy of Art and Design in Basel, Switzerland, said that she hoped Ursula's work would be reclaimed "as they are reclaiming also Hilma af Klint," the pioneering Swedish abstract painter and mystic who died in 1944. A 2018–19 af Klint exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York [set an attendance record](#).

Even when Ursula was actively exhibiting, she faced difficulties in winning acclaim. "It was always much easier for her husband, as a male artist," said Dr. Diederich, who curated the Ludwig show with Helena Kuhlmann, a curatorial assistant. Dr. Diederich got to know Ursula in the 1990s when the Ludwig did a show focused on the art of that man, Bernard Schultze, a German abstract painter whom Ursula married in 1955. "She often was seen, let's say, only as his wife," he said.

In 1968, the couple moved from Frankfurt to Cologne, where they shared a studio. Ursula handled admin for both of them, once confiding to a collector-friend that she had to "steal the time from myself for my own creative work, which makes me unhappy." She and her husband nicknamed each other Spider and Bear, and in her artistic pursuits, Spider was utterly independent. "I never had any academic training, so there is very little my husband can tell me,

The New York Times - March 2, 2023
Online / Art & Design
Cologne Museum Dives into German Artist's Once-Lost Fantastic World / Andrew Russeth

Galerie Christophe Gaillard
www.galeriegaillard.com



"L'individualiste" (1955). Ursula's art seems ahead of its time in a moment when artists today are experimenting with ways to express hybrid or fluid identities. Museum Ludwig, Cologne. Reproduction: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

Even when Ursula was actively exhibiting, she faced difficulties in winning acclaim. "It was always much easier for her husband, as a male artist," said Dr. Diederich, who curated the Ludwig show with Helena Kuhlmann, a curatorial assistant. Dr. Diederich got to know Ursula in the 1990s when the Ludwig did a show focused on the art of that man, Bernard Schultze, a German abstract painter whom Ursula married in 1955. "She often was seen, let's say, only as his wife," he said.

In 1968, the couple moved from Frankfurt to Cologne, where they shared a studio. Ursula handled admin for both of them, once confiding to a collector-friend that she had to "steal the time from myself for my own creative work, which makes me unhappy." She and her husband nicknamed each other Spider and Bear, and in her artistic pursuits, Spider was utterly independent. "I never had any academic training, so there is very little my husband can tell me, because he sets out from other principles," she said.

The New York Times - March 2, 2023
Online / Art & Design

Cologne Museum Dives into German Artist's Once-Lost Fantastic World / Andrew Russeth

Galerie Christophe Gaillard
www.galeriegaillard.com



Ursula painted two wooden figures, with gilded edges, in oil and enamel for "The two guardians" (1986). IKMuseum Ludwig, Cologne, photo Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne

The art market has been taking notice, too, according to Dr. Goldmann, who handles works by Ursula and her husband as part of the Cologne auction house Van Ham. They were bequeathed after his death in 2005 to a group that sells them to raise funds for the collection of the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany.

At Sotheby's in 2021, an Ursula painting from 1967 once owned by the French dealer Daniel Cordier went for more than five times its high estimate, at €32,760 (about \$39,300 at the time) — a modest sum in the art field but an impressive result nonetheless.

The couple's estate also bequeathed art to the Ludwig, which is providing 43 of the nearly 250 pieces in the sprawling retrospective. "It doesn't work that well to show only a few of her works," Dr. Diederich said, "because it's really a whole world which she creates in her work, and the public should, let's say, dive into her work, into her world."

A version of this article appears in print on March 4, 2023, Section S, Page 7 in The New York Times International Edition. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

The New York Times - March 2, 2023
Online / Art & Design
Cologne Museum Dives into German Artist's Once-Lost Fantastic World / Andrew Russeth

Galerie Christophe Gaillard
www.galeriegaillard.com