

KUNSTMUSEUM THUN



MARGUERITE SAEGESSER AMERICAN MONOTYPES 4 FEBRUARY – 16 APRIL 2023

ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

During the years she spent in the USA, the Swiss artist Marguerite Saegesser (born 1922 in Bern, died 2011 in Muri b. Bern) produced monotypes that have rarely been exhibited here in Switzerland. A trained sculptor, Saegesser made a name for herself in this country in the early 1960s with abstract iron sculptures (an example of which can currently be seen in front of the Thunerhof). In the mid-1970s, she then left her homeland to live and work in the USA. Settling in the San Francisco Bay Area, at the time a hotbed of artistic activity, Saegesser broke new ground first with acrylic sculptures and shortly thereafter with her use of experimental printing techniques. From the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, monotype would become an important means of artistic expression for her, one that she pushed it to its limits.

The term “monotype” describes a printing process in which, unlike with other printing techniques, only one original is made at a time. The process was developed in the

seventeenth century but then quickly fell into oblivion until being revived in the late nineteenth century by the Impressionists, in particular Edgar Degas. In the course of what became known as the Print Renaissance in the USA in the 1970s, the Abstract Expressionists then rediscovered and breathed new life into the art of monotype.

Saegesser drew inspiration from the diverse forms of expression subsumed under the term Abstract Expressionism, with whose protagonist Sam Francis she had been friends for years, to develop her own extremely free and intuitive approach to colour and form. The range of her artistic vocabulary is so broad that it is difficult to pinpoint a specific signature style. The Kunstmuseum Thun is now hosting the artist's first solo show at an art institution. Based on groups and series of her works, Saegesser's passion for experimentation becomes tangible here for the first time in all its breadth.

FIRST MONOTYPES (GALLERY 1)

In her initial experiments with the monotype printing technique, which was new to her, Saegesser was still quite reserved. This cautious approach makes for the special appeal of these early works with their small gestures and reduced colouration. Two of the small-format prints, dating from September 1978, are in monochromatic black and betray only minimal movements on the printing plate. Comparatively large expanses of the paper surface remain untouched in relation to the image, making the small printed area appear all the more concentrated. While in one of the works a curved concentric swoop is reminiscent of calligraphy, in other examples from this series fine, bundled lines call to mind an etching.

In one of her 1979 prints, Saegesser worked with stencils for the first time, here in the form of letters and numbers that are incorporated into the lighter greenish-yellow surface of the picture. The horizontal colour gradient suggests a twilight mood, and the letters "BV" open up further potential levels of meaning, perhaps referring to a beautiful view, or "Belle Vue".

Four larger, square works from 1979 constitute Saegesser's first cohesive work series from this period. They share not only a uniform colour scheme in ochre and blue tones but also a composition consisting of a frame and two diagonals that each connect the corners of the square image section. These common features suggest that Saegesser even used the same printing plate for at least three of the works, re-inking it and rotating it in a different way each time.

ON BLACK GROUND (GALLERY 2)

The mid-1980s were an immensely productive period for Saegesser, particularly in her work on the printing press. In 1984 she made several groups of works with black backgrounds whose aesthetic tellingly embodies the 1980s zeitgeist. The prints *Bleak Answer* and *And the Answer is...* were made from the same plate, the deep black work being the first printing. The second print, or "ghost", is much less dense, as it was made using only the residual ink remaining on the printing plate. The artist then applied the coloured areas in red and blue afterwards. The pair are thus almost ideal complements for each other.

A "ghost" can also be found in Saegesser's *Peppermint Twigs* series, namely print number *XVII*. Here, the colourful accents were painted with oil pastels directly after printing onto the areas that had been left white. Working in series with only slight variations was a common practice among Saegesser's Abstract Expressionist role models – who had in turn adopted the strategy from Impressionism.

Raining Coins can be viewed as almost a seamless continuation of the *Peppermint Twigs* series. The coins are not depictions, however, but rather imprints of actual coins that Saegesser put in the printing press to imprint them onto the paper.

OVERVIEW



COLOUR AND EXPRESSION (GALLERY 3)

Saegesser's prints from the early 1990s display bold colours and expressive gestures. To produce them, she generously applied ink to the printing plate with rollers to cover large areas of the sheet. Each movement of the artist's hand is crucial, as variations in pressure remain clearly visible and palpable on the image surface. Saegesser had no interest in making the colour fields uniformly opaque; more important was to leave a trace of her movements on the printing plate and thus indirectly on the paper.

And yet her compositions are always balanced, the luminous colours set down purposefully. The transparency of the various surfaces creates a spatial effect, with some areas seeming to be in front of others. In prints such as *Untitled SAE #1239*, the dark passages on the left and right guide the eye into the depths of the pictorial space.

Here, Saegesser unfolds her full expressive potential in works whose colour planes seem to dance across the sheet.

CUTOUPS AND STENCILS (GALLERY 4)

Around 1985, hints of figuration suddenly appeared in Saegesser's otherwise almost entirely abstract oeuvre. These might be floral forms, as in *The Rite of Spring*, or the lantern in *A Lonely Lantern Shines Through the Night* – both titles that reinforce associations with the world we live in.

In the prints on view here, the artist also worked with stencils, some of which she used several times. The ring shape with the smaller circle from *A Lonely Lantern Shines Through the Night* reappears in *There is Still Hope in Life*, for example. This connection as well as the inverted colour schemes in the two works (midnight blue and bright orange) makes them siblings, so to speak. Taken together, the two titles tell a brief tale about hope.

MATERIAL EXPERIMENTS (GALLERY 5)

While Saegesser often gave playful or lyrical titles to her works around the mid-1980s, these later work groups in more sombre tones, dating from 1990, have no titles at all. The focus is on technique and material, and no narrative or representational elements can be discerned. Uniting these prints is their experimental character, as evidenced by their augmentation with various additional materials: after the printing process, Saegesser reworked her monotypes with charcoal, pastels, oil pastels and oil paint, and in some cases glued on bits of paper and corrugated cardboard as collage elements. Through the occasionally almost brutal handling of the material – paper is torn, chalk is applied with strong pressure – Saegesser allows the viewer to viscerally participate in the process of the works' creation.

BIOGRAPHY

Marguerite Rüfenacht (1922–2011) grew up in Bern in a family of merchants who were devoted to the fine arts. After studying violin at the Lausanne Conservatory, she decided to do an apprenticeship in sculpture in the studio of the then prominent Lausanne artist Milo Martin, which she completed in 1946. She studied abroad in Sweden and Rome and then ran a studio in Chexbres in the canton of Vaud until 1952, whereupon she returned to Bern and married Max Saegesser, a professor of medicine. The couple took trips to Boston and San Francisco, where their daughter was born in 1953. In the 1950s, Saegesser regularly exhibited her sculptures in solo and group shows. Highlights were an exhibition at the Wolfgang Gurlitt Gallery in Munich in 1957 and her participation in the Swiss sculpture exhibitions in Bienne in 1958 and 1962. From the mid-1970s, she lived in the USA, returning to Switzerland only sporadically. In her adopted country, she began to produce monotypes in 1978 and, starting in the early 1980s, a large number of abstract paintings. Saegesser returned to Switzerland in 2004 and lived in Muri b. Bern until her death in 2011.

The monograph "Marguerite Saegesser: American Monotypes" will be published to accompany the exhibition, with a foreword by Helen Hirsch and texts by Jackson Kenneth Doyle and Claudia Blank. (Scheidegger & Spiess, design: Büro 146, ISBN: 978-3-03942-133-6)

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