Rooms 1–7: **Franz Gertsch. Blow-Up (Part II)**

Introduction

The Kunstmuseum Bern and the Museum Franz Gertsch have collaborated to take over from the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (DK) and the Deichtorhallen Hamburg (D), who presented the first comprehensive retrospective on Franz Gertsch (1930–2022) since his death. The artist himself was still able to participate in this project. While the Kunstmuseum Bern is providing an overview of important works and creative periods from 1956 to 2021, the Museum Franz Gertsch is presenting a selection of works from 1970 to 2021 that features the models Patti Smith, Luciano Castelli, and Irene Staub. The show includes female portraits and representations of nature in paintings and woodcuts.

With works by Franz Gertsch, Luciano Castelli, and Roswitha Hecke

Room 1 (Patti Smith and Self-portrait)

Room 1 is dedicated to the rock poet Patti Smith (*1946), whom Franz Gertsch portrayed five times between 1978 and 1979. On display together for the first time since 2004 are the four large-format paintings "Patti Smith I–IV". Photographs by Franz Gertsch, some of which he used as templates, as well as "Selbstbildnis", the self-portrait he created shortly after this series in 1980, complement the presentation.

"Until then, Gertsch's models had either been acquaintances or people he noticed in his social sphere. His first encounter with the American punk and rock poet, photographer, and graphic artist Patti Smith, however, was with Robert Mapplethorpe's photograph on the cover of her album 'Horses' (1975). Gertsch was fascinated by her interesting, androgynous face and started listening to her music.

On 20 October 1977, Gertsch, who had based almost all his works on his own photographs since 1969, went to Cologne to photograph Patti Smith's poetry performance 'Rock'n'Rimbaud' at the Galerie Veith Turske he was working with at the time. […] **'Patti Smith I' (1977/78)** shows the musician from behind, crouching on the floor with her guitar. **'Patti Smith III'** and **'Patti Smith IV'** (both 1979) capture moments from her performance. The photo for 'Patti Smith V' (1979, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart) was taken at another event on 12 June 1979.

'Patti Smith II' plays an exceptional role in this series. Rather than a random moment, the work captures the interaction between painter and model during this evening in Cologne. The impartial viewer Franz Gertsch became the cause of the motif: While snapping shots incessantly, he did not realise how much the frenzy of flashes from his Nikon camera with its motor drive was disturbing Patti Smith's performance, until she finally crumpled up her text sheet and threw it at him. The larger-than-life painting shows this moment: On the left side, the musician is visible from her thighs up with an amplifier behind her, and a large loudspeaker and a microphone stand in the bottom right corner – all elements are cropped. A substantial part of the composition is dominated by an empty white, slightly grimy screen on which Patti Smith's shadow appears twice. Thus, the protagonist continues to draw attention, despite being pushed to the side. Her expression and body language are telling. As she scrunches up the piece of paper with her slender hands, her face is slightly twisted. Gertsch was evidently not interested in portraying a star, the cult figure Patti Smith, but rather in depicting an event by making an individual, the person Patti Smith, the subject of an exploration of reality, photography, and painting."

(Anna Wesle in: "Kunstmuseum Bern. Meisterwerke", ed. by Matthias Frehner and Valentina Locatelli, Munich 2016, p. 370)

During his artistic career of over six decades, Franz Gertsch painted only two self-portraits in 1955 and in 1980. He described the circumstances that led to his self-portrait from 1980 as follows: Disappointed that Patti Smith was not willing to give him an exclusive opportunity to take a close-up he could use to paint another portrait of her, the artist decided to become his own model.

The painting **“Selbstbildnis” [Self-portrait] (1980)** shows him at the age of forty-nine and became the starting point for the large-format female portraits he painted over the course of the following fifteen years. “The hair on the top of his head slightly cropped, Franz Gertsch presents himself in a half-length portrait in three-quarter profile against a backdrop of whitewashed boarding. Only insiders can tell that this is the wall in his studio. His chin slightly raised, he is gazing into the distance, the pupils in his blue eyes reflect the light from the camera (this painting is based on a photograph Maria Gertsch-Meer took of her husband). The painter is interested in the textures of the depicted materials and traces them meticulously with his paintbrush: the structure of the wood underneath the white paint, the dark grey fluffy jacket, the striped, white cotton shirt with the black t-shirt underneath it. He approaches the texture of his hair and skin with the same attentiveness, tracing the first grey strands in his thick shock of hair, the greying sideburns, the first wrinkles and softening contours. The result is a photorealistic portrait of an attractive, middle-aged man. His expression with the slightly furrowed brow and sensitive mouth characterise him as alert and pensive. Devoid of attributes or other allusions to his profession, this work is not immediately recognisable as a self-portrait of the artist. His success at the ‘documenta 5’ in Kassel (1972) put Gertsch on the map, and by the 1980s he could look back on an acclaimed oeuvre.”

(Anna Wesle in: Rainer Michael Mason, “Franz Gertsch. Aus dem Frühwerk 1945–1969“, Burgdorf 2011, p. 64)

Room 2 (Luciano Castelli and Still Lifes)

The second room showcases the model Luciano Castelli (*1951), a young artist from Lucerne Franz Gertsch painted thirteen times between 1971 and 1977. Now on display at the Kunstmuseum Bern, the iconic Castelli pictures were already part of the Museum Franz Gertsch’s comprehensive exhibition “Franz Gertsch. Die Siebziger” [Franz Gertsch. The Seventies] (21.03.–04.10.2020). For this presentation, the museum chose two paintings that have almost never been shown in Switzerland, **“Luciano Castelli II (1972)** and **“Spiegelkabinett” [Mirror Cabinet] (1974)**, as well as rarely exhibited loans from public and private collections, namely the monumental **“Aelggi Alp”** and the first painting from the series, **“Luciano Castelli I” (both 1971)**. The two seldomly shown small-format still lifes from 1970 add to the display.

“A small painting by Franz Gertsch from the 1970s. A still life with the screw top from a jar repurposed as an ashtray, with cigarette butts, matches, a folded piece of paper or book of matches. Yellow, red, and blue dominate the picture. Small, no more than 30 x 40 cm? Still life? Gertsch, the non-smoker?

The painting [**‘Stillleben’ (Still Life),)1970**] from the collection of the Teo Jakob Art Foundation is atypical and surprising at first sight. What might have induced Franz Gertsch to paint this small piece after his artistic revival in 1969 that led him to large-format painting based on slide projections? The artist’s response to an inquiry provides little information; it is long ago. In 1970 the gallerist Toni Gerber held exhibitions in the upstairs rooms of Teo Jakob’s furniture shop in Bern – space was limited – after the show, the work was gifted to the owner as a token of gratitude. Maybe inspired by a detail in a photograph, the picture resulted as a kind of byproduct. A small work Gertsch painted in the close quarters of the studio on Bern’s Junkerngasse that hardly provided him with enough space to look at the piece from a distance, thus forcing him to step out into the corridor. And yet, this is where he produced the paintings from ‘Huaa...!’ (1969) to ‘Kranenburg’ (1970).

The cropped composition of this still life is characterised by a very liberal, almost impressionist painting style carried out with dispersion on ungrounded half linen. With swift brushstrokes Gertsch created a colourful surface and background defined by pastel-like softness that literally prepares the ground for the improvised ashtray. What seems like a section from another painting by the same artist should probably be interpreted as a tablecloth or a rug. The cropped objects on the left and right remain indefinable. The far end of the match in the foreground seems to submerge into softness, its colours are echoed by the white and red folded book of matches on the other side of the lid, which contains the usual remnants: ashes, filters from at least two

different brands, a charred match. The red lettering of the instruction ‘auf’ (open) is still legible on the side of the screw top. A commonplace sight at a garden party or in an art studio.”

(Anna Wesle in: “Franz Gertsch. Die Siebziger”, Berlin 2020, p. 66/67)

“The [still life with record player] is untitled and was painted in 1970 [...]. It is an unusually small format within Franz Gertsch’s oeuvre. Moreover, we know that the depicted record player belonged to the artist. Vinyls from Bob Dylan to Joan Baez to Santana and the Rolling Stones were played on it. Franz Gertsch created the small vertical format for the gallerist Toni Gerber, who organised a solo show for him in Bern in 1970. It was the first exhibition to showcase the pictures he painted with the aid of slide projections. We also know that they were largely met with incomprehension and consternation. As part of the gallerist’s collection, the picture was eventually gifted to the Kunstmuseum Bern.”

(Andreas Fiedler in: “Franz Gertsch. Die Siebziger”, Bern 2020, p. 62)

Jean-Christophe Ammann (1939–2015), the Swiss art historian, curator, and director of the Kunstmuseum Luzern from 1968 to 1977, introduced Franz Gertsch to Luciano Castelli in the winter of 1970. The painting **“Luciano Castelli I” (1971)** is based on the first photographs Gertsch took of Castelli in his parents’ house, where he was living at the time. Castelli subsequently moved to a shared villa on Reckenbühlstrasse 17 in Lucerne. Gertsch got to know Castelli’s circle of friends and portrayed them in several pictures. A motorbike tour through the South of France led to the photographic template for **“Luciano Castelli II” (1972)**. Jean-Christophe Ammann probably took the shot in Saint Guilhem-le-Désert and then sent the slide to Gertsch. The paintings “Luciano Castelli I” and “Luciano Castelli II” were both on display at Franz Gertsch’s big exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1972. Within the space of a year, he created all the works for this presentation, which Ammann had demanded “must be a delirium”. **“Aelggi Alp” (1971)** was also among these pieces: the title refers to the popular destination for excursions, an Alpine summit near Lucerne, almost at the exact geographical centre of Switzerland. As he was not part of the excursion, Franz Gertsch did not take the photographic template. The people depicted are (f.l.t.r.) Franz Marfurt, Luciano Castelli, Ueli Vollenweider (obscured in the background), Vanja Palmers, and Ludwig von Segesser.

”’Aelggi Alp’ shows an almost surreal-psychedelic scene of hippies in a mountain landscape depicted in shimmering colour. [...] Those depicted belong to the Lucerne clique surrounding Luciano Castelli. The most important medium for the ‘paradoxical’ perception is the extremely large format of the picture (this goes for other paintings by Gertsch too), which provokes a sharp contradiction between distances. From afar, the ‘photographic’ nature of the picture can be seen; from close up, the ‘peinture’ is seen in its overwhelming sensuality. Strangely enough, it is the insignificant parts of the picture – hair, grass and scree – that are subjects of the most engaged painting. Remarkable is the shopping bag, which in reality had been put down by chance but now becomes the central point of the composition, thereby bringing the ‘sublime’ genre of the alpine landscape into the present day. This is also underlined by the contemporary (hippie) clothes of the group of friends. It is apparent: Gertsch creates works of art that, in contrast to photographs, demand an extended period of perception.”

(From the flyer on the exhibition “Franz Gertsch. The Retrospective” at the Museum Franz Gertsch, 2005)

The painting **“Spiegelkabinett” [Hall of Mirrors] (1974)** is based on a photograph taken of Luciano Castelli in Lucerne’s Hall of Mirrors. A similar picture was shown in “Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie” [Transformer. Aspects of Travesty], an exhibition Ammann curated for the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1974. “Spiegelkabinett” became the poster image for the DAAD exhibition at the Berlin Akademie der Künste but was withdrawn by the artist and first shown in “Franz Gertsch. Blow-Up” at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg (2024/25). This is the work’s first presentation in Switzerland. It depicts Luciano Castelli, who had asked to spend some time alone on the round platform at Lucerne’s Hall of Mirrors – equipped with outfits, shoes, and accessories he took a series of self-portraits.

Rooms 1–7: **Franz Gertsch. Blow-Up (Part II)**

Foyer Ground Floor (Works by Luciano Castelli)

The exhibition not only features Luciano Castelli as a model, but also as an artist. Two photographs he took with a self-timer for the nine-part group of works **“Spiegelsaal” [Hall of Mirrors] (1973)**, which inspired Franz Gertsch, as well as the large-format painting **“Irène” (1982)** are on display. For some time, Irene Staub (1952–1989) and Luciano Castelli were a couple, together with Irene’s son Carlo they visited the Gertsch family in Rüschegg. Franz Gertsch was fascinated by Irene and produced numerous portraits of her in 1980–82. After their separation, Luciano and Irene stayed in touch, and when he moved to Berlin in 1978, she continued to visit him. During one of these visits Castelli, who had become an important representative of the “Neue Wilde” [The New Wild Ones], took the photo on which he based the expressive portrait of Irene shown here.

Luciano Castelli
Born in Lucerne (CH) in 1951. 1969–72 signwriting apprenticeship. 1968–69 preliminary course at the Kunstgewerbeschule Luzern (School of Applied Arts), student of Max von Moos and Anton Egloff. In the 1970s he lives in the Villa Reckenbühl, Lucerne. 1970 first group exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Luzern (CH) and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (F). 1970/71 Kiefer-Hablitzel Scholarship. 1971 solo exhibition at the Galerie Toni Gerber, Bern (CH), part of the group exhibition “The Swiss Avant Garde” at the New York Cultural Center, New York (USA). 1972 participation in the “documenta 5”, Kassel (D), at the same time as Franz Gertsch. 1973/74/75 Eidgenössisches Kunststipendium (Federal Art Scholarship), Bern (CH). 1974 part of the show “Transformer. Aspekte der Travestie” (Transformer. Aspects of Travesty), curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann at the Kunstmuseum Luzern (CH). 1977–78 sojourns in Rome and the USA. 1978 move to Berlin. 1979 founding of the punk rock band “Geile Tiere” with the artist Salomé. 1984 Prix Nordmann (today: Manor Kunstpreis), Lucerne (CH). 1980s super-8 film productions such as “Room Full of Mirrors” (1982). 1986–91 studio in Tuscany (I). 1989 move from Berlin to Paris, 2009 to Zurich. From 2009–15 Castelli worked in Zurich, Paris, and Normandy. Numerous exhibitions at home and abroad. Works by the artist can be found in many private and public collections in Switzerland, Europe, and the USA. Luciano Castelli lives and works in Zurich (CH).

Room 3 (Irene Staub)

The group of works in the third exhibition room revolves around Irene Staub. She belonged to Luciano Castelli’s circle of friends and was known as a sex worker in Zurich, who went by the name “Lady Shiva”. The painting **“Irène” (1980)** is the highlight in this room. It is accompanied by a selection of works the artist also dedicated to the model “Irène” (spelled with an accent because Gertsch preferred this version) and carried out on paper with different techniques in 1981/82.

“Many easily told stories surround Irene Staub alias Lady Shiva, the famous sex worker who lived in Zurich, mingled with artists, and died in a motorbike accident in Thailand. [...] Gertsch based his portrait of Irene Staub on slides he produced while visiting her in Zurich. He still remembers how the pale, rather unremarkable woman who opened the door to him and Maria seemed all but transformed after briefly disappearing into the bathroom. ‘I went through two rolls of film in no time’, Franz Gertsch recalls. He then selected and edited one shot and projected it onto the empty canvas. [...] The composition of the picture follows classical criteria. The woman’s glowing red lips mark the horizontal centre of the painting, while an imaginary vertical line runs through her left eye. Both eyes are within the golden section of the upper half of the painting [...] ‘It took me about a year to complete this picture. [...] I started with Irène’s left cheek, her left eye, and then moved on to her right eye, nose, and mouth. Her forehead and hairline were especially challenging. Finally, I painted her blouse and the wallpaper.’ (F.G.) In 1980, shortly after completing his self-portrait, Franz Gertsch concluded his series of 1970s paintings with ‘Irène’ [...]. ‘I still needed a woman to bring these pictures to a close, hence the decision to paint Irène’ (F.G.).”

(Helmut Friedel in: “Franz Gertsch. Die Siebziger”, Berlin 2020, p. 162–165)

The presentation includes three pictures by the German photographer **Roswitha Hecke** (*1944) who dedicated a photo book to Irene Staub. First published in 1978, "Liebes Leben. Bilder mit Irene" [Love Life. Scenes with Irene] gained cult status and global acclaim, was reprinted several times and translated into numerous languages.

"Irene [...] not only cultivates the distinction between man and woman, but makes it exciting, erotic. She wants to be beautiful, a woman, free. She is direct and as moody as a child. She prefers flirting to marriage, tension to harmony, desire to satisfaction, and distance to touch. With the utmost consistency she adheres to these priorities. Someone as desirable as Irene does not stay on the streets for long, she is snatched up by directors [...] or by the proposals of wealthy men. Well, in her case they never had a chance. She needs her stilettos clack-clacking on the pavement in tune to her heartbeat. 'I'd rather be a railway station hooker than a call girl!' Because she loves the streets, the independence – the luxury of being a star, every day, every night, chosen by none other than herself."

(Roswitha Hecke in: "Love Life. Scenes with Irene", Munich 1978, n.p.)

"I am a taker. It used to be the other way round. I don't want to be a victim anymore."

"Sometimes I'm afraid of being fucked up, but then I'm saved by the prospect of uncertainty, which gives me strength and energy again."

(Irene Staub in: "Love Life. Scenes with Irene", Munich 1978, n.p.)

Roswitha Hecke
Born in Hamburg in 1944. 1962–63 photography training in Hamburg. 1964–75 relationship with Peter Zadek. Until the early 1970s she exclusively photographed his productions. 1975 photo work on transvestites in Paris. Sojourn in America, travels with her new partner, the writer Wolf Wondratschek, production of photo series and travel reports. 1978/79 photo shoots with Irene Staub in Zurich and Rome for her book "Liebes Leben". The photo book receives multiple awards, leading to the photographer's international breakthrough. From 1978 onwards, numerous solo and group exhibitions, including Fotoforum in der Fabrik, Hamburg (1980), Prince Gallery, Kyoto (1990), NORD/LB art gallery, Hannover (2004), Akademie der Künste, and Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (2007). Roswitha Hecke lives in Hamburg.

Room 4 (Johanna, Silvia, Forest Path, and Grasses)

The fourth room unites large-format paintings featuring Franz Gertsch's main models Johanna (1983–1985) and Silvia (1998–2004).

The painting **"Johanna I" (1983/84)** is the penultimate work in a series of women's portraits from the 1980s that followed upon a self-portrait of the artist. The sitter is the then circa 20-year-old daughter of a now deceased Viennese publisher, editor and art collector. Franz Gertsch was at the height of his photorealistic phase here. The silhouette of the delicately made-up young woman with dark blond hair appears against a neutral background. Johanna looks somewhat provocatively at the viewer. The perfection of her beauty and that of the picture's painterly execution creates a feeling of remoteness and aloofness. While this portrait can easily be dated to the 1980s by means of the typical fashion styles and make-up, Franz Gertsch lessened such time-bound aspects in later portraits of women, e.g. 'Silvia I' (1998). He subsequently painted 'Johanna II' (1985), which is now in the Hess Collection in Napa Valley, California.

Franz Gertsch was commissioned to create "Johanna I" and then went on to paint "Johanna II" (without a commission). As opposed to Andy Warhol, who worked almost exclusively on commissions after 1972, Franz Gertsch at first did not want to accept when Johanna's father approached him with the idea of portraying his daughter. In the end, he agreed with a view to Johanna's appearance and under the condition that the completed painting was to be lent

long term to a museum. After “Johanna I” was in fact exhibited at the Palais Liechtenstein in Vienna, Franz Gertsch made a smaller portrait on paper, **“Johanna III” (1984)**, so that the customer could have something he could hang at home.

”The young girl Silvia appears like a figure from earlier times. Franz Gertsch is already pursuing the theme of time here, albeit in the sense of timelessness and not yet with a view to the cyclical passage of time. His paintings from the 1970s and 1980s are very much children of their time and one immediately senses the zeitgeist of these decades that are visibly evident in the fashion, hairstyles and furnishings. **‘Silvia I’ (1998)** is different. The girl is shown wearing a simple cotton shirt against a mid blue backdrop. She is not wearing conspicuous make-up and her hair is simply pulled back behind her head. The question about which decade she comes from is not easily answerable. The artist has created a striking portrait here that references the high point of portraiture in the Renaissance. Gertsch similarly went back in time for his technique. Like medieval fresco painters, he worked on a small passage of the picture every day, proceeding in this manner using egg tempera as his painting medium until the work was completed.
(Anna Wesle in: „Franz Gertsch. Geheimnis Natur“, ed. by the Stiftung Frieder Burda and Götz Adriani, Ostfildern 2013, p. 85)

The portrait **“Silvia III” (2003/04)** is characterized by a powerful and somber tension. Dark and melancholy, his composition orientated on traditional portraits links the picture to Old Master paintings by Raphael and Titian. The girl’s glance casts a spell over the viewer, capturing his attention. The eye simultaneously glides over the painterly details, the fine blond hair that almost forms a wreath over the forehead, the smooth skin and the structure of the shirt. An interaction evolves between the motif on the one hand and the flesh tones as well as the painting’s texture on the other.

Additionally, this room displays important landscape motifs that the artist revisited time and again, both in his paintings and in his woodcuts: Waldweg (Campiglia Marittima) [Forest Path (Campiglia Marittima)] and Gräser [Grasses].

In **„Waldweg (Campiglia Marittima)“ [Forest Path (Campiglia Marittima)] (2013/14),** Franz Gertsch takes up and interprets a familiar theme from his woodcuts. It concerns a Tuscan landscape interspersed with flickering light and sun spots that is closely related to the woodcut “Waldweg (Ausblick)” [Forest Path (Prospect)] (2005/06). This is not the only point where the close links between the artist’s painted and printed oeuvre are made evident. “Waldweg” [Forest Path] concerns a subject matter from Tuscany; the photographic model was taken during a vacation in Campiglia Marittima: “It is a path through underbrush and evergreen holm oaks that leads to the sandy beach on the sea.” (Trans. from Franz Gertsch in the catalogue “Rehau. Ausblick Franz Gertsch” (2007), p. 52) The viewer asks himself whether he would have noticed all of this when looking at the woodcut. The Mediterranean sun is quite noticeable in the painting. Franz Gertsch worked here with a warm eggshell white that determines the essence of the painting’s colour scheme. Ever since working on the Four Seasons, he had increasingly attempted to reduce the number of the colours he employed – his path to monochrome painting was not yet completed. He also took a further step on the road to abstraction in a realistic painting with “Waldweg (Campiglia Marittima)” [Forest Path (Campiglia Marittima)].

After focusing solely on woodcuts for almost ten years, Franz Gertsch returned to painting with “Gräser I” [Grasses I] (1995/96). It shows a greatly enlarged section of the reed-like grasses (false brome) in his garden in Rüschegg. The pictures on display here allude to the “mother image” from which they are derived. The group of works “Gräser V–IX” (Grasses V–IX) (2018–21) is a continuation of the series “Gräser I–IV” (1995–99) from the collection of the Museum Franz Gertsch. In his late work, Franz Gertsch forwent new subjects in favour of variations and elaborations on familiar, previously explored motifs, and thus revisited these grasses.

As opposed to the earlier Grass pictures, Gertsch began here with the dark background and then took pleasure in painting each and every blade of grass in multifaceted hues of green. He firstly drew the contours of all the grasses, thus laying down the painting’s composition in advance: He selected,

simplified, shaped. This linear composition gained in significance at this moment in his late work and in the process, his execution attained a new level of freedom. **‘Gräser VI’ [Grasses VI] (2019)** depicts blades of grass in delicate tones of blue and green shown against a dark ground. **‘Gräser VII’ [Grasses VII] (2019)**, by contrast, surprises the viewer with its stronger use of colour: We see greenish blue blades of grass against a luminous red background. Franz Gertsch even almost leaves the realm of local colour here. In this work he took abstraction a step further, perhaps with another nod to his teacher Max von Mühlenen (1903–1971) who propagated red-blue painting by correlating the subject with blue and the surrounding space with red.

Room 5 – Film “Giving Time to Time. Franz Gertsch” (2023)

The Czech-Swiss director and scriptwriter, Dana Maeder and her team accompanied Franz Gertsch, his wife Maria Gertsch-Meer, and the exhibitions at our museum from 2019 to 2021. The result is an atmospherically dense film which not only allows his companions to be heard, but also provides a perceptive portrait of his studio, his paintings and woodcuts, and above all, of the protagonists Franz and Maria Gertsch. The 52-minute film is available at the museum shop in German (with English and French subtitles).

Room 6 – Woodcuts

A selection of woodcuts in the smaller rooms in the annex of the Museum Franz Gertsch also features some of the artist’s key subjects, such as “Silvia”, “Waldweg (Campaglia Marittima)” [Forest Path (Campaglia Marittima)], and “Gräser” [Grasses]. The woodcuts **“Gräser I” (2000)** and **“Gräser II” (2004)** are graphic translations of motifs from “Gräser I” (1995/96). Thematically **“Sommer II” [Summer II]**, a late work from 2019, belongs to the monumental paintings of the Vier-Jahreszeiten-Zyklus [Four Seasons Cycle] (2007–11), which is part of the museum’s permanent display.

Drawing on photographs he took in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer (F) in the 1970s, Franz Gertsch created further paintings and woodcuts on this theme from 2013 onwards. In 1971 he and Sergius Golowin visited the old town in the Camargue, which is primarily known for the Romani pilgrimage to Sara the Black that takes place every year on 24 and 25 May. From the 1950s/1960s onwards, Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer also became a meeting place for artists. In 1971 and 1972 Franz Gertsch used the photographs he took there to create the paintings “Saintes Maries de la Mer I–III”, which show children on the beach. Around 2011 the artist learned that one of these paintings, “Saintes Maries de la Mer II”, had been destroyed in a warehouse fire in New York. This loss inspired him to revisit the theme. Franz Gertsch’s last woodcut **“Meer” [Sea] (2020/21)** is on display here.

Room 7 – The Four Seasons (2007–11)

In 2007 the then 77-year-old Franz Gertsch started working on the Four Seasons cycle – knowing full well that he would need about a year for each painting. In 2011 he completed his masterly Seasons cycle with the painting “Frühling” [Spring]. Without doubt the cycle can be regarded as a pinnacle of the artist’s late work.

“Franz Gertsch paints the four seasons” – the idea was triggered by a photograph of an autumnal forest from 1994 the artist came across while going through his slides. This image served as a template for **“Herbst” [Autumn] (2007/08)**: After enlarging the slide to oversized proportions, Gertsch projected it onto the canvas as a foundation for his monumental painting. In summer, winter, and spring he revisited the nearby forest to take further pictures. While working on the cycle he followed the changing seasons to capture photographic templates for the other pieces: “Sommer” [Summer] is the summer of 2007, “Winter” [Winter] is the winter of 2008, and “Frühling” [Spring] is the spring of 2009. Viewers inspecting the whole cycle will also notice how the landscape changed in the approximately twelve years between the first and the other pictures.

Rooms 1–7: **Franz Gertsch. Blow-Up (Part II)**

The autumn picture marks the beginning of a new phase in the artist's creative approach. For the first time, he used watercolour pencils to sketch directly onto the canvas and dispensed with the slide projector for longer periods of time. While the artist's brushstroke seems more liberal, the painting is still astoundingly photo-realistic when viewed from a distance. To see **"Herbst" [Autumn]** clearly, the viewer has to take several steps back: seen up close, the painting seems abstract and starts to flicker. While his earlier works provide an equilibrium between the close-up view and the photorealistic impression from afar, the balance seems to have shifted in favour of painting.

There is much to discover in the vibrant green painting **"Sommer" [Summer] (2008/09)**. The initial impression is of a planar composition depicting the leafy piece of forest as an impenetrable thicket. However, upon closer inspection the viewer is pulled into its depths while different zones constantly reveal new nuances and effects.

In **"Winter" (2009)** the leafy summer forest has made way for a snowy piece of woodland at daybreak. Trees, branches, and twigs shaped with finely shaded browns cover the surface of the painting like a web; although the snow is everywhere it does not distort the view of nature. Some branches are layered with snow, the bottom right corner seems to be completely white. Viewed up close, the freshly fallen snow is almost palpable. Franz Gertsch structured the white landscape with the finest nuances thereby visualising the soft powdery qualities of the snow.

"Frühling" [Spring] (2009–11), the last of the Four Seasons paintings, shows a slightly larger section than the previous works. It becomes apparent that all four works need to be viewed to understand the topography of the landscape. Pictorially this painting represents another highlight in the cycle; with a precise, yet liberal brushstroke Franz Gertsch captured the many details such as little leaves, sun flecks, and textures.

The presentation of the Four Seasons in one room highlights the colour harmonies between the paintings. Franz Gertsch limited himself to a reduced colour palette, to a few shades he himself made using pigments derived from minerals, earth, and other sources. While viewing the Seasons as a group, the colours in the individual works form connections, certain shades resurface from one painting to the next. The interplay between the subject, brushstroke, and colouring in each picture is enhanced by the synergy between the paintings.

(Text: Anna Wesle)

The exhibition at the Museum Franz Gertsch was curated by Anna Wesle.

An exhibition by the Kunstmuseum Bern (CH) and the Museum Franz Gertsch (CH) in collaboration with the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk (DK) and the Deichtorhallen Hamburg (D).

Louisiana Publications issued an exhibition catalogue in English with contributions by Tobia Bezzola, Kathleen Bühler, Dora Imhof, Florian Illies, Ulrich Loock, and others. German and French versions of the same content were developed for the Swiss shows and published by Hatje Cantz.

The exhibition is kindly supported by

Dr. h.c. Willy Michel · Kanton Bern Canton de Berne · Regionalkonferenz Emmental · Stadt Burgdorf · Swisslos Kultur Kanton Bern · Ursula Wirz Stiftung · Dr. Georg und Josi Guggen Heimstiftung · Burgergemeinde Burgdorf · Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft Burgdorf · YPSOMED Selfcare Solutions · Haller Jenzer