

Exhibition information

Duration 18 November 2022 – 22 January 2023
Location ALBERTINA MODERN, basement floor
Curator Constanze Malissa

Works 85

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Opening times 10 am – 6 pm daily

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Karl Anton Fleck

18 November 2022 – 22 January 2023

The ALBERTINA Museum is devoting a wide-ranging, approximately 90-work exhibition to Karl Anton Fleck (1928–1983). Most of the presented drawings are from the collection of Dagmar and Manfred Chobot, who acquired this Austrian artist's entire artistic estate in 1987. The Fleck estate constituted a large part of the donation that the Chobots made to the ALBERTINA Museum in 2019.

The present exhibition focuses on multiple themes within Karl Anton Fleck's oeuvre: while he employed an abstract, art informel-inspired visual language during the early 1960s, he then began including more and more figural elements, resulting in surreal compositions of body and object fragments that in some cases took up impulses from pop art. Fleck's critical attitude toward Western consumerism becomes clear in a series of still-lives whose titles allude to themes such as overabundance and obsessions with dieting. He also frequently created "recipe poems" by combining text – done in his characteristic printed lettering – and images. During the 1970s, the artist increasingly portrayed himself as a hybrid being between animal and human, giving rise to a rich oeuvre, mainly made up of drawings in which the (self-)portrait played an increasingly central role.

The collection of Dagmar and Manfred Chobot numbers among the most important donations made to the ALBERTINA in recent years. The work of the Chobot Gallery that was founded in 1971 and of this collector-couple relates closely to post-1945 Austrian contemporary art. Even in their early days as collectors, the Chobots had a future handover to the ALBERTINA in mind – which took place in 2019, some 50 years after they had founded their gallery. Dagmar and Manfred Chobot ultimately made the ALBERTINA Museum a generous gift of nearly 800 works, 300 of which are from Fleck's estate.

Karl Anton Fleck (1928–1983)

Karl Anton Fleck, who was born in Vienna in 1928, was a multi-talented artist: an illustrator, a graphic designer, a painter and a musician. Alongside his many artistic endeavours, he also carried on working as a retoucher (the profession he had trained in).

Fleck initially worked as a musician, and in 1953 he moved with his family to Sweden. They returned to Vienna in 1958. During this period, Fleck exhibited his graphic work for the first time, and enjoyed his first successes as an artist. Nevertheless, he still carried on working as a retoucher at various printing presses. This work was a major influence on the development of his style. He was constantly dealing with negatives, processing them either chemically or mechanically. These processes changed the material, reversing the brightness of different parts of the image: dark parts became light and light parts became dark. Fleck's artistic perspective changed over the course of time, and he started to perceive his motifs like negatives. This is evident in his graphic work, particularly his portrait drawings. From 1965 onwards, the artist experimented with photo collages and film montages: the works in this group are made from negatives stuck one on top of the other, so that the faces of the subjects are blurred and distorted.

In this way, Fleck developed his distinctive style: on the one hand he strips everything down to the essentials, and on the other he creates distortions and a plethora of details and symbols. This conglomeration is held together by a clear, prominent outline which precisely marks out the contours of the motifs. This static element of expressive, aggressive, thickly scrawled lines is juxtaposed with dynamic grouped strokes. They draw the eye to and emphasise certain elements, lending great tension to the drawings. This effect is often heightened by the use of wax crayons.

Karl Anton Fleck avoids any form of elegance in his oeuvre, and through his extraordinary perspective, he manages to make his pictures look dark using the resulting black-and-white aesthetic. Due to his dark sense of humour and social critique, however, they also come across as dark in a metaphorical sense.

Drawings of nudes

Karl Anton Fleck's talent for drawing was already obvious at the vocational school he attended while training to become a photo retoucher. The sixteen-year-old was granted special permission to attend life drawing classes at the adult education centre. In the 1969 exhibition catalogue of the Vienna gallery Autodidakt, he explains how he first started drawing nudes: "I have been drawing, sculpting, creating ever since I discovered my self [...] long before choosing my career I was attending classes in still-life drawing, life drawing and portrait drawing at Ottakring Adult Education Centre". Apart from these classes, and Professor Herbert Boeckl's "Abendakt" sessions, Fleck was an autodidact. He was also supported by Robert Schmid, the director of the Autodidakt gallery, and under his tutelage Fleck produced many nude drawings. From 1975 onwards, Fleck created a series of classical nudes for which his second wife, the young painter Gisela Beinrucker, was his preferred model. For the nude drawings he produced in the 1960s, Fleck mainly used coloured wax crayons, perhaps in order to emphasise the female body more clearly. For the nude drawings he did from the mid-1970s onwards, he worked mainly with graphite. In his late phase from 1980 onwards, following his separation from Gisela the previous year, his nudes became colourful again, and he often named them only by their initials.

Landscapes

Fleck was already painting abstract landscapes in watercolours when he lived in Helsingborg (Sweden), before his turn towards art informel. It was not until the 1970s that he started producing more landscapes again. As a city-dweller, Fleck probably discovered a love of the countryside during his extended stay at the Atelierhaus in Neumarkt in Burgenland. He talks about the "land-landscape" as a living organ that breathes and possesses human features. In his poem *LANDSCHAFTSZEICHEN – MENSCHENZEICHEN* ["Landscape Symbols – Human Symbols"] he describes how he can breathe more freely in the "land-landscape". It is important to him, however, to maintain his critical gaze and to distance himself from impressions and extreme emotions in his art.

Portraits

Portrait drawing occupies a central position in Karl Anton Fleck's oeuvre. As a photo retoucher, he worked for mass media such as newspapers and also designed printed advertising materials. Fleck draws a clear distinction between hand-drawn portraits and photography. He felt portraiture should not be left to photographers, because drawings capture more than just the surface. He always lamented the fact that drawn and painted portraits had been overtaken by photography in our medialised world. His attempt to highlight the advantages and the uniqueness of artistic portraits compared to

photography is evident in two drawings he produced in 1966, *Ein Gesicht aus der Zeitung* [A Face from the Newspaper] and *Porträt. Ich glaube, es sieht Beckmann ähnlich* [Portrait. I Think It Looks Like Beckmann]. The faces he portrays are almost half covered with black graphite, creating an expressive black-and-white aesthetic.

Fleck had a talent for drawing quickly and assuredly on the paper. He would rub graphite dust across the paper with a cloth beforehand to make it look more alive. He often produced portraits of his friends and his collectors, such as Pechco and Dagmar and Manfred Chobot, when they visited his studio. Some of his works also portray members of his family. When Fleck knew someone well, he was able to draw them accurately from memory.

Self-portraits

The many self-portraits Karl Anton Fleck produced from the mid-1960s onwards display a broad spectrum of his psychography as an image of the self.

Self-harm and the deformation of one's own body were central to a movement called Viennese Actionism which developed in the 1960s. The exploration of one's own identity was coming to the fore, as the traditional image of masculinity was increasingly called into question by the growing strength of the feminist movement. The dissolution of the self and the death of the author and the artist were proclaimed, most notably by Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, in discussions about cultural theory. In this climate, Fleck, who was fascinated by Viennese Actionism, also tried to define his self-discovery as a man in his art but without involving himself. To do this, he took well-known imagery associated with historical artists, rulers and religious reformers such as Albrecht Dürer, Elector Johann and Martin Luther, and interwove it with his own face and name. In his division of the self, however, he also slipped into everyday roles, which show him as a ridiculous figure and the complete opposite of heroic self-portrayals. This is evident in some of the works he produced in the first half of the 1970s, such as *Der Nasenbohrer* [The Nose-Picker], *Selbst als Ohrenbohrer* [Self as an Ear-Picker] and *Ich werde rot* [I Turn Red]. We see a particularly painful engagement with the self in self-portraits like *Thonet Selbststilleben* [Thonet Self-Still-Life], which features Fleck's severed head lying on a chair, and *Selbstporträt* [Self-Portrait], in which the artist looks out through a set of bars with a despairing expression; he has been committed to a secure psychiatric institution because he is considered a suicide risk.

Karl Anton Fleck's depictions of himself as an animal

Fleck's anthropomorphic portrayals of the dissolution of the self are characterised by seriousness and at the same time by cynicism and irony. As an artist he has privileged access, getting closer to animal existences through desubjectification. Fleck often depicts himself as a dog. In his later work *Selbstbefleckung* [Self-Defilement], a series

of crayon lithographs produced between 1982 and 1983, he becomes *Bullyhündin Fleck* [*Bullybitch Fleck*], a female dog whose slack teats hang down from her belly, and her male counterpart: *Dies ist der Fleckboxer* [*This Is the Fleckboxer*]. But dogs are not the only animal the artist transforms himself into in his drawings. From the 1970s onwards he borrows from animal bodies including monkeys, birds, lions, cats, fleas, flies, rhinos and horses to create chimeras – half animal, half human – like those found in mythology. By doing this, the artist Karl Anton Fleck is trying to invent himself in an animalistic way.

Photo montages

Drawn and painted portraits are not the only cornerstones of Karl Anton Fleck's oeuvre. His group of photo montages produced in the second half of the 1960s is just as important. His early training as a photo retoucher was undoubtedly part of the reason he started using this technique. Fleck worked as a retoucher for some time, working for print media and designing advertising materials.

As an artist, he drew a clear distinction between drawn and photographed portraits. However for certain drawings, such as *Ein Gesicht aus der Zeitung* [*A Face from the Newspaper*] and *Porträt. Ich glaube, es sieht Beckmann ähnlich* [*Portrait. I Think It Looks Like Beckmann*], he does borrow an expressive black-and-white aesthetic from his photo montages.

In his montages, Fleck massively distorts the subjects' faces and bodies. These works remained unpublished during his lifetime. When the Chobots made their donation in 2019/20, the Albertina made copies. Some of the works are on display in this exhibition for the first time.

An intense friendship – Dagmar and Manfred Chobot

Karl Anton Fleck met Dagmar and Manfred Chobot at the Autodidakt gallery in 1968, and they later bought three nude drawings from him in instalments. Manfred Chobot, who is now a well-known writer, was studying cultural technology at the time. Dagmar Chobot worked in a bank before becoming a successful gallery owner. The artist and the young collector couple soon struck up a close friendship. Portraiture, life drawing and landscapes became increasingly important to Fleck after he had distanced himself from art informel. Fleck and the Chobots met every week at Fleck's studio, and his artist friends, including Wilfried Zimmermann and Drago Prelog, often came along too. A number of portraits of the couple emerged from these meetings, which were very informal – the friends smoked and drank wine and had deep conversations about art. Manfred Chobot and Fleck were both pipe smokers, and this distinguishing characteristic often featured in Fleck's drawings, such as *Chobot mit Pfeifentabak* [*Chobot with Pipe Tobacco*] and *Das Paar* [*The Couple*]. Group pictures featuring

Fleck's wife Dina Fleck also emerged from group discussion sessions, such as *Dea is brav und dings und goaned iagendwi*.

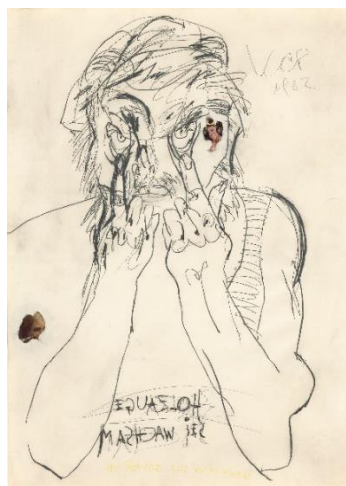
In 1971, the Chobots set up a gallery called "Yppen" at Yppengasse 5 in Vienna's 16th district. In 1984 they opened the "Chobot" gallery at Domgasse 6 in the 1st district. This gallery became Fleck's most important permanent representation. Even after Karl Anton Fleck's early death, Dagmar and Manfred Chobot continued to work hard to promote his work through exhibitions and publications. In 1987 they inherited Fleck's entire estate, including copyrights, from his son Wolfgang.

Press images

You can access the following images www.albertina.at in the *Press* section:



Karl Anton Fleck
DER - DIE ANDERE [THE OTHER], 1979-1980
Graphite, wax crayon on drawing paper
ALBERTINA, Vienna – Dagmar and Manfred Chobot
collection
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Karl Anton Fleck
HOLZAUGE SEI WACHSAM [WOODEN EYE BE
WATCHFUL], 1982
Technique: Graphite, collage underlaid on drawing paper
ALBERTINA, Vienna – Dagmar and Manfred Chobot
collection
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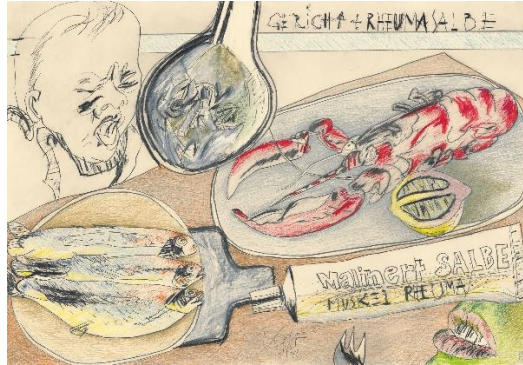
Karl Anton Fleck
CHOBOT MIT PFEIFENTABAK [CHOBOT WITH PIPE
TOBACCO], 1970
Graphite, coloring pencil, wax crayon on drawing paper
ALBERTINA, Vienna – Dagmar and Manfred Chobot
collection
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Karl Anton Fleck
ICH WERDE ROT [I TURN RED], 1974
Graphite on paper
Dagmar and Manfred Chobot collection
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Karl Anton Fleck
FRAU + KUNST [WOMAN + ART], 1973
 Graphite, colouring pencil, wax crayon on drawing paper
 Dagmar and Manfred Chobot collection
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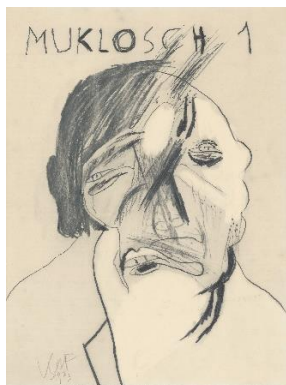
Karl Anton Fleck
GERICHT + RHEUMASALBE [MEAL + RHEUMATISM OINTMENT], 1976
 Graphite, colouring pencil, wax crayon on drawing paper
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Karl Anton Fleck
FANGO TANGO TAUBENBAD [FANGO TANGO PIGEON BATH], 1971
 Graphite, colouring pencil, wax crayon on drawing paper
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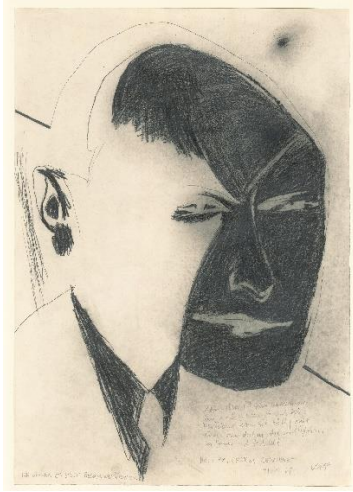
Karl Anton Fleck
ÜBERQUEREN [CROSSING OVER], 1967
 Graphite on drawing paper
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Karl Anton Fleck
MUKLOSCH 1, 1973
 Graphite on drawing paper
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Karl Anton Fleck
WIEN(D)HUNDE [VIENNA DOGS], 1971
 Graphite, colouring pencil, wax crayon on drawing paper
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Karl Anton Fleck
PORTRÄT. ICH GLAUBE ES SIEHT BECKMANN ÄHNLICH
[PORTRAIT. I THINK IT LOOKS LIKE BECKMANN], 1966
Pencil on white wrapping paper
ALBERTINA, Vienna – Dagmar and Manfred Chobot
collection
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Karl Anton Fleck
Ohne Titel (Filmmontage 39) [Untitled (Film montage 39)],
1965-1969 (copy 2020)
Black and white matt laser digital print on Fuji Crystal
archive paper
ALBERTINA, Vienna – Dagmar and Manfred Chobot
collection
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Karl Anton Fleck
Ohne Titel (Filmmontage 9) [Untitled (Film montage 9)],
1965-1969, copy 2019
C-print
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Karl Anton Fleck
Ohne Titel (Filmmontage 16) [Untitled (Film montage 39)],
1965-1969 (copy 2020)
Black and white matt laser digital print on Fuji Crystal
archive paper
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