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‘Aging Pride’ Challenges the Cult of Youth

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The German photographer Herlinde Koelbl's 2001 portrait of the artist Louise Bourgeois. Herlinde Koelbl

VIENNA — The day after I arrived in this grand city, the ostentatious capital of an empire that vanished 100 years ago, a taxi emblazoned with an ad for an Austrian brand of mineral water drove past me. Its slogan, rendered in now customary hashtag form, was #jungbleiben — or #stayyoung — and in TV commercials for the campaign, Keira Knightley and Sienna Miller swig straight from the bottles, and Agness Deyn shouts in passable German, “If you want to stay young, you’d better get started early.” Spend more, consume more, drink up — but never, ever get old.

Well, whether you are strapping or sedentary, and no matter how much you hydrate, old age is coming for you — and youth, I’m learning as a worn-out thirtysomething, is wasted on the young. Embracing the fate that awaits all of us, and casting it as something more virtuous than an affliction to be mitigated with spring water, is the project of “Aging Pride,” an extensive gambol through the art of our later years at the Belvedere Museum and one of the largest exhibitions of the season in Vienna.

Frank self-portraits by the printmaker Käthe Kollwitz, the photographer John Coplans and the painter Maria Lassnig are joined by biting videos and photographs that explore the social side of aging, by contemporary figures such as Martin Parr, Hans Op de Beeck, and Fiona Tan. The show is capacious and good-natured, though in a rapidly aging country like Austria, “Aging Pride” has a particular demographic bite. When the general population is getting older (and art audiences more so), we had better expect a few more gray hairs in our white cubes.

With nearly 200 works, ranging across a century and intermingling icons of art history with figures little know outside Austria, the show can charitably be called a grab bag. More than one of its galleries resembles a storeroom more than a carefully hung exhibition. (“Aging Pride” has been mounted not in the famous Upper Belvedere, the plush Hapsburg palace where tourists take lip-smacking selfies in front of Gustav Klimt’s “The Kiss,” but in the Lower Belvedere, where the royals actually lived.) With so many works in relatively little space, the curator Sabine Fellner has been obliged to group the art by clashing themes that cancel each other out more than they illuminate: desire and loneliness, retirement and reinvention, death and memory.

The virtues of “Aging Pride,” then, lie in the works themselves. Nudes of old people, men and women alike, play a crucial role in this exhibition — as markers of the body in evolution, and as test cases for the social meanings of desire and disgust. Ms. Lassnig, a hero of Viennese painting who died in 2014 at 94, appears here in the 1975 self-portrait “Butterfly,” her breasts drooping, her arms gaunt, her mouth pursed.

A more recent nude self-portrait on show is “Centered” (2002), by the American figurative painter Joan Semmel — whose unabashed paintings of herself unclothed influenced a generation of feminist successors. Ms. Semmel, who turned 70 the year she painted the work, sits with her right leg bent and her arm wrapped around her knee. She holds a camera in front of her face: a marker of authorship, but also a mask.



Maria Lassnig's 1975 self-portrait, "Butterfly." Maria Lassnig Foundation



The exhibition at the Belvedere in Vienna features over 200 works. Margot Pilz/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Fondation Oskar Kokoschka, via Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Museum of Modern Art; Johannes Stoll, via Belvedere, Vienna

Compared with the paintings, photographs a then-64-year-old [Helen Mirren in the bath](#), her nipples faintly visible beneath the soapy water, her face steely and seductively absolute. The image is a confident sally against double standards of sex appeal: If Denzel Washington can still draw looks in his early 60s, why can't she?

Paintings of nude old people are relatively rare in art history, not only because of a cult of youth and beauty. More concretely, humans now live decades longer than they did just a couple of centuries ago. (When the Belvedere was built in the early 18th century, the life expectancy for European males was under 30.) In the catalog for "Aging Pride," Ms. Fellner notes that the ranks of the elderly are set to expand 37.5 percent in Austria over the next 12 years alone. Low birthrates from Spain to Slovakia, combined with increasing life spans, [will see Europe's work force shrink nearly 12 percent](#) by 2060: a phenomenon with not only worrisome economic consequences but political ones, too.

What sort of lives will these old Europeans lead? Loneliness is a risk — though changing work patterns and isolating technologies have seen [a surge in loneliness among the young](#) — and long-term relationships pose hazards of their own. [Mr. Op de Beeck's grave video "Coffee"](#) (1999) shows an older couple in an overlit cafe, she staring into the distance, he slumping in his chair, bored, absent.

Increasing life spans and improving medical technologies have also introduced a growing danger in old age: that of dementia, of the body outlasting the brain. In a revealing series of black-and-white [portraits by the Austrian photographer Regina Hügli](#), people with Alzheimer's disease show expressions of delight, confusion, bemusement and utter vacancy.

But old age can also be a third act of life, permitting new identities and greater social independence. It need not entail a loss of sexual desire — western literature bulges with dirty old men, and women of a certain age, too, have the right to desire.

One of the delights of "Aging Pride" is a [short video by the Austrian artist Carola Dertnig](#), who interviewed her grandmother, then 86, about a dream she had the night before: she had fantasized that she was in a forest, locked in the arms of "a hunk." She is embarrassed to have such desires at her age, but only a little.



Pina Bausch Pina Bausch

“Such a nice fellow I picked up in my dream,” the grandmother says wistfully, before the telltale strains of Barry White’s “Love’s Theme” play.

“Youth’s a stuff will not endure,” sings the downhearted fool in Shakespeare’s “Twelfth Night.” To grow old, though, is not only a chronological fact but also an inevitability of fading powers and sagging integument. To grow old is a social phenomenon, one we have the power to make better or worse if we want to; and Europeans, facing a stark demographic future, should probably get to work.

No art in “Aging Pride” speaks more eloquently to our collective power to reimagine old age than a clip from the German choreographer Pina Bausch’s “Kontakthof” — her 1978 masterpiece of lonely-hearts on the dance floor, which she created for her company of dancers in Wuppertal, Germany, but later restaged with volunteers over 65. The older dancers, wearing the same tight suits and slinky silk dresses that Bausch’s regular troupe had worn, go through the ritual preening they learned over decades; they get lucky or get humiliated, and come back for more. Their bodies are notably stiffer than the average professional dancer, but they are here, they are boogieing, and they are ready for love.

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