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Claire Falkenstein: *San Francisco, Paris, Rome*

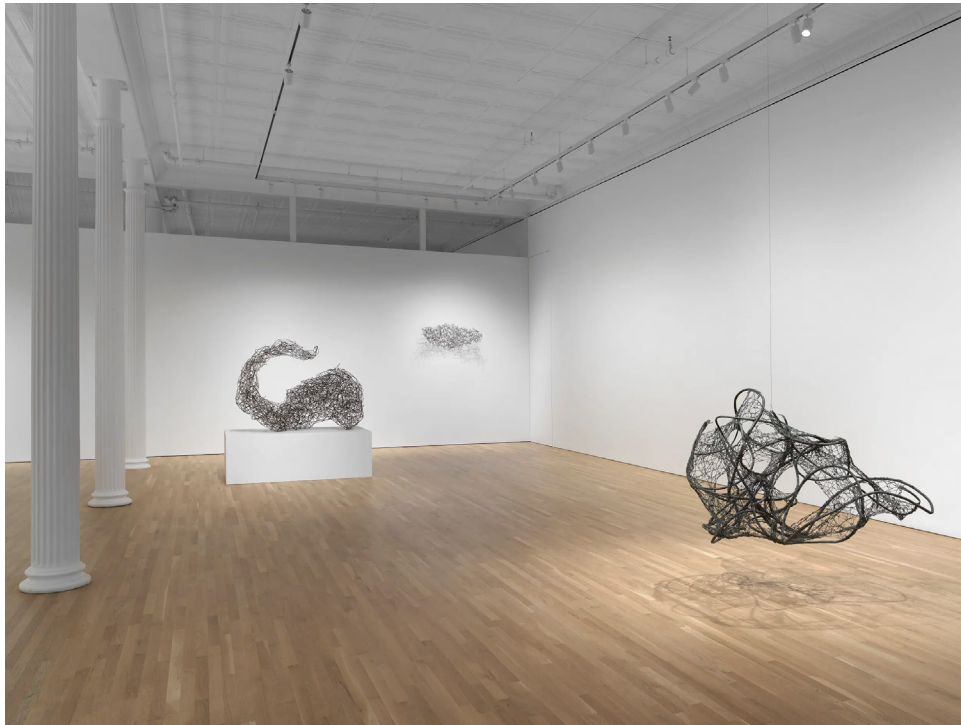
By Ann McCoy



Claire Falkenstein, *Sun #13*, ca. 1958. Copper, 28 ½ × 62 × 20 inches. Courtesy Claire Falkenstein Foundation and Ortuzar, New York. Photo: Thomas Barratt.

Known for her milled iron and Murano glass gates at Peggy Guggenheim's Venetian palazzo, Claire Falkenstein's oeuvre is primed for a serious reappraisal. At Ortuzar, we encounter a well-curated exhibition of early historical gems created in San Francisco, Paris, and Rome. Largely pegged as a modernist known for her architectural commissions in 1960s California, Falkenstein (b. 1908; d. 1997) was slowly erased from an LA art scene dominated by the all-male Ferus Gallery stable. Before the early 1970s, the marginalization of women was largely the rule in the city of the angels. Hauser Wirth & Schimmel's *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women 1947–2016* began to set the record straight. Falkenstein's stellar brazed iron, bronze, and copper wire "Suns," seen alongside the likes of Louise Bourgeois, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Lee Bontecou, placed her firmly in this exalted firmament. Today, seeing wire sculptures by Christopher Wool and Alan Saret, we realize Falkenstein made similar works that look surprisingly contemporary decades earlier. She was one of the first women to use experimental industrial materials and led the way for artists like Eva Hesse. It is wonderful to see Falkenstein finally getting her due, along with her fellow Californian Ruth Asawa!

San Francisco,
Paris, Rome
Ortuzar
September 10–
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Installation view: Claire Falkenstein: *San Francisco, Paris, Rome*, Ortuzar, New York, 2026. Courtesy Claire Falkenstein Foundation and Ortuzar. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Importantly, this exhibition's *point de départ* is the artist's early period in San Francisco, where her comrades in art were Alexander Archipenko (b. 1887; d. 1964), László Moholy-Nagy (b. 1895; d. 1946), György Kepes (b. 1906; d. 2001), and later Clyfford Still (b. 1904; d. 1980). Falkenstein studied sculpture with Archipenko at Mills College in 1933. *San Francisco, Paris, Rome* begins with *Inside Out* (1939), a pivotal clay sculpture whose exterior form folds into the interior like a Möbius strip or Klein bottle. For Falkenstein, interior and the

exterior space would become interchangeable in importance. Archipenko's influence can also be seen at Ortuzar in Falkenstein's *Four Piece Bronze Horizontal (Sculpture horizontale)* (1951), which is reminiscent of his *Walking Woman* (1912). It is one of the few bronzes Falkenstein made, since casting was so costly. That expense may have worked to her advantage and freed her from more academic approaches, while pushing her to experiment with industrial materials and metal wire.

Moholy-Nagy and Kepes—whom she met at Mills College—feel more like kindred spirits than influences. Falkenstein knew both Moholy-Nagy and his wife Sibyl and was familiar with his work. László Moholy-Nagy's experimental photograms, like *Marseille, filets de pêche* (1929) and *Light-Space Modulator* (1930), mirror Falkenstein's interests in movement, space, and unfettered experimentation. Kepes's photographic works, like *Hand and Geometry* (1939), may have helped Falkenstein unleash her explorations into see-through and uncanny forms. As she said, "I'm working with motion all the time. If you're unwilling to ... go into the unknown and fail, you'll never do anything."

In 1950 at forty-two, Falkenstein decamped to Paris, which fueled an important chapter of her artistic development. In a leap of faith, a short trip turned into a thirteen-year stay. The expat group "Les Américains à Paris" included Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, Zuka, Alice Baber, and others. In Paris, they met up with the École de Paris, whose members included Jean Arp, Karl Appel, Alberto Giacometti, Antoni Tàpies, and Georges Mathieu. In a small flat on the rue de Savoie, Falkenstein began working with industrial stovepipe wire, lead, melted solder, and metal rods. She was never part of the herd. Often working in isolation, her independent approach stood out. The French critic Michel Tapié identified her as one of the select, maverick practitioners of what he termed *art autre*—art that resembled no others and was free from both geometric and figurative inherited form. Several American expats were also working with wire and rods but in very different ways: Alexander Calder with his whimsical circus, Harold Cousins's iron rods welded into more predictable abstractions, and Shinkichi Tajiri's semi-figurative sculptures. Falkenstein's Parisian sculptures were never predictable or figurative. Her densely layered sculptures like *Sun #4* (1954) and *Untitled (Sun)* (ca. 1955), which could include melted glass, sheet copper, and dripped enamel, have a weighty psychological impact and palpable presence. They were radical, and there was nothing like them. Her larger and more open-spaced works, such as *Sun #13* (ca. 1958) and *Sun #14* (1958), take flight in another way, becoming almost topographical structures mapping an imaginary cosmology.

Falkenstein also knew Mark Tobey, a practitioner of Bahá'í, who referred to the repeated forms in her work—often open curves—as "signs." The less mystical Falkenstein countered: "[The sign] has no reference to anything, anything, anything in nature. It is a new kind of alphabet." She called her works "ensembles." Where Tobey's pronouncements seem most relevant is in her "Moving Point" works, which began as a drawing on a train to Rome in 1959. She said, "one point becomes two, two becomes three, three becomes four." It is hard not to think of the third-century alchemical Axiom of Maria: "One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the One as the fourth." If Tobey's influence can be felt, it is in the work *Elaborated Line* (1958), whose elements are like Tobey's calligraphic strokes falling in a linear progression. The

singularly unique and tower-like *Lattice – Sun* (ca. 1960) has a very different, ethereal feel due to its white painted surface. Here, the same delicate quality of Tobey’s painterly calligraphic strokes can be felt. We sometimes encounter this delicacy in Falkenstein’s small passages of fine wire incorporated into larger sculptures and wall pieces.



Installation view: Claire Falkenstein: *San Francisco, Paris, Rome, Ortuzar, New York*, 2026. Courtesy Claire Falkenstein Foundation and Ortuzar. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

The Ortuzar exhibition functions like a small retrospective of a period. It is the surprises found here that amplify the viewer’s understanding of her work. *Sequoia* (1949–50), a massive, carved sequoia sculpture, was so important to the artist that she had it transported from the States to Paris through the Panama Canal for an exhibition. One wonders if it was partially important to the artist due to the herculean effort it took to carve it. What is interesting about the piece is how this density will later translate into the layered wire pieces, like *Sun #4*, which have a far more mysterious dimensionality.

Art viewers can often have short memories. California art of the period is remembered largely for the Finish Fetish artists and the Light and Space movement. Falkenstein lived in Venice cheek by jowl with many of these artists, and I met her there as a graduate student. Claire was no-nonsense, at times strident, but also wonderfully funny. I got the real lowdown on “Les hommes Américains à Paris,” and how difficult some of them were. Because she was such a groundbreaking artist, it was surprising to me that she was largely ignored by the seventies LA feminists. As important and revolutionary as artists like Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, James Turrell, and Douglas Wheeler were, I found their neighbors, Claire Falkenstein and Ray and Charles Eames, just as innovative. For both recent and long-time fans of her work, the Ortuzar exhibition comes highly recommended. Its level of connoisseurship is commendable and will hopefully encourage further scholarship.