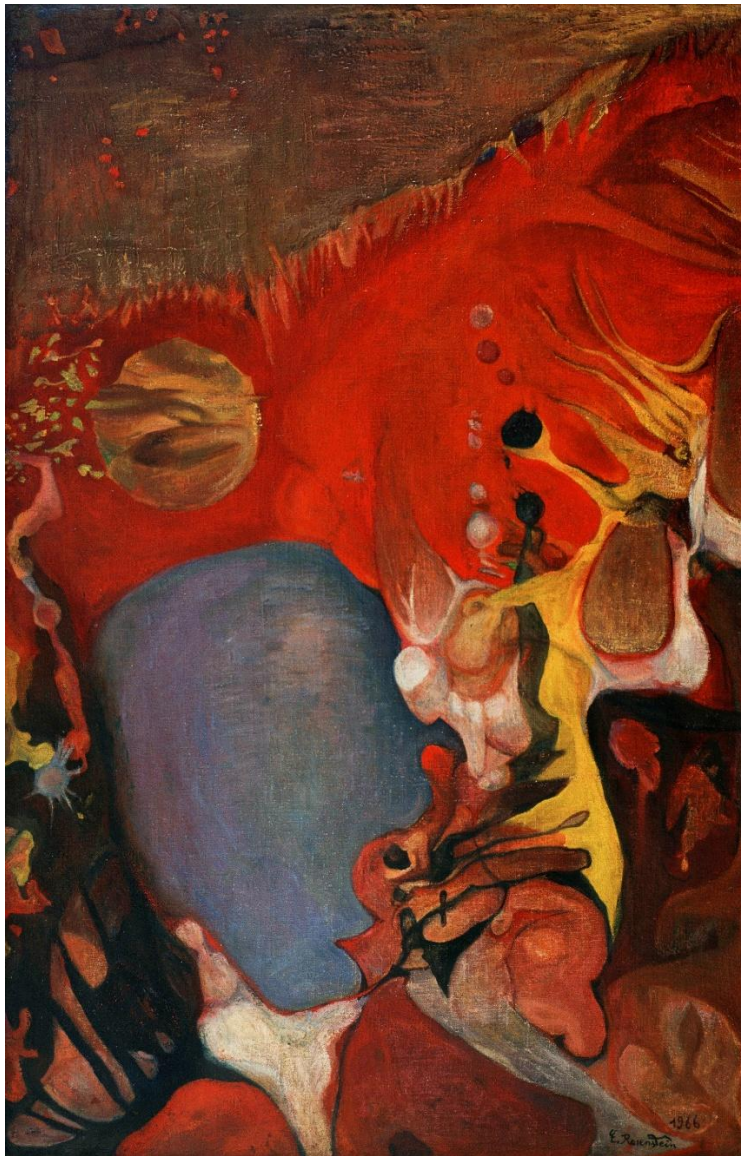


ERNA ROSENSTEIN

On the Other Side of Silence

Lower Belvedere
3 July 2026 to 10 January 2027



Erna Rosenstein, *The Burning of a Witch* (*Spalenie czarownicy*), 1966
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For the first time in Austria, a major retrospective is paying tribute to this key figure of the postwar avant-garde in Poland.

Against the backdrop of the Shoah and historical upheavals in Poland, Erna Rosenstein's works bear witness to the resilience of an artist who never wavered in her political and artistic ideals. In a career spanning six decades, Rosenstein developed a multimedia creative cosmos that reveals how the present interweaves with memories of the past, and how collective and individual experiences are intertwined.

General Director Stella Rollig: Rosenstein's works reject a culture of remembrance that regards history as a closed and single narrative. The artist instead sees memory as an open-ended process in which the past is repeatedly reordered. In this respect, her work also touches on pivotal issues in museum and academic practice: History never presents itself as a self-contained whole but rather as a fragile tapestry of traces, ruptures, and losses. Remembering therefore always involves a continuous process of questioning and reconstruction.

Rosenstein lived in Vienna for two years in the early 1930s where she studied at the Women's Academy, joined a communist youth organization, and witnessed the 1934 February uprising firsthand. None of the artist's works have survived from this period. They were lost or destroyed during the years of persecution in Nazi-occupied Poland.

After World War II, Rosenstein adopted an expressive visual language to articulate not only the collective experience of violence but also the question of complicity. She resisted the doctrine of Socialist Realism imposed during the Stalinist era in Poland and her art was instead guided by Surrealism and subjective experiences. One theme she kept revisiting over the decades was the brutal murder of her parents, which she explored as a form of remembering and

processing. Rosenstein never abandoned figuration, even when biomorphic, abstract compositions began to characterize her visual language in the late 1950s.

Throughout her life, Rosenstein explored various forms of expression through painting, drawing, and assemblage, seeking different ways of capturing her experiences—including those beyond the limits of speech. Memory became an artistic principle in Rosenstein's work. Both defining experiences from the past and fleeting moments in the present are etched into her multilayered visual worlds, said curator Stephanie Auer.

Enigmatic and poetic work titles create space to explore memory, trauma, and personal narratives while also reflecting how for Rosenstein—as a painter and poet—word and image are closely intertwined. Her assemblages convey the poetry of the everyday, bringing together found, used, and discarded objects to form unexpected and sometimes ironic constellations.

The approximately eighty works in the exhibition in the Orangery at the Lower Belvedere—paintings, drawings, assemblages, and poems—tell of persecution and flight, loss and grief while at the same time conveying the artist's resilience, artistic independence, and persistent pursuit of new forms of expression.

Biography of Erna Rosenstein (1913–2004)

Erna Rosenstein was born in Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine) in 1913. She joined an illegal communist youth organization while still at school in Kraków. From 1932 to 1934 she studied at the Vienna Women's Academy and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, remaining politically active during this time. In 1938 she visited the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* in Paris. The members of Rosenstein's family were persecuted during World War II on account of their Jewish origins. In 1942 her parents, Anna and Maksymilian Rosenstein, were murdered while attempting to escape. Erna Rosenstein survived with injuries and went into hiding under various aliases for the remainder of the war. In 1945 she joined the Polish Workers' Party, and remained a member of its successor, the Polish United Workers' Party, until the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. In 1947–48 she traveled to Switzerland, Britain, and France. In Paris she met up

again with literary critic Artur Sandauer, her future husband, with whom she lived in Warsaw from 1949. During the Stalinist era in Poland (1948–56), she rejected the politically ordained style of Socialist Realism and worked outside the official art scene. A state-orchestrated antisemitic campaign by the communist leadership, which came to a head in 1968, led again to repression. Yet the artist never left the communist party or went into exile, instead becoming one of the most important exponents of postwar art in Poland. A founding member of the second Kraków Group, which also included artists Tadeusz Kantor, Maria Jarema, and Tadeusz Brzozowski, Rosenstein contributed to major exhibitions of contemporary art both in Poland and abroad.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Erna Rosenstein (1913–2004) is a major figure in the postwar Polish avant-garde. Against the backdrop of the Shoah and the political upheavals in Poland, the artist and poet developed a multimedia creative cosmos that reveals how the present interweaves with memories of the past, and how collective and personal experiences are intertwined. Spanning more than six decades, Rosenstein's oeuvre testifies to the resilience of an artist who never wavered in her political convictions and artistic approach. Throughout her life she grappled with the brutal murder of her parents as a way of processing this trauma. Rosenstein never abandoned figuration, even when biomorphic, abstract forms began to characterize her visual language in the late 1950s. In her assemblages the artist conveys the poetry of the everyday, by bringing together found, used, and discarded objects to form unexpected and sometimes ironic combinations. This comprehensive retrospective is the first exhibition in Austria to pay tribute to Rosenstein's work. Some eighty paintings, assemblages, and drawings, in addition to a selection of her poems, tell of flight and persecution, grief and loss, while at the same time telling about her resilience, artistic independence, and enduring commitment to constant renewal.

Processing and Renewal

Erna Rosenstein's oeuvre consists solely of works from the period after World War II. Everything she had completed during her studies or before 1945 was either lost or destroyed in the Shoah. In the early postwar years, the artist employed an expressive visual language to convey not only the collective experience of violence but also the question of complicity in Nazi-occupied Poland. In addition to these works aimed at processing her experiences, there were also everyday scenes reflecting the spirit of renewal at the time. Rosenstein revived her close prewar connections with artists associated with the first Kraków Group. She shared an active political engagement and an interest in the art of the Polish and European avant-garde with the members of this group, which was founded in the early 1930s by students at the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts. Her participation in 1948 in the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Palace of Art in Kraków marked a high point in the short period of cultural openness in Poland before Socialist Realism became the official style imposed by the communist authorities.

Surrealism in Communism

During a stay in Paris in early 1948, Erna Rosenstein visited a number of exhibitions on Surrealism. The Surrealist paintings that resulted were unusual, both in Rosenstein's oeuvre and in Polish art of the time. By then, the art scene had already been reorganized

on Soviet lines, and Socialist Realism had become established as an instrument of social change. Artists were called upon to create works with propagandistic content in the service of the party-political ideology. Against this background, Rosenstein's approach to art, with its emphasis on inner subjective experience, seems in deliberate opposition to the official doctrine. Although she remained committed to communist ideals throughout her life, she openly advocated the independence of art: "As far as art is concerned, either the party is wrong or else I am. Time will tell." Rosenstein's attitude brought criticism from the authorities and led to her marginalization in official exhibitions.

Echoes of Memory

The motif of fragmented bodies and decapitated heads was a constant feature of Erna Rosenstein's work over five decades, a direct reference to the cruel fate of her parents, Anna and Maksymilian Rosenstein, who were brutally murdered by someone professing to help them escape from the Nazis. Incorporated initially in the narrative recalling the night of the murder, their faces later appear in surreal landscapes, schematically in drawings, or in assemblages.

Although her work from the late 1950s onward was marked by an abstract biomorphic visual language, even in later years Rosenstein continued to produce figurative works depicting the violence she had experienced. This repetition became a central element in her art as a way for her to process the past.

Transformation

Erna Rosenstein's style defies categorization. She stubbornly insisted on the independence of her art and resisted any ideological appropriation or formal constraints. From the late 1950s onward Rosenstein developed a pictorial world populated by abstract organic forms in which everything appears to be in flux. It was not the external reality that shaped the artist's work. Instead Rosenstein investigated inner subjective spaces that she transformed into a painted reality. Her memories and her emotions of the moment have equal status in her painting. This was already noted in her solo exhibition in Warsaw in 1967, organized by Polish painter, theater director, and set designer Tadeusz Kantor, in which Rosenstein's paintings were described as "intimate landscapes" reflecting mental states.

Under the Skin

Parallel to the painterly "inner landscapes" of the 1960s and early 1970s, Erna Rosenstein also completed graphic compositions whose organic forms recall bodily systems. The focus was on elements hidden under the skin: blood vessels, neural pathways, histological

structures. They pulsate, expand, and seem to be in a state of permanent transformation. Instead of translucent layers of paint, Rosenstein weaves filigree linear networks that coalesce to form complex structures.

These works, marked by a sense of formal unrest, were created during a period of increasing political repression in Poland. Following the Six Day War in 1967, antisemitic tendencies intensified under the communist and nationalist party leadership, culminating in 1968 and forcing thousands of Jews to leave the country. Rosenstein; her husband, Artur Sandauer; and their son, Adam, also considered going into exile but ultimately decided to stay.

Interweaving

Painting, drawing, and poetry all had equal status and were employed by Erna Rosenstein in different situations to reflect on her experiences. "I write," she said, "because certain things cannot be expressed otherwise and can only be communicated in words." Most of her paintings have poetic titles, an indication of the close connection between words and images in Rosenstein's artistic practice.

Like poetry, drawings offered a direct means of expression for the artist. They were mostly autonomous works, a reflection of mental processes connecting memories and current perceptions rather than depictions of reality. Drawings are a particularly good medium for evading rational control and deliberate structuring, an approach similar to the automatism of Surrealist works.

The Poetry of Everyday Life

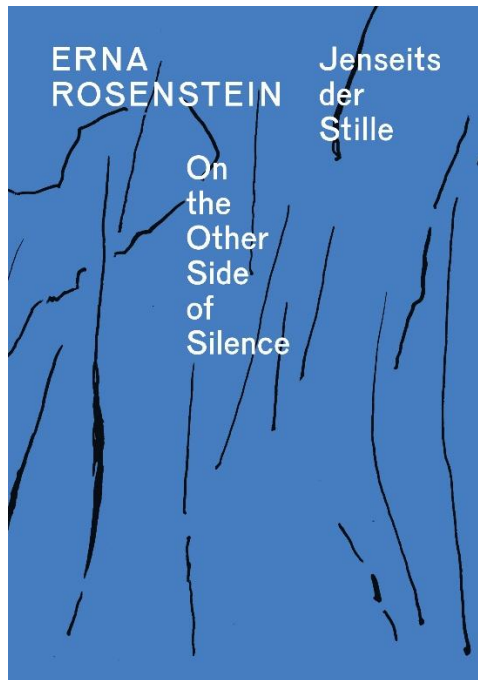
During her two stays in Paris, Rosenstein already encountered Surrealist strategies that deliberately alienated objects from their everyday context and endowed them with new meaning. In the postwar Polish avant-garde after the end of Stalinism, artists such as Tadeusz Kantor and Alina Szapocznikow also experimented with the appropriation and reinterpretation of everyday objects. From the 1960s, Erna Rosenstein extended her artistic repertoire beyond painting and drawing. Assemblages of used objects figured more prominently and in the 1970s became one of the artist's main forms of expression. Rosenstein combined objects into unusual and often ironic constellations. The transformation of everyday materials into poetically charged assemblages opened up associative spaces for memory, trauma, and personal stories. Unusually for the artist, many of these works were untitled and undated.

Change and Continuity

The consistent development of formal and visual language and the confrontation with the violence Rosenstein had experienced are constants in the artist's work over six decades.

In her later works, the density of composition and the abundance of organic forms give way increasingly to empty space. Luminous lines crisscross the surface like lacerations. String fixed to the canvas recalls bleeding wounds. Recurring motifs such as a damaged moon or a knife—references to the night her parents were murdered—continue to resonate in the artist's work right up into the 1990s.

CATALOGUE



Erna Rosenstein. On the Other Side of Silence

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Curator	Stephanie Auer
Assistant Curator	Miroslav Hal'ák
Exhibition Design	Walter Kräutler
Graphic Design	Willi Schmid
Exhibition Management	Tanja Angermann-Cekinmez
Conservation	Elias Campidell, Stefanie Hasenauer, János Korényi, Réka Králik, Ana Stefaner, Barbara Steiner
Installation	Christoph Gruber, Selma Kurtagic, Johannes Stacher
Art Mediation	Michaela Höß, Philipp Reichel-Neuwirth, Katalin Várdai
Exhibition Texts	Stephanie Auer, Miroslav Hal'ák, Philipp Reichel-Neuwirth, Katalin Várdai
Translations	Rebecca Law
Translations of the poems from Polish	MJ Kazmierski, Urszula Usakowska-Wolff
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