

Helga Paris's Portraits Capture the Unseen Women of Germany's Socialist Regime

At Kicken Berlin the artist's work explores what it meant to be a woman in the 1970s and 80s under German Democratic Republic reign

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BY ANNA VOSWINCKEL IN **REVIEWS** | 16 DEC 20

In 2019, Berlin's Akademie der Künste held a major retrospective by the Berlin-based artist Helga Paris. Now, an exhibition at Kicken Berlin brings together a cross-section of her photographs from the 1970s and '80s, as well as some previously unseen working prints. While this show is considerably smaller than the 2019 retrospective, it's thoughtful selection of works makes for a highly rewarding viewing experience.



Helga Paris, *Untitled*, from the series 'Frauen im Bekleidungswerk Treff-Modelle' (Women at the Treff-Modelle Clothes Factory), 1984. Courtesy: the artist and Kicken Berlin © Helga Paris

Known primarily for her black and white images chronicling daily life in the former German Democratic Republic, Paris has a particular interest in the representation of women. In *Selbstportrait* (Self Portrait, 1971), for example, we see her reflected in the mirror of a dresser on which sits a collection of images: a huge photograph of Marilyn Monroe, prints of 18th-century courtesans and children's drawings for 'mummy' – a naked woman holding a basket and a self-portrait of a girl in Young Pioneer uniform – are deployed as 'feminine' visual references while the casually dressed artist looks impassively into the camera. By contrast, the 12 works of her later series 'Das Mappenwerk, Selbstporträts, Berlin' (The Portfolio, Self-Portraits, Berlin, 1981–89), hung together in a row, register slight changes in the artist's facial expression – a kind of visual diary of the years before the fall of the Berlin Wall.



Helga Paris, 'Frauen im Bekleidungswerk Treff-Modelle' (Women at the Treff-Modelle Clothes Factory), 1984, installation view, Kicken Berlin. Courtesy: the artist and Kicken Berlin; photograph: Ludger Poffrath

In the 1970s, Paris started taking photographs of her eclectic Prenzlauer Berg neighbourhood. Her portrait series 'Frauen im Bekleidungswerk Treff-Modelle' (Women at the Treff-Modelle Clothes Factory, 1984) subtly renders the distinct personalities of 29 seamstresses at a state-owned clothing factory. While the tight hanging in a four-by-seven grid underlines the social cohesion of the women in their workplace, the heavy framing of the delicate small-format working prints allows each portrayed person their space and individuality. A single portrait from the series, showing an averted woman smoking a cigarette during her break, (*Untitled*, 1984) is presented in a larger frame and hung at a slight distance to her co-workers behind a door – as if to honour the sitter's unspoken wish to be left alone.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

'Helga Paris. Notizen' (*Helga Paris. Notes*) is on view at Kicken Berlin through 18 December 2020.

Main Image: Helga Paris, Selbstportrait (Self Portrait), 1971, gelatin silver print, printed. Courtesy: the artist and Kicken Berlin © Helga Paris