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## Gathie Falk

(1928- )

Painter, Sculptor, Performance Artist

Gathie Falk in her studio,  
Vancouver, 1983[Copyright/Source](#)

### 30 Grapefruit Sculpture

30 Grapefruit, by Gathie Falk

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Gathie Falk has said of the subjects of her art, "this very ordinary thing will be made very special" (*Gathie Falk*, Douglas & McIntyre, p. 48).

Falk's subjects are the objects and activities of everyday life: fruit, eggs, men's shoes, women's clothing, garden flowers and reading a book, for example. As Robin Laurence suggests, "Gathie Falk understands that she can transform the simple subject through her art, make it more beautiful, more arresting, better" (*Gathie Falk*, Douglas & McIntyre, p. 48).

Gathie Falk was born in Alexander, Manitoba, in 1928 to Agatha and Cornelius Falk, German-speaking Mennonites who immigrated to Canada in order to escape persecution in Russia. Her father's death, in 1928, left the family impoverished and they were forced to move frequently among various Mennonite communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario. Despite the family's poverty, Gathie recalls good food, clean surroundings and her mother's creativity and resourcefulness in sewing clothes without patterns and decorating her garden with painted rocks.

Gathie's mother remarried when Gathie was five, but left the difficult marriage after two years and settled in Winnipeg with her children. In Winnipeg, Gathie excelled in public school and discovered a love of books and reading. Gathie began her first art lessons at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, at the recommendation of one of her teachers. The lessons were a painful experience for Gathie and she eventually abandoned them, continuing to draw on her own. She also developed a talent for music, taking voice and music-theory classes.

At sixteen, Gathie was forced to quit school and music lessons in order to work to pay off a family debt. She worked full-time in a packing plant and finished her grade 10 education through a correspondence course.

In 1946, Gathie and her mother moved, first to Chilliwack and then to Vancouver where Gathie undertook a series of menial jobs to support them. At the same time, Gathie resumed her music lessons, completed grades 11 and 12 by correspondence, saved enough money to make a down payment on a house and continued to draw in pastels on her own.

In the early 1950s, Gathie experienced a crisis; she reached the limits of her musical ability and realized that a career in music was not attainable. At the recommendation of her mother and music teacher, Gathie attended teacher's college and worked as an elementary school teacher from 1953 to 1965. During this period, Gathie began her formal education in art. In summer courses at the University of British Columbia, she studied painting and drawing with J.A.S. Macdonald and art history with Ian McNairn. Gathie also pursued courses at the Vancouver School of Art and took evening courses through local school boards and community centres.

Robin Laurence points out that "Falk had a much longer apprenticeship than most artists and for a considerable time she felt unready to proceed on her own. But in 1962, at the age of thirty-four, she had an important revelation: 'I thought, I don't want to hear another person's opinion. I know what I want to do ... I don't need to be helped along'" (*Gathie Falk*, Douglas & McIntyre, p. 26). That year, Falk began to exhibit paintings in group shows and, in 1965, she had her first solo exhibition at The Canvas Shack, Vancouver. She left her teaching job to concentrate on her art and travelled throughout Europe.

The latter part of the 1960s saw Falk switch from painting to ceramic sculpture. She had studied with ceramic artist Glenn Lewis, at the University of British Columbia. Her first critical success in this medium was the installation *Living Room, Environmental Sculpture and Prints* (1968) (retitled *Home Environment*) at the Douglas Gallery, Vancouver. This piece juxtaposes incongruous everyday objects such as ceramic fish positioned on the arms of an armchair, a plucked chicken in a bird cage and a telephone wired to an oil can. Motifs, such as food as a pattern in the wallpaper and a ceramic TV dinner, are repeated to convert, as Gathie Falk suggests, "the stuff of blatantly bad taste" into "a living space which might make the flesh crawl and at the same time be visually glorious" (*Gathie Falk*, National Gallery of Canada, p. 3-4).

Repetition and architectural form are the hallmarks of other series of ceramic works that Falk created in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In *Fruit Piles*, pyramid-shaped mounds of gleaming fruit, oranges, grapefruit and

apples, are stacked on plexiglass bases. With *Single Right Men's Shoes*, Falk displays various styles of men's shoes -- patent leather, brogues and boots -- in vivid colours, in glass-fronted cases of matching hues.

In 1971, Falk was commissioned to create two murals for the Department of External Affairs Building in Ottawa. These works were installed, in 1973, as *Veneration of the White Collar Worker # 1* and #2. Falk produced two series of 24 ceramic panels representing variations on men's shirt fronts with ties. In describing this work, Robin Laurence notes, "even as the ordinary office workers are here venerated and monumentalized, however, it's possible to perceive a little nudge of satire on the conformity, the static hierarchies of bureaucracies. And for the persistently ghoulish, it's also possible to see the work as a kind of burial place, a vault, a tomb with rows and rows of commemorative plaques" (*Gathie Falk*, Douglas & McIntyre, p. 45).

In 1968, Gathie Falk was introduced to performance art by the New York dancer, Deborah Hay. As in her sculpture, repetition and the everyday are the principle themes of Falk's performance pieces. Between 1968 and 1972, Falk created fifteen works, which she performed until 1977. She described them as follows:

From my perspective, to make a performance piece is to put together, or choreograph, or compose a work of art that has a beginning, an end and a middle, with preferably, but not necessarily, a climax or several climaxes. Sometimes a piece works in a linear way with one event following another (*A Bird is Known by His Feathers Alone*, 1972); sometimes choreography is worked out like a fugue in music, with one event beginning close upon the heels of another, and a third event intertwining with the first two.... The events or themes I like to use are, guess what, activities of ordinary everyday living: eating an egg, reading a book, washing clothes ... together with slightly more exotic events such as shining someone's shoes while he is walking backwards singing an operatic aria ...

(Falk, *Artscanada*, (March/April 1981), p. 12)

The first half of the 1970s was a period of grief and stress in Falk's life. In 1972, her mother died after a long illness and in 1975, her brief marriage to Dwight Swanson ended. Falk had met Swanson while he was in prison and had agreed to marry him on his release in 1974. However, the difficulties of marriage to someone who had spent a good portion of his life in jail proved too great. Falk has noted that the stress of these events is reflected in her art, particularly in *Herds One* and *Herds Two* (1975), of which she said, "it is probable that my anxieties were reflected in those fleeing horses" (Falk, *Gathie Falk Retrospective*, p. 18).

Falk returned to painting, the medium of her original training, in 1978. She created several series of paintings, including *Night Skies* (1978-79), which consists of 22 oil paintings depicting the subtle and shifting variations of Falk's personal vision of the night sky.

*Cement Sidewalks* (1983), allowed Falk to document the details of walks in her Kitsilano neighbourhood in Vancouver. The cement of her sidewalks is rich in colour and texture, as is the grass of the lawns that border them and the shadows that fall upon them. Gathie has said, "if you can't see your sidewalk clearly and with pleasure, you won't see the pyramids correctly and with pleasure" (*Gathie Falk Paintings, 1978-1984*, Introduction, p. [3]).

Her 1987 series, *Soft Chairs*, combines painting with her interest in sculptural form. Falk pairs the mass of the large comfortable sofa with various items of clothing such as suits and dresses.

In 1997, Falk returned to sculpture, this time combined with photographs, silk-screen prints and paintings in installations such as *Traces* (1998) and *Portraits* (2001). Women's dresses and men's shirts, meticulously sculpted in papier-mâché, suggest human forms that are very individual and yet absent, a recurring theme throughout Falk's career.

Gathie Falk has been honoured for her work. She received the fourth annual Gershon Iskowitz Prize in 1990, for "the extraordinary range of her work and the substantial contribution she has made to each of the diverse media she has worked in" (Perry, *Vancouver Province*, 21 February 1990, p. 56) and was made a Member of the Order of Canada in 1997.

Gathie Falk's works of art have been exhibited in numerous venues and are held in many public collections including the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, British Columbia; the Art Gallery of Ontario; the Glenbow Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta; the McMichael Canadian Collection, Kleinburg, Ontario; Musée d'art contemporain, Montréal, Quebec; Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia; and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba.

A retrospective exhibition of her art, organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Canada, has recently toured to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina and the National Gallery of Canada. At the exhibition's opening at the National Gallery, Gathie Falk, now 74, said "I am not finished working. There is a good deal yet to come" (Gessell, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 31 January 2002, p. E1). Lovers of Gathie Falk's art can only wait in anticipation of the creative directions she has yet to take.

## Suggested readings

"Gathie Falk : performance artist". -- *Contemporary Canadian artists* [online]. -- September 1998. -- In *CPI.Q.* -- Toronto : Gale Canada, c2000

Falk, Gathie. -- *Gathie Falk* -- Vancouver : Douglas & McIntyre ; Vancouver Art Gallery, c2000. -- 162 p.

\_\_\_\_\_. -- *Gathie Falk*. -- Ottawa : National Gallery of Canada, c2000. -- [12] p.

\_\_\_\_\_. -- *Gathie Falk : February 1-May 5 2002* [online]. -- National Gallery of Canada. -- [Cited June 10, 2002]. -- Also available in French. -- Access: [www.gallery.ca/exhibitions/exhibitions/falk\\_cohen/english/falk/frame\\_e.html](http://www.gallery.ca/exhibitions/exhibitions/falk_cohen/english/falk/frame_e.html)

\_\_\_\_\_. -- *Gathie Falk paintings, 1978-1984*. -- [Victoria, B.C.] : Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, c1985. -- [38] p.

\_\_\_\_\_. -- *Gathie Falk retrospective*. -- Vancouver : Vancouver Art Gallery, 1985. -- 79 p.

\_\_\_\_\_. -- "A short history of performance art as it influenced or failed to influence my work". -- *artscanada*. -- (March/April 1981). -- P. 12-14

"Gathie Falk works : volumes 1 and 2". -- *Capilano review*. -- Nos. 24 and 25 (1982). -- 144 p.

Gessell, Paul. -- "Veneration of the ordinary". -- *The Ottawa citizen*. -- (January 31, 2002). -- P. E1

Laurence, Robin. -- "Clothes that paint the man : Gathie Falk's latest installation continues her fascination with the way clothing can convey a poignant sense of human identity" [online]. -- *Globe and mail*. -- (December 13, 2001). -- In *CPI.Q*

Lind, Jane. -- *Gathie Falk*. -- Vancouver : Douglas & McIntyre, c1989. -- 40 p. --(Canadian artists series)

Graham, Mayo. -- *Some Canadian women artists = Quelques artistes canadiennes*. -- Ottawa : National Gallery of Canada, c1975. -- P. [25]-40

Perry, Art. -- "Falk wins \$25,000 prize". -- *Vancouver province*. -- (February 21, 1990). -- P. 56

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