FALK, Gathie (b. Alexander, Manitoba, 1928 / née à Alexander (Manitoba) en 1928)

Gathie Falk spent her early years in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario before settling in Vancouver in 1947 where she continues to live and work. Falk began her career as a painter, though she first gained prominence in the late 1960s for her ceramic sculptures and performance work. She returned to painting in the late 1970s and has recently resumed sculpting as well. Her work is in numerous public collections including the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Glenbow Museum, the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, the Mackenzie Art Gallery and the National Gallery of Canada. In 1990, Falk was awarded the Gershon Iskowitz Prize and was named to the Order of Canada in 1997. She also received a Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2003.

*Lizzie* is a bronze sculpture suggestive of a reclining figure, however the figure itself is absent. The work is comprised of a hollow form consisting of a woman’s sweater and skirt. Yet the protrusions of breasts and the suggestion of a folded knee give the strange impression that the dress is inhabited. Much of Falk’s work is based on a close observation of everyday life and everyday objects. Her work is characterized by a repeated use of motifs from daily life, such as food, furniture and clothing. There is a sense of playfulness but also of strangeness in Falk’s pieces. This strangeness occurs when she transforms these familiar objects. In *Lizzie*, Falk worked with clothing to create a portrait of Elizabeth Nichol, founder of Vancouver’s Equinox Gallery, who passed away in December 2000. Nichol, a recognized figure in the contemporary Canadian art world, is known for her support of British Columbia artists and for bringing contemporary international art to Vancouver. In this homage, Falk investigates ideas of mortality and the passage of time.

The artist explored similar issues in *Dress with Candles*, a work from the “Traces” series, which is in the National Gallery’s collection. The work features candles with painted flames running in a row along the shelf in front of the dress, and two other candles emerging out of the back of the dress as if clutched by protruding shoulder blades. The candles are at once celebratory and sad. Their flickering flames, combined with the old-fashioned style of the dress, remind us of the brevity of life, making *Dress with Candles* a kind of memento mori. According to Robin Laurence, Falk made up stories about the owners of the dresses in “Traces”: “In some of these fictions, the owner of the dress has died; in other instances, she has moved away, leaving the dress behind. Death, loss and abandonment are thus encoded within these garments, as they had once been encoded in empty armchairs and uninhabited men’s shoes and clothing.” The works in “Traces” were conceived as an homage to unnamed women while *Lizzie* can be understood as a monument to the memory of a particular person.
Lizzie signals a shift in Falk’s artistic process as she decided to use bronze as opposed to her previous materials of choice, ceramics and papier mâché. Bronze is not the obvious choice of material for an artist whose methodology embraces the laborious, repetitive and time-consuming nature of a process like papier mâché. In making each of the dresses from “Traces”, the artist began with a rudimentary pattern cut from newspaper and then “stitched” the sections together with strips of paper and liquid cellulose. Layer upon layer of strips of newspaper were then melded to the surface to give the dress form and definition. For Lizzie Falk started by making the dress out of paper which she then used to make a mold. Working with Joe Fafard, she proceeded to cast the form in bronze. Each of the nine casts produced has a slightly different patina. The artist only recently started working with this medium and according to Andy Sylvester, “Falk was fascinated by the new possibilities this medium opened to her. For this particular work she liked the idea of something so fragile and feminine being cast in bronze”.2 By casting Lizzie in bronze, a classical material employed by Degas, Daumier and Matisse, Falk has left behind the inglorious materials of ceramics and papier mâché for the longevity and durability of metal. This piece brings to mind another art historical tradition, that of the reclining figure or more specifically the reclining woman represented by such artists as Ingres, Matisse, Picasso, Klimt and Moore. Falk acknowledged the influence of Henry Moore on her recent work in the title of sculpture created in 1999 Reclining Figure (after Henry Moore): Stella (1999).

Please cite in the following manner:

Josée Drouin-Brisebois, Acquisition Proposal for Gathie Falk’s Lizzie, accession #41191.1-2, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.

1 Robin Laurence, Gathie Falk, Vancouver Art Gallery, 2000, p. 126
2 Andy Sylvester in a phone conversation, April 2003