



Visual Arts

EXHIBITION REVIEW: Franciszka Themerson: Lines and Thoughts – ‘a near perfect mix of abstraction and tender humour’



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Normally, *l'étrangère* exhibits works by contemporary artists, but the gallery is currently focussing on Franciszka Themerson (1907-1988), a Polish-born artist who contributed to the interwar avant-garde in Poland, before eventually ending up in the UK amidst the turmoil of the Second World War. What we see at *l'étrangère* is Themerson's work from the early 1950s through to the 1980s – a small insight into the life and work of an artist, whose biography reads like an adventure.

Across two rooms, the exhibition highlights Themerson's multi-dimensional practice, ranging from fragile ink drawings to heavily-layered oil paintings. In *l'étrangère*'s pared-down gallery interior, with dark painted floors and white walls, Themerson's drawings seem all the more exquisite: humorous and fantastic compositions, works like 'Woof woof' (1950), 'Dialogue' (1951) and 'Triple Drinkers I' (1955) are a near-perfect mix of abstraction and tender humour, which emphasises the power of simple lines. These images, which remind us of Themerson's practice as a children's books illustrator, show that her work relies on everyday scenes, but abstracts them to the absurd, allowing us to see them in a different light – no wonder she has been called a 'radical observer of society'.

The drawings also remind us of Themerson's interwar avant-garde activities: like many young Central European artists of her generation, she forged connections with the Paris art scene, and read Apollinaire, after whose 1918 collection of poems she named her abstract *Calligrammes* series, following a variety of creative activities: not only publishing her drawings in illustrated weeklies like *Płomyk*, but also contributing to text- and children's books by her husband Stefan, and producing a number of films together with him in the 1930s. Once in London, the couple founded their own publishing house, *Gaberbochus*, where Themerson was the art director, while also completing costumes and stage designs for various theatre productions. This variety in her work informs Themerson's drawings: they are naïve with their use of simplified, single lines, theatrical with their fantastic figures, and tell a number of stories at the same time.



Franciszka Themerson. June 1940. Courtesy Themerson Estate. © Themerson Estate, 2014



Triple Drinkers 1.
Image © Themerson Estate, courtesy of *l'étrangère*

What we see in the exhibition, paintings and drawings alike, is a mature work, something that Themerson clearly had begun to develop years earlier. At the same time, the show's inevitably based on the artist's emigration background – and we can't help but wonder how much of her art relates to this post-war moment, when she managed to escape from the horrors of Nazism and continue her life and work elsewhere. The grotesque bodies in her images thus also gain a darker dimension, emphasising the power of simple imagery to convey the horrors of history.

With so much insight into the artists' multi-faceted career, 'Lines and Thoughts' fits perfectly with *l'étrangère's* usual exhibition focus, even though Themerson is a much earlier artist: having shown solo exhibitions of Joana Rajkowska and Anita Witek in the previous year for example, *l'étrangère* is not an 'easy' gallery. The works on show always need context and become better through our efforts to learn more about their background. There always seems to be a connection to texts, in one way or another, emphasising that, even though this is a fine art gallery, culture is multi-faceted – and often more successful in collaboration.

Franciszka Themerson: Lines and Thoughts can be seen at *l'étrangère* Gallery until December 16 2016.

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