



04 November 2016 – 16 December 2016

Franciszka Themerson, Lines and Thoughts

A new exhibition of Themerson's paintings, drawings, and calligrammes

4 November – 16 December, Tue–Sat 11am–6pm

l'étrangère

44a Charlotte Road,
London, EC2A 3PD
FREE

It seemed to me that the interrelation between these two sides: order in nature on the one side, and the human condition on the other, was the undefinable drama to be grasped, dealt with and communicated by me.
– Franciszka Themerson, Bi-abstract Pictures, 1957

A solo exhibition of paintings, drawings and calligrammes by Franciszka Themerson – a seminal figure in the Polish pre-war avant-garde. She developed her unique pictorial language during the shifting years of pre- and post-war Europe, having settled in Britain in 1943. Together with her husband, writer, poet and filmmaker, Stefan Themerson, she was involved with experimental film and avant-garde publishing. Her personal domain, however, focused on painting, drawing, theatre sets and costume design.

This exhibition brings together Franciszka's three paintings completed in 1972 and a selection of drawings, dated from 1955 to 1986, which demonstrate the breadth of her work.

The paintings: *Piétos Apocalypse*, *A Person I Know* and *Coil Totem*, act as anchors in the exhibition, while the drawings demonstrate the variety of motifs recurring throughout her work. The act of drawing and the key role of the line remain a constant throughout her practice. The images are characterised by a fluidity of line, rhythmic composition and the humorous depiction of everyday life. She was instinctively drawn to the contrast of extremes: abstraction and figuration, order and disorder, comedy and tragedy.

In an art so alive with story-telling, literary sources, particularly concrete poetry and Dada, played an important role in Franciszka Themerson's works. Often, the titles of her works, both insightful and playful, are quotations from poets and philosophers, whether from the Greeks, Apollinaire or Gertrude Stein. Among English writers she felt closest to the nonsense and fantasy of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and Jonathan Swift.

After publishing the first English translation of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1951, which was illustrated by Franciszka, the Themersons were invited to become members of the College of Pataphysics.

Established in Paris in 1948, the College included among its members avant-garde writers, artists and intellectuals, such as Joan Miró, Jean Dubuffet and Raymond Queneau. The Themersons maintained close links and frequent correspondence with its various members. The absurdist elements of Pataphysics permeated Franciszka's work and are prominent in her paintings and drawings from the 1960s and 1970s when she produced designs and costumes for several stage productions of *Ubu Roi*.

Throughout her life, Franciszka developed a pictorial language that, while ignoring expressionism, conveyed emotion with a lightness of touch and delicacy of line. In the paintings, lines are incised with knives, sticks or her fingers, while in the drawings, ink and pencil progress across the paper by the constant motion of hand and arm. The sense of immediacy in her work is an expression of her desire for a seamlessness between internal thinking and the external execution. As she says of her bi-abstract language – *I did not think it out. I painted it out. And now I let it develop within its own laws.*

In both work and life, Franciszka Themerson was by nature a non-conformist. In her drawings and 'drawn' paintings she analysed the world around her, intellectually and imaginatively, both amazed and bewildered by it.



Calligramme XXIII ('fossil'), 1961 (?), Black, gold and red paint on paper, 52 x 63.5cm, © Themerson Estate, courtesy of l'étrangère.