

l'étrangère exhibits works by a seminal figure in the Polish pre-war avant-garde



Calligramme XXIII ("fossil"), 1961 © Themerson Estate, courtesy of l'étrangère.



LONDON.- l'étrangère is presenting 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: *Piétons 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.

Franciszka Themerson (b. 1907, Warsaw, d.1988, London) was born into an artistic family. Her father Jakub Weinles was a painter, her mother, Łucja, a pianist, her older sister Maryla a graphic artist and illustrator of books for children.

Franciszka studied the piano at the Warsaw Conservatory and then painting and graphic arts at the Academy of Fine Arts, where in 1931 she obtained a diploma with the highest distinction. The same year she married Stefan Themerson, a writer and experimental photographer. In 1930 they had produced their first experimental film, *Pharmacy*, to be followed by *Europa* (1931), *Moment Musical* (1933), *Short Circuit* (1935), and *Adventures of Good Citizen* (1937). They were founders of the Film-makers' Cooperative in Warsaw and published its magazine, f.a. (*Art Film*), of which Franciszka was the art editor. During the 1930s she illustrated many books for children, mainly written by Stefan Themerson, and published her drawings in various publications.

In 1938 the Themersons moved to Paris. After the outbreak of World War II, in September 1939, they volunteered for the Polish army in France. Franciszka became a cartographer for the Ministry of Information and Documentation for the Polish government-in-exile. After the capitulation of France in 1940, she was evacuated to London. Stefan stayed in France and came to England in 1942.

After their reunion, the Themersons made two films for the Polish Film Unit: *Calling Mr Smith* (1943) and *The Eye and the Ear* (1944-1945). In 1948 they founded Gaberbocchus Press of which Franciszka was the art director. She illustrated and designed almost all of the highly original publications of Gaberbocchus, most famously Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* in 1951; from that point on *Ubu Roi* became a significant element in her work. She designed masks for the performance of *Ubu Roi* at the ICA, London, life-size puppets for Marionetteatern in Stockholm and Dukka Teater, Copenhagen. In 1966 she was responsible for costumes and sets for *The Three Penny Opera*, Marionetteatern in Stockholm. In 1968 Franciszka designed the graphics and setting of the exhibition *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA, London.

Throughout their lives, the Themersons stayed in touch with the intellectual life of Poland and of France. In 1961 they were awarded residencies at the Karolyi Foundation in Vence, France.

Between 1963-68 Franciszka taught at Wimbledon School of Art and Bath Academy of Art. In 1951 she was elected a member of the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers and in 1960, became a Fellow. In 1959 Franciszka was elected to the L'ordre de la Grande Gidouille du Collège de Pataphysique. In 1966 she was awarded Gold Medal at the First International Triennial of Theatre Design in Yugoslavia. In 1976 she was elected honorary member of the Union internationale de la Marionnette.

There are four books devoted to Franciszka's drawings. Her works are also to be found in numerous international art magazines. She has participated in many exhibitions internationally and her works are in many public and private collections.