



Anna Zemánková, *Untitled*, ca. 1960s,
oil pastel and mixed media on paper,
34½ x 24½".

ANNA ZEMÁNKOVÁ

CAVIN-MORRIS

A consistent source of formal and iconographic inspiration to academically trained, historically engaged artists throughout the twentieth century (from Paul Klee to Max Ernst to Julian Schnabel), talented autodidacts like Czech artist Anna Zemánková (1908–86) have too often been discussed using a pseudo-critical vocabulary (such as “compulsive visionaries,” coined by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1992) that reads more like a diagnosis than an appraisal. Although the circumstances of this artist’s life might invite the former, the eighteen oil-pastel drawings that made up the show, marked by a uniquely lyrical language of biomorphic abstraction, demand nothing less than the latter.

Zemánková, a Prague housewife who suffered from chronic depression and who never pursued a formal art education, began making swirling, luminous drawings in 1960, at the age of fifty-two. She often

drew in a trancelike state, as if channeling a spiritual force. Most of the works presented here date from the '60s, a richly experimental period for the artist and a time in which she formulated her repertoire of abstracted floral and insectlike forms set against flat, softly atmospheric backgrounds. Her larger compositions are dynamic but always deftly balanced, offering fantastical organic shapes in which soft greens mingle with warmer hues of orange and yellow. Imagined stems bend under the weight of glowing, pregnant bulbs; branches extend into feathers that suggest wings. In one large drawing, an allover web frames an otherworldly caterpillar-like form. Yet the strength of Zemánková’s work lies less in this game of allusion than in the abstracted forms themselves, which unfold with rich textures and linear grace.

In the six smaller works on view, the artist indulged her penchant for such minutiae without sacrificing a unified gestalt. Here, biomorphic abundance gives way to intimate, quasi-symbolic forms reined in by tighter, linear symmetries. In one later work, featuring an ordered, circular explosion of floral and starlike shapes, the artist crimped the paper to raise certain elements in relief.

Zemánková eludes easy categorization: The mother of an acclaimed Czech artist (Bohumil Zemánek) who provided her with quality materials, she was nevertheless self-taught; influenced indirectly by local folk traditions, she did not belong to them; and finally, although she lacked any kind of intentional engagement with art history, her oeuvre exemplifies the type of unself-conscious artistic practice that the Surrealists systematically mined in the service of their codified notion of “pure psychic automatism.” To dismiss this roomful of drawings by Zemánková as yet another example of “outsider” novelty is to miss the quiet but profound challenge they pose.

—Jennifer P. Borum