

Strange Blooms

Anna Zemánková's fantastical worlds

By Jennifer Higgin

Arising before dawn, Anna Zemánková liked to listen to music as she painted and drew the wildly original images that sprang, fully formed, from her unconscious. Occasionally gluing or sewing materials to the paper, her pictures bloomed in unexpected directions: strange plants in rich soil.

Born in 1908 in Olomouc, in what was then Moravia and is now the Czech Republic, Zemánková grew up with music as a constant companion. Her tastes were eclectic, but she especially loved Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, the American jazz musician Charles Lloyd and the Czech composers Antonín Dvořák and Leoš Janáček. When asked: 'Do you think there exists some sort of relationship between your pictures and music?' she replied: 'Absolutely! I can even tell you what music I was listening to when I was making a drawing.'¹ She said that whenever her daughter played Beethoven's *Appassionata* on the piano, she would 'grab my kit and start drawing. I drew and drew while she played. [...] I only draw while listening to music. I couldn't work if it was quiet. My thoughts would wander.'²

Art, for Zemánková, had a profound therapeutic value – as it did for Janáček, who was born in 1854 and died when Zemánková was 20, in 1928. Perhaps she recognised in the composer a kindred spirit. In 1903, Janáček's beloved daughter, Olga, died at 20 of typhoid; in 1939, Zemánková's four-year-old son Bohoušek died from cancer. It was a loss, wrote her granddaughter, Terezie Zemánková, 'that devastated her for the rest of her life'.³ The tragedy was compounded with a series of miscarriages. Like Janáček, who transformed his daughter's dying words into what he termed 'speech melodies', Zemánková discovered that creation

¹ Anna Zemánková interviewed by Pavel Konečný during preparations for his lecture 'The Fantastical Work of Anna Zemánková' given at the Olomouc Music Theatre; an edited version is published in *Anna Zemánková*, Anežka Šimková – Terezie Zemánková, eds, KANT, Prague, 2017, p.31

² Ibid.

³ Terezie Zemánková, 'The Flowers of Passion', translated from the Czech by Jan Travníček, in *Anna Zemánková*, pub. Cavin-Morris Gallery, New York, 2013, p.1

could be a source of great solace; a way of articulating the complexities of grief and survival in a way that words cannot. As Terezie Zemánková observed:

Her images could be interpreted as a kind of intrauterine memory. They resemble the body's organs, or acts of creation and conception. They evoke the moisture of sexuality. [...] The miracle of conception and nativity and the ability to raise new beings from the deepness of the body remained highly mystical acts for the artist.⁴

Zemánková didn't begin making art seriously until she was in her early 50s – she had been too busy training to be a dental clinician, running a household and looking after her children. She loved being a mother, making up fairy tales, filling toys with speakers and painting bedroom walls, but her marriage brought her no joy; she missed her children when they grew up and left home and she became depressed. Her sons bought her coloured pencils and paper, believing a creative outlet for her feelings might help. They could never have predicted the creative wonders that were about to be unleashed. She recalled saying to them: 'Sure, I'll draw you something, I'll draw you one of my fantasies.'⁵

Once she began, she was unstoppable. She said:

When I'm painting, I'm more balanced, calmer. Art gives me a lot. It gives me direction. I didn't used to be the way I am now! I was more aggressive and unstable. I'm quite reserved now. Balanced and calm. I don't have days when I'm angry. I handle things calmly. Art frees me from material things.

At first, the artist drew, over and over again, variations on a theme of flowers: no two were the same. In the same way that musical notes can be arranged into a seemingly infinite combination of sounds, the function of flowers is myriad; they're pollinators, decorations, symbols; gifts to be given in celebration or sympathy. As she grew in confidence, Zemánková's floral drawings became increasingly fantastical – a springboard to explore the intermingling of physical worlds with less concrete ones: the endless realms of the unconscious. Her interest in materials also expanded and she became increasingly

⁴ Ibid, p.4

⁵ Op cit. Anna Zemánková interviewed by Pavel Konečný, p.30

improvisatory. Along with pens and pencils, she loved tempera, pastels and paint; fabrics such as satin, ribbon, imitation diamonds, sequins, twine, and more. In the 1970s, she employed crochet, embroidery and appliqué to great effect, weaving images that allude to both domestic and esoteric sources. As she said, she could use anything she could get her hands on.⁶ At times, she perforated the paper with a pin to create constellations of hundreds, if not thousands, of small, raised dots, each of which she encircled with pencil marks. Some of these works became lampshades that filtered light through tiny holes, transforming dark rooms into night skies, peppered with glowing stars.

Like many of the compositions by the great musicians Zemánková so admired, the past and the present entangle and erupt into new forms in her work. Whilst many, if not most of her pictures emanate a sense of great joy – conveyed in high-key colours, exuberant spirals and dancing lines – now and then, the intimation of something darker lurks, such as the combinations of severed, tube-like shapes that recur again and again. These images are something of a terrible prophecy. Suffering from diabetes in her later life, tragically, Zemánková had both her legs amputated.

Lines vibrating with energy evoked the artist's waking reveries. Her work as a dental clinician emerged in patterns of tiny teeth, enlivened with references to plant and animal life, human bodies, genitals and bellies; folk dresses, Prague's architecture and music. As Terezie Zemánková notes, the artist's works are often simultaneously kaleidoscopic and microscopic; they conjure the vastness of the space and the minuscule worlds swirling in a cell.⁷ Absorbing yourself in Zemánková's pictures is like going for a long walk through the parks and boulevards of both an ancient city and a frenetically inventive mind.

Asked about the sources of her inspiration, Zemánková replied:

Nobody knows. Me either, when I think about it. Why? Where does it come from? There's a big question mark hanging over it for me, too. I can't really say [...] sometimes I see something, the sort of deep feeling people have inside them, and it stays with me and I put it onto paper.⁸

⁶ Op cit, Anna Zemánková interviewed by Pavel Konečný, p.31

⁷ Op cit., Terezie Zemánková, 'The Flowers of Passion', p.4

⁸ Op cit., Anna Zemánková interviewed by Pavel Konečný, p.32

Although the artist wasn't spiritual, she recognised that her creativity had a life of its own. She described its evolution:

My work has gone through huge changes, but the steps were very slow. What you see today, and if you saw the beginnings ... well, what a difference! A huge difference. And whenever I create something, I always say: "That's it, I'm finished." And I'm convinced I can't go on. But again and again, I come up with something new. It drives me all on its own.⁹

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⁹ Ibid.