

Anna Zemánková

Electric Flowers and Cosmic Motherhood

Is Anna Zemánková (1908–1986) an artist ‘brut’, belonging to a loose field also called ‘outsider art’? I don’t think so. I could actually finish this argument right here, adding perhaps that the very question sounds obsolete today and that it also demonstrates my non-objectivity. The moment I set eyes on Zemánková’s work¹, I realised that I was looking at powerful and eccentric organic abstraction. Leaving all categories aside, I am routinely mesmerised, personally and professionally, by her subtly anthropomorphic, eroticised and vigorously blooming creatures.

The question of ‘art brut’ in relation to Zemánková’s work is not a new one. When art historians first encountered her drawings, they considered, discussed and reviewed this question — and the debate has continued ever since. The issue keeps shifting and oscillating through different angles and arguments, reflecting the mindset and prejudgements of each time period, as historians ponder the intimate meaning, symbolism and purpose of her work. But frankly, and most importantly, the sheer irresistibility of her mutating flowers seduces and confuses all judges. And today, as we know, these very categories, canons and borders themselves are visibly moving. The porosity of ‘art brut’ is being embraced, and the impurity of Western art categories in general has been acknowledged and confessed. Therefore it seems a good moment to revisit Zemánková’s oeuvre from her standpoint.

Sabotaging of definitions

‘Il Palazzo Enciclopedico’, the 2013 edition of the Venice Biennale curated by Massimiliano Gioni, made the ongoing mutations of occidental ‘high art’ and its hierarchies of knowledge noticeably visible. On the largest scale possible, this exhibition blurred the distinctions between professional and amateur artists, as well as ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’. Since then, the debate surrounding these issues has reached the most remote ears and eyes. What do we know, how do we accumulate all of this knowledge and how do we organise it all into rankings and hierarchies? A grid? A circle? A spiral? In the 1950s, the Italian-American ‘outsider’ artist Marino Auriti built *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico del Mondo*, a model for a 136-storey edifice, a construction that became the perfect figure for Gioni’s curatorial hypothesis at the 2013 Biennale. Auriti’s palazzo captures the ‘madness of modernism’ and its obsession with rational knowledge; it is a troubling utopia of a universal, all-encompassing and perfectly organised knowledge brought to the limits of absurdity.

Zemánková’s artworks were included in this exhibition. Her knowledge, which was not acquired and perfected in art schools, came from other sources: her medical training, her family life, the vicissitudes of the Cold War, the globally publicised technological breakthroughs of the 1960s, motherhood and the science fiction-novels she enjoyed reading. Her work is on view again at the Arsenale this year, in the exhibition ‘Foreigners Everywhere’, which takes a stand against the modernist practice of ‘othering’, while making a greater effort to expand boundaries, break the grid of classification and go beyond categorisations.

Indeed, Zemánková’s fantastic plants have always bloomed on their own. She was born in 1908 in a suburb of Olomouc, then part of Austria-Hungary. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that she grew up, as many classical artists like to claim about themselves, ‘surrounded by art’. Her home city of Olomouc, once the capital of Moravia, is in modern-day Czech Republic and remains a celebrated centre of Baroque and Art Nouveau. In some instances, Zemánková’s art undoubtedly makes a nod to Art Nouveau’s hybridity and dynamism, plant-inspired fabulation and detailed and stylised floral language.

Zemánková painted landscapes throughout her youth and dreamed of studying art, but her family decided that becoming a dental assistant was a safer life choice for her. She obliged. Her training likely included anatomy and physiology, enabling her to develop an understanding of the human body and its processes. In 1928, she started working in a dental office and later opened her own practice in Olomouc, to considerable success. In the context of the 1930s Europe, she was a modern woman - educated, successful and independent.

In 1933, she married. With the birth of her children, she had to give up both her job and her painting in order to dedicate herself to family life. Motherhood, it seems, was a jubilant, creative activity for her, since her children remember her making toys and brightly embroidered cloths, as well as engaging in exuberant decorative activities in the homes the family inhabited.²

Discipline and delirium

In 1960, when Zemánková was 52 and her children had left home for good, she started to consistently make art again. This story is well known in her biography and it is indeed an incredible one. Feeling lonely and falling into depression as an ageing woman, she was unable to find a use for her irrepressible creative energy, so she returned to art, the passion of her youth. Reportedly, her sons found an old suitcase in the basement of Zemánková’s house with the landscapes she had painted as a very young woman. Worried about her condition, and eager to help, they proposed that she try drawing again. And she did.

Work by Anna Zemánková is featured in the 60th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, through 24 November 2024, www.labiennale.org

Anna Zemánková (1908–1986) was on view from 13 April to 15 June at Wouters Sablon, Brussels, www.woutersgallery.com



ANNA ZEMÁNKOVÁ, *Untitled*, pastel on paper, 1960s, courtesy Terezie Zemankova and Christian Berst Gallery

What happened next? She started working, testing, trying out different techniques, formats and types of paper; she experimented with cloudy hues and bright pastel colours. She worked with discipline and obsession, such that drawing became a daily ritual. One particularity is noticed and discussed widely: she drew while listening to music, and always in liminal hours, at dawn.

As early as 1964, she presented her work during an ‘open studio’, enabling the public to see her ‘flowers’ for the first time. A certain puzzlement about the floral motifs in her work arose early on. Although she once said herself, somewhat enigmatically, ‘I grow flowers that grow nowhere else’, doubts remained. Are these really flowers? Or are they rather some erotically charged aliens?

The desire to treat her as a ‘floral painter’ has come up against several obstacles: some ‘flowers’ contain insect bodies. Others have some human joints or other body parts, and yet others feature maritime shapes. By combining these biomorphic elements, Zemánková created hybrid beings with a certain extraterrestrial allure. *Unheimlich* and bewildering, her blooming aliens seem to exist in both micro- and macrocosmic worlds.

And the paradoxes continue. Some of her ‘flowers’ have a technological touch. Her rocket-shaped plants, for example, were probably inspired by the

¹ Zemánková’s work was part of the exhibition ‘fragilités’ that I co-curated with Silvia Van Espen at Rudolfinum, Prague, 2022.
² Terezie Zemánková, art historian and the granddaughter of Anna Zemánková, has conducted an extraordinary work of research and publishing dedicated to her grandmother’s art.

enthusiasm for the space race of the post-war world. This period of the 1960s produced a massive iconography surrounding the 'conquest of the cosmos', the human victory over nature and the laws of gravity. Impressed and enchanted by the spell of progress, Zemánková reacted by painting rocket flowers, creatures that blend fragile organic and phallic aeronautic shapes, to a wonderfully surrealist effect. Her proud rockets, powerful instruments for overcoming gravity, look like determined insects. They stand resolutely ready for the upcoming cosmic challenge and yet, drawn by Zemánková's hand, they appear touchingly absurd in their helplessness. In a strange twist, their evident fragility produces a tender, comical take on the craze of the space race, the human obsession with technology and the strange belief in our species' superiority.

Such virtuoso intersections between Zemánková's responses to the outside world and her very intimate feelings and experiences energise her fabulous plants. And very often, her flowers' extra-terrestrial morphologies appear suggestive and erotically charged. Associations with Georgia O'Keefe's imagery are unavoidable and indeed, this has been evoked abundantly. Both artists managed to be acutely observational, yet despite their imageries' botanical likenesses, their artworks clearly embrace abstraction, an organic abstraction linked to rhythms found in the natural world. Indeed, organic or biomorphic abstraction could be Zemánková's art family.

Cosmic Motherhood

Although the feminine anatomy in Zemánková's work is rather ambiguous, her blooming exuberance often alludes to primal forms that invite speculation. Is it a seed, womb, cocoon, foetus, secret gland, dividing cell or opening pod? She doesn't help us with clarifications, because the titles in her work are extremely rare, with one notable exception.

Several titles reference her personal experience of childbirth. For example, *Birth of Slavomir* and *Birth of our Lucinka* (1967) evoke the births of her son and daughter, several decades before the drawings were made. Clearly, she drew upon bodily memories that remained fertile. As an older woman, she returned to these major moments in her life, when her body in transformation was fragile and powerful at the same time.

Motherhood is yet another boundless topic to which Zemánková contributed a distinctive and surprising take. These days, there seems to be a resurgent interest in motherhood. Popular topics for discussion, research and exhibitions range from prehistoric fertility goddesses to images of the Madonna, Mary Kelly's iconic 'Post-Partum Document', the stages of motherhood and its evolution across the ages, and feminist perspectives on same.

Zemánková conveys a sense of anatomic interiority in a flower shape. She combines this with a sense of jubilation and transformation, often supported by spectral bursts of light that seem to come from nowhere. In her work, it's possible to get a sense of both the physical and the neurobiological experience of motherhood, perhaps even of an identity transition, which is how motherhood is treated today. Her art recognises the inner transformation of the mother's identity, which is often accompanied by confusing emotions. The mother's changing body exhibits a vital cosmic energy exemplary of vibrantly blossoming invisible forces, impermanence, emergence and re-emergence.

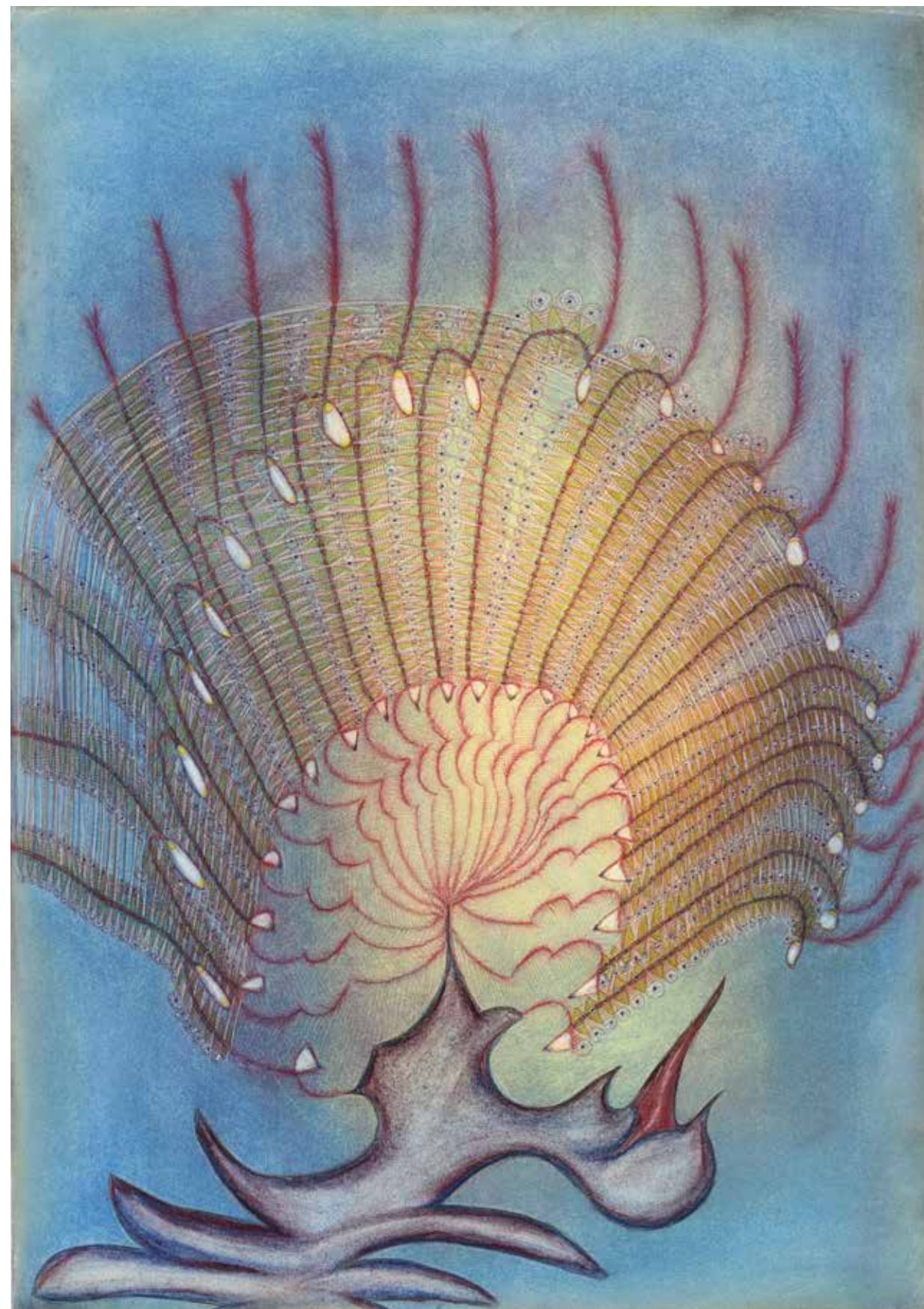
Thou shalt not decorate

Zemánková, who indulged in crochet, beadwork, brilliant colours and meticulous details, joyfully broke one of modern art's chief taboos. Her visual language transcends hierarchies and exudes a formal virtuosity and intricacy. However, this formal exuberance rarely remains static. In fact, her creatures appear to mutate, as if they're transitioning between different stages, moving between terrestrial and celestial realms or experiencing multiple senses. Her pictorial spaces are organised through dynamic diagonals, curves and spirals that come across like cosmic vibrations caught on paper. All matter seems to exist in a flux of energies, in their complex interrelationships, entanglements and predispositions to change.

My own curatorial lens on her work concerns this ongoing metamorphosis and its fragility. In 2022, I co-curated the exhibition 'fragilités' at the Rudolfinum in Prague, a group exhibition featuring works by Zemánková alongside other artists — some of them her contemporaries, others from much younger generations. The show did not take the classical meaning of fragility for granted, nor did it equate fragility with weakness, powerlessness or passivity. Rather, it claimed fragility as a source of strength and agency, the foundation of an artistic language that focuses on interconnections and insists on entanglements and the vulnerabilities of ecosystems, given their interdependencies with humans and more-than-humans.

In this context, Zemánková's extraordinary mastery of metamorphosis is what makes her art resonate as contemporary for me.³ She embraced the fantastic mutability of things, their fluidity and hybridity. She shared an interest in shifting and changing anatomies and identities, as well as open, fluid and unpredictable forms. She considered and sensed the body as a fragile vessel, unfinished and transitory, interconnected and interdependent. And ultimately, she expressed the fluid interchangeability of both fragility and strength, showing how neither fragility nor power ever comes in expected guises. Fragility itself is in constant metamorphosis, and we never know how it transforms into strength, or strength into fragility.

3 Her work was also shown in dialogue with contemporary positions at 'Chrysalis: The Butterfly Dream', at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, 2023.



ANNA ZEMÁNKOVÁ, *Birth of our Lucinka*, 1967, pastel, colour crayon and ink on paper, courtesy Terezie Zemankova and Christian Berst Gallery