

The Incandescent Botany of Overlooked Czech Artist Anna Zemánková

Combining baroque design with folk tradition, the late artist's work asks: is pattern not the motor of creation?

BY GREG NISSAN IN REVIEWS | 18 APR 19



In 1958, when Anna Zemánková was 50 years old, one of her children discovered a suitcase of paintings in the basement of her house in Prague and encouraged her to resume her artistic practice for the first time in decades. The 35 works on display at Weiss Berlin range from incandescent botanical drawings to murky geometric tempera paintings and pastel paintings on paper folio, which she would embroider with yarn, plus some folded miniatures produced towards the end of her life in 1986.

Zemánková first exhibited her works among a circle of friends and artists in Prague in the 1960s, difficult as that was during the Soviet era. Unlike other artists assembled under the banners of Outsider art or Art Brut – as Zemánková was introduced at the Hayward Gallery in 1979 and the Serpentine Gallery in 1987 – she was eager to find an audience and, in 1964, hosted her first open house to display her work. Abstraction and figuration beget one another in Zemánková's art: patterns metamorphose into biological forms; pink petals stutter into ornate arpeggios. But these patterns are not merely surface decoration: as with the crocheting the artist loved, they provide the constitutive links of matter. This rhythmic emphasis makes sense when we learn of Zemánková's ritualized creative process: she would wake at three or four o'clock every morning, put on music (often Johann Sebastian Bach or Leoš Janáček) and trace trance-like loops with her ballpoint pen. At seven o'clock, her domestic tasks would begin.



'Anna Zemánková', 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: Terezie Zemánková and Weiss Berlin; photograph: Gunter Lepkowski

In *Untitled* (1970s), a yellow triangular form holds the centre. Straight lines of pink flowers radiate to one side, resonating with power line-like extensions below. In the white space around the flowers, Zemánková's faint circles of pen echo their curvature, like she's humming the petals' refrain. By plotting them in straight rows, the flowers become their very own trellis. This mutuality of abstraction and figuration seems to ask: are patterns not the motor of creation? If cells link into organs and plants forge networks of nutrients, then what do the intervals of our lives form, with our routines of labour and leisure?

One of the most detailed pastel works, *Untitled* (1970s), seems like a conch or a carnivorous plant. But approach it and this wholesale recognition is vanquished for a contingency of rhythms: conveyor belts of pen marks, accordion-like contractions and extensions. New associations are forged at this scale, its underbelly like cells seen through a microscope or the Mocarábe ceilings of Moorish architecture.

Zemánková does not hide these images like punchlines; rather, her patterns cannot help but generate associations. Without thematizing her own rituals and activities – art, family life, domestic chores, correspondence – her work extends their sense of interval: quotidian comings and goings, the segmentations of space our daily tasks are built around, circular routines and their occasional sparks.



Anna Zemánková, *Untitled*, first half of 1970s, pastel, India ink, and ballpoint pen on paper, 45 × 62 cm.
Courtesy: Terezie Zemánková and Weiss Berlin; photograph: Gunter Lepkowski

The artist's embroidery and collage works from the 1970s demonstrate a dizzying variety of scale and texture. Satin floats like jellyfish in one, droops like a branch in another. Coarse webs of yarn hold within them dynamic baroque patterns. It's never quite clear what's woven, collaged or drawn. One fern-like figure seems static, as if pressed between pages. But, under the yarn, a hyperkinetic carnival spins out in a single square inch.

Drawing on the decorative and folk traditions of the Czech region of Moravia, Zemánková's works reveal the nuance of decoration in art: that ornament can catch the brief explosions of our senses without chaining them to a beginning or an end, or invoking a falsified sense of closure. You will not find a skull or a clock in her garden. Here are no symbols of time. These are the works of days.

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*'Anna Zemánková' was on view at Weiss Berlin from 15 December until
16 March 2019.*

*Main image: Anna Zemánková, Untitled (detail), first half of 1970s, pastel, india ink, ballpoint pen, and embroidery on paper, 63
× 45 cm. Courtesy: Terezie Zemánková and Weiss Berlin; photograph: Gunter Lepkowski*

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