

Life & Culture

Celebrated at last, forgotten artist who captured Fifties East End slums

Eva Frankfurter is being recognised in a major exhibition at the Barbican



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ART



West Indian Waitresses by Eva Frankfurter

Exhausted West Indian waitresses seek comfort in each other’s company at a restaurant bar, their weary hands resting on the surface in front of them as they hold a ladle and a plate.

This mesmerising painting by German refugee Eva Frankfurter was among several of the artist’s works admired by the greats of British Jewish art – but for years her output was overlooked by the art establishment.

Now, more than 60 years after her death, she is being recognised in a major exhibition at the Barbican in London.

Ms Frankfurter was born into a cultured and assimilated Jewish family in Berlin in 1930. Following the rise of the Nazis, she escaped to London with her family in 1939. In Britain, she opted to live in a Whitechapel slum, scraping a living as a dishwasher at a Lyons Corner House.

Her co-workers were often her subjects, and her portrait of the waitresses is one of the poster images for the show *Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain*, which runs until 29 August. The work is an example of the tenderness that renowned British-Jewish artist Frank Auerbach admired in her painting, which he described as “full of feeling for people”.

Ms Frankfurter studied at St Martin’s Art School with Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, but she went her own way and “chose not to support herself with her art”, said curator Jane Alison, head of visual arts at the Barbican.

Tragically, Ms Frankfurter suffered from depression and took her own life in 1959, aged just 29.

Another Jewish artist whose work features in the Barbican exhibition is Magda Cordell, whose life was also shaped by the Second World War.

Two impasto (heavily layered) paintings by Ms Cordell, who fled Hungary as a war orphan, are among the largest in the show and stand out for their drama. They greet visitors with a blaze of colour after rooms of other artists’ work displaying grim black-and-white images, scarred and scratched, redolent of the aftermath of war and mutilated bodies.

One of the huge paintings by Ms Cordell is an exposed heart, which stands at almost 10ft high. To Ms Cordell, the body was a site of trauma, reflecting her experience picking her way across war-torn Europe to find refuge in Egypt and Palestine before she settled in London to make and show art.

Unlike Ms Frankfurter, Ms Cordell lived a long and productive life, becoming an academic after emigrating to the USA with her second husband. Her optimism is reflected in her post-war comment: “I was filled with pain and I hoped for a better world.”

Another Jewish refugee artist not unknown but rediscovered for the Barbican show is Polish-born Franciszka Themerson, who fled Paris for London in 1940 while her family, most of whom perished in the Holocaust, were trapped in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Curator Ms Alison said Ms Themerson often combined the “joyous and acerbic”, with one example being her portrait of a puppet head of state, which evokes comparisons with today’s leaders in Belarus and Kazakhstan.

Yet her *Eleven Persons and One Donkey Moving Forwards* may be the most optimistic work in the whole show, an image of migrating refugees moving resolutely towards a new life.

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