Franciszka Themerson: a painter who 'carried her world within her'

Having fled wartime Paris, Themerson settled in London with her husband Stefan, publishing avant-garde books and making experimental films. Her work is now being rediscovered, ahead of her inclusion in Tate's forthcoming *One Donkey Morning Forecasts* (FMC) exhibition at the Modern British and Irish Art Evening Sale on 19 March

Alicia de Blasses Auction Highlights Arts & Culture Writer
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Franciszka Themerson (1921-2000), *Gloves Dancers and Lion Dancer (Gloves Dancers)*, 1960, ink on canvas, 47 x 33 in. (119.5 x 83.8 cm.). Estimate £40,000-60,000. Offered in Modern British and Irish Evening Sale, 19 March 2026 at Christie's in London

In 1949, the artist **Franciszka Themerson** drew a comic picture of herself the wrong way up. Titled *Jan Fatandrap or my head* (V.A. in the model speak), about the Soviet Union had just turned its first atomic bomb, marking the beginning of the Cold War and raising the potential for nuclear Armageddon. Themerson's pen and ink portrait, depicting herself hanging inverted in a parachute, is one of the artist's rare works that hold up to reading some of this strange universe in which she found herself.

How does an artist respond to a world gone mad? By taking a lently to the complacency and emptiness of high culture, as **in the Dadaists (Hi-Hi)** or by exploring the absurdity of the human condition, as Franciszka Themerson, an artist, illustrator and filmmaker, made the decision to laugh to crotch, and enliven the tale of fears with a little savage fantasy.

Franciszka Themerson at her London studio in 1949, painting her *Gloves Dancers and Lion Dancer (Gloves Dancers)*. © Estate of Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson

For the next 40 years, until her death in 1980, Themerson adopted a deliberately plain technique to express her home at the world, the show flat headed thinkers with atomplied limbs soft, quasicly bodies toppling into the void, and the occasional monstrous figure. In her paintings, she made the stick-coal of her punishment, home of her works were unexpected, such as a 1973 depiction of a grieving, pitiqu, general, titled Napoleon as Seen by the Ghosts of Those Who Died in Battle, and her work were little more than a couple of spidery lines connected by a solid swing axis.

As a Pole in London, she found the British predilection for small talk and avoiding the toxic machismo. Twas completely entangled in this strange world, she wrote in her diary, and I felt I was a stranger in it. Her work, "unlike Dada", she recalled, "also articulated her frustration with such as *Two Dead Persons Making Their Way to Heaven One Pinnefkend One Dehydrated with a Little Jaded Horse*, 1949, now in the Tate collection, which depicts a pair of pretty figures in an abstract landscape.

Franciszka Themerson (1907-1988), *Waving Japanese*, 1966, 35 x 50 cm, Private collection. © Estate of Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson

At times, the artist kept her palette deliberately austere, only using white, black and grey to provide a 'strange counterbalance', the tale of the human stillness and self-importance. Ohe tell paint, however, was often deployed to great effect, as in the 1966 work *Waving Japanese*, a perspective drawl of Themerson's figures were trying to escape the morass. Caught up in some Kafkaesque cycle of things, or if it was the artist trying to yibou, seconds, perhaps, there her way into this viscous insipid and of life.

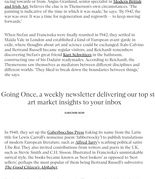
Themerson was born into a family of artists in Warsaw, Poland, in 1903. Her mother Lucja was a painter, and her father was the painter Adam Niesiko. A highly strung child, at the Franciszka became distraught at a self-portrait she had produced, and her father tore it up. Later, she was to be remembering as my eyes in the mirror. Eyes remained her I know. It was a revelation to discovery at the age of seven, that by adding a single detailed eye to an empty face a whole mental world might emerge.

Franciszka Themerson (1907-1988), *Dada Dancers*, 1960, 35 x 50 cm, Private collection. © Estate of Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson

At 12, Franciszka enrolled in the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, graduating as its best student in 1925. An exhibition of early drawings and paintings, currently running at the Rose Art Gallery in London until 25 May 2026, reveals a prodigiously talented artist with the instincts of a storyteller.

It was also in 1925 that she married a young writer Stefan Themerson, and together they worked on experimental films incorporating diverse techniques such as photomontage, universal surfaces and animation, with the mystery and elasticity of a dream. Inevitably, the couple were drawn to Paris, and in 1928 the pair left Poland for what was then Europe's centre of ideas and artistic liberation.

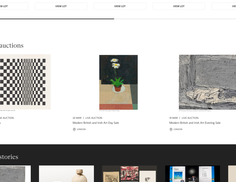
Their time in Paris was short lived. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Stefan enlisted in the Polish 2nd Infantry Brigade, while Franciszka got a job in the Polish Embassy. The couple escaped to Vichy, then to the Free Polish Bureau in London with his colleagues. Stefan's division was disbanded and he spent the next two years trying to secure a passage to the United Kingdom.



Franciszka Themerson (1921-2000), *Gloves Dancers and Lion*, 1960, 47 x 33 in. (119.5 x 83.8 cm.), ink on canvas. Estimate £40,000-60,000. Offered in Modern British and Irish Evening Sale, 19 March 2026 at Christie's in London. © Estate of Franciszka Themerson and Stefan Themerson

For their families in Warsaw, the situation was critical. Franciszka's 22-year-old brother was killed in Auschwitz, and her father died of a heart attack in the Holocaust. Three are had been Franciszka wrote in one of her many 'unposted letters' to Stefan. 'I seem unable to do anything to convince myself that I'll survive. Perhaps I just don't know how to anyonen.'

It was a book of drawings by Edward Lear that brought Franciszka back to her craft, as she discovered in his prose work *Nonsense* a way to exercise her own 'psycho storme' Unlike her father, who was renowned for his paintings of Polish life, Lear was a Victorian businessman had suffered Pinnefkeda artistic creative control to let art. 'It haunts her paintings nonetheless,' says the artist's niece, Inna Rickhardt.



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Eleven Persons and One Donkey Morning Forecasts (FMC) is a case in point. Exhibited in *Postwar Modern: New Art in Britain/Poland 1945-1968* at the Barbican and Tate Liverpool in London in 2018, the work was first shown at Gallery Gecko, where thoughts about art and science could be explored. Sadie Coleman and Bertrand Russell became regular visitors, and Rickhardt remembers her parents discussing Wittgenstein, Russell and Bertrand Russell, constructing one of his Dadaist masterpieces. According to Rickhardt, the Themersons saw themselves as mediators between different disciplines and different worlds. 'They liked to break down the boundaries between things,' she says.

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In 1948, they set up the Gaboflowchus Press failing its name, from the Latin *ofly* for Lucy's cat and *chus* for Stefan's dog, to publish translations of modern European literature, such as Alfred Jarry's satirical political satire Ubu Roi. They also invited contributions from writers and poets in the UK, including Dylan Thomas, Lawrence Durrell and Herbert Read. Themerson's surreal style, the books became known as Neo Jarlsen' as opposed to 'Neo' jarlsen' perhaps the most popular of them being Bertrand Russell's subversive *The Good Citizen's Alphabet*.

Rickhardt believes that, over the years, the Themersons found that in London they could do what they really wanted to do, and so they remained in the UK for the rest of their lives. 'McLean once said that artists and writers carry their own world within themselves,' she says. 'and I think that is true.'

The Modern British and Irish Art sales are on view at Christie's in London until 19 March 2026, followed by the Evening Sale on 19 March and the Day Sale on 20 March.

Themerson is currently the subject of two exhibitions in London: Franciszka Themerson: Dadaist Modernist at the Tate Britain and Stefan Themerson and Franciszka Themerson: Studies from the Life at the Hoo 1.0 Gallery in Museum until 22 May.

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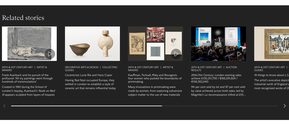

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