

18 February 2019

Camden  
arts centre

A Tale of Mother's Bones: Grace Pailthorpe,  
Reuben Mednikoff and the Birth of Psychorealism

12 April – 23 June 2019

Preview: Thursday 11 April, 6.30 – 8.30pm

The first exhibition on these important artists' for more than twenty years.



Reuben Mednikoff, *March 20, 1936 - 1 (The Stairway to Paradise)*, 1936. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 41 x 47 cm framed. Courtesy: The Murray Family Collection (UK and USA).

Photo: Luke Walker

Camden Arts Centre is pleased to present the major survey exhibition: *A Tale of Mother's Bones: Grace Pailthorpe, Reuben Mednikoff and the Birth of Psychorealism*. Organised by Camden Arts Centre and De La Warr Pavilion, this is the first exhibition on the work of these important but little-known artists' for more than twenty years.

*A Tale of Mother's Bones* tells the remarkable story of a unique artistic and personal collaboration. Dr Grace Pailthorpe (1883–1971) and Reuben Mednikoff (1906–1972) met at a party in 1935. Pailthorpe was a surgeon in the First World War and a trained psychoanalyst, whilst Mednikoff was an artist and graphic designer. 23 years his senior, Pailthorpe began an intense relationship with Mednikoff which was to span the next four decades. Mednikoff taught Pailthorpe the rudiments of art; she taught him the basics of interpretative analysis. Together they produced wildly experimental paintings and drawings, psychoanalytic interpretation, and a new approach to art therapy. They invented the term 'Psychorealism' to describe their creative process, spending many years researching how art and writing might liberate individuals and societies from violence and oppression.

Working in close dialogue they produced their work freely, using psychoanalytic interpretation, often written directly onto the back of the works, to unlock subconscious meaning and messages. Using themselves and each other as subjects, they drew on their earliest memories in order to try and understand the complexities of adult relationships and psychology, as well as the broader repercussions of various forms of repression for society as a whole.

*A Tale of Mothers' Bones* is the first exhibition to bring together Pailthorpe and Mednikoff's extraordinary drawings and paintings, alongside their interpretations. Featuring over 80 works, as well as material drawn from their extensive archive, held at National Galleries of Scotland, the show examines their earliest experiments with Surrealist processes, the critical reception they received, their response to the rise of Fascism in interwar Europe, as well as the way they approached gender, relationships and spiritual belief from new and often radical positions.

*A Tale of Mother's Bones* also looks at why the artists remain relatively unknown to contemporary audiences. Despite exhibiting with leading British Surrealist artists in the 1930s and being called "the best and most truly Surrealist" of all the English artists by André Breton himself, they were expelled from the group for refusing what they saw as the narrow ambitions of Surrealism, pursuing instead a more expansive application of their work. The show includes loans from Tate, Victoria and Albert Museum, National Galleries of Scotland and the British Museum, as well as private collections, and follows Pailthorpe and Mednikoff's inclusion in the recent *Modern Couples* at Barbican (2018-2019), *Virginia Woolf, An Exhibition* at Tate St Ives (2018) and *Dreamers Awake* at White Cube (2017).

The exhibition's presentation at Camden Arts Centre in Hampstead has a particular relevance. The couple were living on nearby Redington Road for several years around 1950. During this time Pailthorpe was involved in the founding of the Portman Clinic at Swiss Cottage, whose pioneering work in juvenile delinquency and mental health continues today. This was also the time when the former Hampstead Library was being transformed into Camden Arts Centre. It feels a particularly appropriate context in which to introduce

their practice - which spanned art, psychoanalysis, art therapy and writing - to new audiences.

Dr Hope Wolf of the University of Sussex has led the project, undertaking considerable new research into the artists' archive. Dr Wolf comments: 'Pailthorpe and Mednikoff's ambitious quest for self-understanding, to mother the world by birthing new ideas, was pursued with astonishing energy and commitment. Their experiment in art and life was genuinely daring.'

*A Tale of Mother's Bones* is curated by Dr Hope Wolf, Senior Lecturer in Modernism and Co-director of the Centre for Modernist Studies at the University of Sussex, with Martin Clark, Director, Camden Arts Centre, Gina Buenfeld, Curator, Camden Arts Centre and Rosie Cooper, Head of Exhibitions at the De La Warr Pavilion.

It is accompanied by a major new publication on the artist's work, including contributions from Gina Buenfeld, Martin Clark, Rosie Cooper, Joanna Pawlik, Michel Remy, Laura Salisbury, Andrew Wilson, Hope Wolf.

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**Notes to Editors:**

**About Camden Arts Centre**

Camden Arts Centre is a place for contemporary visual art and education, where ideas are made visible and people of all ages and abilities can engage in the creative process of making. Camden Arts Centre's pioneering and varied exhibition, residency and education programmes have gained an international reputation as a model of good practice. It is a forward-thinking organisation where artists and others can see, make and talk about art.

## More About the Artists

**Grace W. Pailthorpe** (1883 –1971) was a British painter, surgeon, and psychology researcher. Qualifying as a doctor in 1914, she served with some distinction as a surgeon at military hospitals in London, Paris and Liverpool during World War One.

After the war, she travelled extensively across the world and upon returning to England in 1922, embarked on studying Freudian analysis, criminal psychology and delinquent behaviour. She published works on the psychology of delinquency and in 1931 established the Association for the Scientific Treatment of Criminals, which eventually became the modern day Portman Clinic, now based within the National Health Service in Camden, London.

In 1935, Pailthorpe met **Reuben Mednikoff** (1906–1972). He was a trained artist and designer who had studied at St Martin’s School of Art and shortly, after meeting, they moved to Cornwall to begin what would become a life-long creative project researching the psychology of art. Initially creating surrealist art and contributing to the International Surrealist Exhibition in London (1936), the pair received great praise for their paintings and drawings.

However, by 1940, the pair had been formally expelled from the group, due to their assertions that creating Surrealist art had the capacity to bring unconscious memories into consciousness, thereby applying a more scientific rationale to a movement which championed the very opposite.

Due to the split, the rise of fascism and the outbreak of World War Two, the pair decided to leave England, travelling to New York, California and then Vancouver, where they developed the discourse of surrealism and staged Canada’s first ever Surrealist exhibition.

Returning to England in 1946, Pailthorpe became a Consultant Psychiatrist at the Portman Clinic in 1948 with Mednikoff joining her as her assistant. She also ran a School of Art Therapy from 1950 until 1958 when they moved to Sussex.

The couple died one year apart from one another in 1971 and 1972.

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### Opening Times:

Tuesday – Sunday: 10.00am – 6.00pm  
Wednesdays late: 10.00am – 9.00pm  
Closed Mondays  
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