

1984

Jitka Vállová (1922 – 2011)

The Ancient Story, 1984

Jitka Vállová (1922–2011) spent her remarkable life in one place and with one person. The place was the periphery of the workers' city of Kladno and the person was her twin sister Květa, also a painter. One extroverted, the other introverted, they lived side by side for 76 years (until 1998, when Květa died). They were both exploited by forced labor in the Kladno steelworks under the German rule during the Second World War, studied at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague in the studio of their beloved professor Emil Filla between 1945 and 1950, and joined the group Trasa in 1954. They exhibited together, and together won the prestigious Austrian J. G. Herder Art Prize. And all the time they lived together in a house in Kladno, in an incredibly modest way, devoted solely to one another and their oeuvres. They never married, but instead supported and inspired each other. The gallery visitors frequently mention that the walls of their studio were barely visible through the thick clouds of cigarette smoke, and the debates about art were spiced by gutsy expressions taken from the authentic life of the Kladno steelworkers. They deliberately did not want to live and work in Prague; they always spoke and worked freely, which was unprecedented at that time. Their first major exhibition took place in 1966 in the Špála Gallery, and it took 17 long years to hold the next one. The two painters were part of the Czechoslovak unofficial art, forbidden by the communist regime. Their exhibition organized in 1983 in the Cheb and Roudnice galleries and also in our branch in Letohrádek Ostrov was thus truly groundbreaking. It was a great event at the time of "darkness," and many eye-witnesses still share their memories of it.

Four years later, the Karlovy Vary gallery acquired a valuable trophy – Jitka Vállová's breathtaking canvases *The Ancient Story* and *The Great Burden*. The artist who created these monumental works was a petite woman and sensitive painter who constantly doubted her work. She was an essential figuralist. Her art is about humans, their strengths and weaknesses, their hopes and resignations, their existential struggles, and the hardships resulting from the repressive normalization era. Her characters struggle to preserve their dignity, authenticity and humanity in the inhuman time that instead of freedom only knew immorality and concessions. Her elongated and slender figures, painted with almost drawing lines, are reminiscent of ancient rock drawings, simplified, without details, bringing emotional and expressive messages. Jitka Vállová's paintings and drawings have always been characteristic of authenticity, unaffectedness, and constant search for the right shapes and lines, which would convincingly capture the fragility of a man crushed by the weight of life or the troubled situation of the time. Her figures were often skewed, sadly crooked, bent. "*Jitka's man is a man-stalk. Jitka's man is vulnerable, bent by the adversity of life, but he is never completely broken.*" (R. Drury)

Jitka Vállová's oeuvre is characteristic of sober color palette; it is sometimes almost monochromatic. This is also evident in *The Ancient Story*, using merely four colors – rusty, grey-blue, white and black, and many of their hues. The depiction of the biblical Crucifixion and Lamentation, using modest drawing strokes, is immensely expressive and monumental, and yet deeply intimate. Just look at the two women mourning under the Cross that towers against the sinister steely sky, the background executed in the rusty color of dried blood, and the gestures of clasped praying hands. The work radiates the power of the Christ's sacrifice for all us who err, and expressively captures the line between physical suffering and spiritual liberation. The message is delivered in a simple and strong way, so characteristic of Jitka Vállová, one of the most distinguished representatives of the 20th-century Czech fine art.

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