



Grace Pailthorpe, May 16, 1941

A Tale of Mother's Bones

Grace Pailthorpe, Reuben Mednikoff and the Birth of Psychorealism

Exhibition: 6 October 2018 – 20 January 2019

De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill on Sea, TN40 1DP, www.dlwp.com

Opening: Saturday 6 October 2018

Dr Grace Pailthorpe (surgeon/ psychoanalyst / artist, 1883-1971) and Reuben Mednikoff (artist, 1906-1972) began collaborating in 1935. From that year until their deaths, they produced a huge body of work that included startlingly vivid and wildly experimental paintings and drawings, often paired with in-depth psychoanalytic interpretation, as well as autobiography, poetry and short stories. They spent decades of their lives researching how the visual and literary arts might liberate individuals and societies from the constraints that sickened and impoverished them, together developing a creative process that combined Surrealism with psychoanalysis, bringing artistic and scientific thinking together.

A Tale of Mother's Bones is the first major presentation of Pailthorpe and Mednikoff's art in twenty years. The exhibition tells the story of the couple's lives through their works, showing how they excavated their earliest memories (including memories of birth, weaning and sibling rivalry) in order to understand their adult relationships, critical reception, political context and spiritual beliefs.

The artworks will be shown together with the artists' interpretations of them: some are inscribed on the back of frames; others have been retrieved from their personal papers. In lectures devoted to paintings such as *The Stairway to Paradise* and *The Flying Pig* (both 1936), Pailthorpe argued that Mednikoff's use of particular shapes, colours and media told stories about the aggressions and anxieties he experienced in early childhood. In 1938 she delved even further back into the past, conducting investigations into the experience of being born, painting and drawing a series of foetal and embryonic forms.



Reuben Mednikoff, *The Stairway to Paradise*, March 20, 1936

The exhibition brings together painting, drawing, writing and biographical ephemera to reinstate the couple within the artistic and intellectual histories they contributed to, charting Pailthorpe and Mednikoff's collaboration from the 1930s through to the spectacularly colourful watercolours Pailthorpe painted in her eighties, when she was living at Ninfield in East Sussex. It draws on extensive archival research undertaken by Dr Hope Wolf from the University of Sussex, who 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: they were heartbreakingly aware of how painful it would be to risk the disapproval of paternal critics.'

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 Rosie Cooper, Head of Exhibitions at the De La Warr Pavilion, Martin Clark, Director, Camden Arts Centre, and Gina Buenfeld, Curator, Camden Arts Centre.

The exhibition is developed in partnership with Camden Arts Centre, where it will be presented on 12 April – 23 June 2019, and will be accompanied by a catalogue featuring original scholarship on the artists.

More about the artists

In 1935 Pailthorpe met Mednikoff, twenty-three years her junior. He was a trained artist and designer who had studied at St Martin's School of Art. Shortly afterwards they moved to Port Isaac in Cornwall and began what became a life-long creative project. They also lived in the United States, Canada, London and finally Ninfield, four miles from the De La Warr Pavilion.

The artists' collaborative work drew on the training they undertook before meeting one another. Unusually for a woman of the period, Dr Grace Pailthorpe worked as a surgeon in the First World War. She went on to explore the mind rather than the body, training in psychoanalysis, conducting pioneering work into the psychology of women in prisons, and co-founding the Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency (from which branched the Portman Clinic, which still exists today).

Not leaving her medical beginnings behind, Pailthorpe's thinking about art reveals a preoccupation with ideas of illness and cure. She hoped that art would offer 'a quicker way to the deeper layers of the unconscious than by the long drawn-out couch method' of Sigmund Freud. She and Mednikoff were 'guinea-pigs' for her research; Pailthorpe was both patient and doctor. Psychoanalytic interpretations would be inscribed on the back of some of their drawings; paintings would be photographed and then annotated. Pailthorpe would devote extensive lectures to a chosen few works, offering intricate readings of their hidden messages. In 1938-9, she published *The Scientific Aspect of Surrealism: an essay that makes the case that creating Surrealist art has the capacity to heal the individual, and achieve the 'liberation of man', by bringing unconscious memories into consciousness.*

Pailthorpe and Mednikoff would later seek to distinguish their practice from more 'destructive' expressions of Surrealism and experimented with a new term: 'psychorealism'. Pailthorpe would never publish *Psychorealism: The Sluice Gate of the Emotions*, a 53,000-word book that explained how her method might offer a way of stopping the kinds of political violence she and her generation had witnessed. 'Hitler and Mussolini', she wrote, 'would never have become insanely dictatorial had they had, as children, ample opportunity to vent their infantile rages'.

While Pailthorpe and Mednikoff never abandoned their interest in infancy and babyhood, in the final stages of their lives they began exploring Theosophy, Creative Meditation and Agni Yoga.. Mednikoff, who changed his name to Richard Pailthorpe in 1948, wrote fascinating reflections on his past lives. The couple died one year apart from one another in 1971 and 1972.

About the De La Warr Pavilion: the De La Warr Pavilion is a centre for arts and culture in an iconic modernist building by the sea. With artists and audiences at its heart, it produces and innovative and integrated cultural programme that reflects the world in which we live. This exhibition is an important part of the 2018 programme that, across the year, invites visitors to think about the Pavilion's social, political and architectural history in new and different ways.

Current exhibitions are Alison Wilding's *Right Here and Out There*, until 16 September; Florence Peake *RITE: on this pliant body we slip our WOW!*, until 2 September; and 1935, a year-long exhibition in the Rooftop foyer which brings together a series of events that happened the year the Pavilion opened, exploring lesser-known histories and the social and political context of the time.

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