



ArtSeen

JINDRICH STYRSKY *Dreams*

by Valery Oisteanu

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In less than two decades Jindřich Štyrský (1899 – 1942) influenced surrealist artists and poets in his native Czechoslovakia, Paris, and around the world. A painter, poet, photographer, editor, and collagist, Štyrský was an innovator of arts on both a spiritual and experimental level. His outstanding and varied oeuvre includes numerous book covers and illustrations for surrealist publications in Prague. Friendly with André Breton, he is credited alongside his co-conspirator Toyen (in real life Marie Cherminova) as a pioneer of surrealism in art, literature, photography, and theater in Prague as well as Paris.

The current exhibit presents 22 rare works by Štyrský that cover his entire range, including collages, drawings, frottages, photographs, and illustrated books. Three small black-and-white photographs from the series “On the Needles of These Days” (the clandestine edition 1941) open the show. The first photo, “Untitled” (1934), depicts branches and roots with an accompanying text that reads: “Roots—surely our sleep will always be troubled when we slumber with our head by the ground.” This is followed by “Untitled” (1941), an image of a barbershop window that is reminiscent of the French photographer Eugène Atget. While taking the picture, Štyrský inadvertently let his reflection in the glass become part of the image. The photograph is supplemented with a wall text that reads, “Your looks dies in horror of the nights of madness which bring only dreams like the flowers on frozen windows, or dreamless plains like the sheet metal of lowered blinds” (Jindřich Heisler, 1941).



Jindřich Štyrský, “Alabastrová rucička [Little Alabaster Hand]” 1940. Pencil frottage & collage on paper 8 5/8 × 11 3/4”. Courtesy of Ubu Gallery.

This work is followed by collages and drawings on paper. Among them is “Woman Frozen in Ice I” (1939), a composition in India ink depicting a slashed bloody face and two breasts protruding from ice. More enigmatic is “Buried Stones” (1939), which shows three stones in a coffin, mysterious and magical at the same time. Each stone is engraved with animal symbols as if by some ancient hunter.

My favorite is the collage “Little Alabaster Hand” (1940). This work, done in pencil frottage and collage on paper, depicts a disembodied hand unable to catch two butterflies hovering above. The puzzling composition has a somewhat Kafkaesque romanticism and mysterious feel to it. A subsequent frottage from the series “Omnipresent Eye” (1936) shows two floating eyeballs on a surreal space-face overlaid with restraining chicken-wire frottage.

“Dream about a Derelict House” (1940) may be the oddest drawing of them all. It presents a square hole in the wall with two female legs dangling from it, the left leg with a high-heel shoe and the other stripped of flesh showing bones and muscles as in a medical book. An accompanying text describes the vision that led to the work’s creation, “When I’ve walked around three sides, I notice on the eastern side, where the house abuts a garden, female legs protruding from the wall. As if a woman has been immured here. A stocking and a shoe cover one leg, and the other has been picked clean to the bone.”

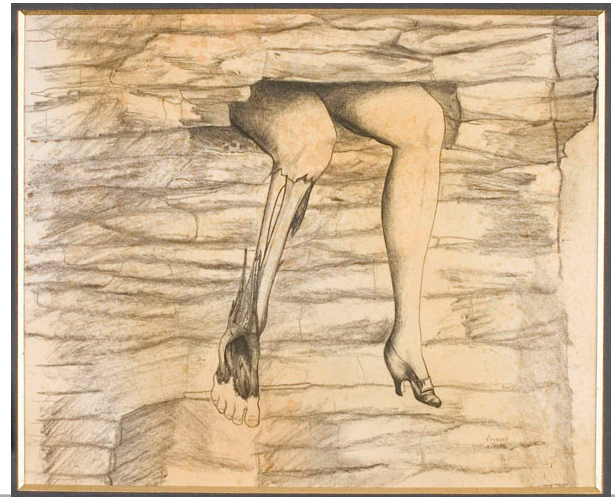
There are three erotic photo-collages, which are mock-ups for his masterpiece “Emilie comes to me in a dream,” whose raw material probably came from vintage erotic photographs of the time. One shows naked couples making love, another depicts two naked women on top of each other and a naked man floating in the air upside down, held onto by an exotic female dancer so as not to drift away. The last of the series portrays a sexual romp on top of what looks like a three-tiered coffin. The series, “Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream,” has the same title as the book Štyrský produced in 1933, two editions of which are on display here. (Emilie was a code name for Štyrský’s sister Marie, who had died at age 21, a devastating loss for the brother.)

The show continues with more small black-and-white photographs of bizarre sculptural details discovered by Štyrský on his hunts, in keeping with the principle of “object trouve” and chance encounter: a tombstone, a sad angel on top of an entrance in a courtyard, a Madonna seen through a balustrade, the bust of a woman as a tombstone, her weatherworn stone-face suggesting corrosion and decomposition.

This fascinating exhibit concludes with a glass display case containing five books and a vintage art bulletin; images include a grotesque collage inspired by Max Ernst showing a bleeding head on a night table with a man unconscious on a couch, holding a large disembodied penis from the

artist's 1931 series, "Sexual Nocturno."

In his short life Štyrský engaged in an unusual amount of experimentation. In the process, he created a surreal personal universe that is still being analyzed and deciphered, leaving a legacy of "the marvelous in the everyday life" that inspired his fellow countrymen and many other avant-garde artists all over the world, and continues to do so today.



Jindřich Štyrský, "Sen o opuštěném domě" [Dream about a Derelict House], 1940. Pencil on paper, 9 × 11". Courtesy of Ubu Gallery.

416 E. 59th St. // NY, NY