

RAW VISION

EXHIBITIONS

DOROTHY F FOSTER

Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia
September 15 – November 5, 2022

In the last decade of her life, Dorothy F Foster (1903–1986) created eerie drawings that remained hidden away long after her death in Port Jervis, New York. During the 1920s, Foster had attended The Cooper Union Women's School and became a textile designer for A. Sulka and Co. in New York. After retiring, she self-published an autobiography, *The Noisesome Day, The Stilly Night* (1973), lively and cheerful except for an abduction figment, described as terrifying but never mentioned again. Foster's drawings convey a similar mood of tension between happy-go-lucky normality and an inexplicable danger. The works were not discovered by her great-nephew until nearly 30 years after her death. He sold some, and a few were shown in 2015 at UpFront Exhibition Space, Port Jervis. Then, in 2021, Claire Iltis, Fleisher/Ollman's associate director, noticed some of Foster's drawings in a shop. "I feel very lucky that we happened to be there," she says. With Foster's great-nephew, she began cataloguing the art.

The small, unsettling works are in coloured pencil and ballpoint pen on newsprint and magazine pages. There is no collaging, and Foster's interplay between her marks and the existing newsprint – often turned sideways or upside down – is mesmerising. The works are populated by tiny, red-haired girls with enigmatic expressions and wearing shapeless gowns and tall, conical hats. Clustered in groups, as if for safety, they seem vulnerable. An arched border is drawn or cut around each drawing, and a pattern often runs across the lower edge. Iconography includes fish, eels, birds, seed pods, vines and leaves. Male forms appear rarely but with atmospheric

RAW REVIEWS



Mayhem, 1970–1986

effect, as in *"Fog" Drifts in from the Sea* (between 1970 and 1986).

The 20 drawings framed in white, in Fleisher/Ollman's first solo show for Foster, are little bursts of colour on the white gallery walls. Their lack of discernible narrative frustrates and enchants – *Mayhem* (between 1970 and 1986) seems to show a beach, a volcano, a railway bridge accident, or all three, while in *"Sunshine" On and On and On* (between 1970 and 1986) two tiers of girls are gathered over rotated type. The work cannot be deciphered, but it is fun to try. Even as they defy context, Foster's untethered fairytales captivate.

EMILY B SCHILLING