

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Calvert Journal

Curvaceous shapes in cheerful colours: Ilona Keserü's paintings wrest unbridled joy out of the grip of sorrow

Edmée Lepercq

29 November 2021

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### Curvaceous shapes in cheerful colours: Ilona Keserü's paintings wrest unbridled joy out of the grip of sorrow

Born on this day in 1933, Hungary's leading post-war artist, Ilona Keserü, developed a luminous and organic abstract style in the face of political and cultural hardship.



Image: 'Double Form 3', Ilona Keserü (1972). Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Gábor S. Horváth.

Abstract art, Keserü's preferred style of painting, was not approved of by the state. She remembers it was absent from national museums and galleries, which favoured figuration, a style of painting more amenable to propagandist messages. As in the rest of the Eastern Bloc, Hungarian artists who departed from the state's imposed style did so discreetly, keeping their experiments behind private doors. Keserü learned about abstract art through local networks and communities, where it was on view in artists' studios and collectors' homes. Catalogues and exhibitions from beyond the Iron Curtain circulated from hand to hand, semi-secretly.



Image: 'All 2', Ilona Keserü (1981). Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Mark Blower.

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Despite this marginalisation and lack of exhibition opportunities, Keserü and other artists from her generation, such as Dóra Maurer and Imre Bak, developed their own idiosyncratic abstract style. They departed from the browns and greys of state-sanctioned socialist realism. Instead, their palettes incorporated bold colours. Art from beyond the Iron Curtain inspired their compositions. Maurer embraced Conceptualism, while Bak took note of Cubism's collapsed perspectives. Keserü, meanwhile, ties her baroque forms to the Italian architecture she saw while on a scholarship in Rome from 1962 to 1963.

The abstract works of these three artists might appear removed from politics, as the style naturally lends itself to an apparent dedication to colour and form. But their practice carried subtle political messaging. Their embrace of abstraction signalled a covert affinity to the West and its ideals. The works of Keserü and Bak also both featured stylised traditional Hungarian motifs, which gestured towards the government's politicisation of folk culture.

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Forming Space (1981).

Image: 'Saturated Accord', Ilona Keserü (1976). Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Stephen White & Co.

## Defining Features

A recurrent form throughout Keserü's work is a double curve, a form which might evoke, for non-Hungarian viewers, the undulating line of an apple, a tooth, or a wave. But the seemingly naïf motif is actually inspired by the heart-shaped tombstones of the Balatonudvari cemetery located an hour south-west of Budapest, which Keserü visited in 1967. Shortly after her visit, Keserü said she felt an urgent need to paint a "cavalcade of these shapes in all their variety". They continue to appear in her work to this day, as in Saturated Accord (1976) and



Image: Forming Space by Ilona Keserü (1981). Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Stephen White & Co

The slightly sinister origins of Keserü's most repeated motif is surprising considering her cheerful palette. Sunrise oranges, lipstick pinks, leafy greens, and ocean blues are some of her most used colours, and the artist often combines them all together to evoke the spectrum of a rainbow. In the 1970s, she expanded this palette by including soft beiges and warm browns, evocative of skin. "I had discovered the human colour", Keserü wrote in 1977, "which is capable of conveying simultaneously both an unbelievable lightness and a confusing mysteriousness, simply because it has been consciously conditioned in us, and because of its familiar and evanescent nature." With its vibrant colours, her work

can be seen as a joyful memento mori — a reminder of our own death — as it makes us hyper-aware of the colour of our skin, and thus our flesh, through the shape of a tombstone.



Image: 'Space Taking Shape' Ilona Keserü (1972). Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo: Mark Blower.

This interest in the intersection of ephemerality, colours, and the body re-emerged in Keserü's practice in the 1980s, when she became fascinated by afterimages. Afterimages are a kind of optical distortion that occur when the eye has been exposed to a bright source of light, such as a camera flash, and continues to see that shape in places where it is not located. Keserü was especially interested in the afterimages that take place behind closed lids, when patches of colour and light appear to float amid the darkness. "The visions I have seen behind my closed eyelids are some of my strongest experiences of colour," Keserü wrote in 1997. "Visions of the afterimage are processes that are fluctuating, swelling, dispelling, illuminating and happening... It is by no means certain that they can be captured or objectified." She tried nonetheless, creating

vibrant works such as Space Taking Shape (1972), which seem to shimmer before our eyes.