

An exhibition about free life in freedomless times. The Prague City Gallery opens a retrospective of photographer Helena Wilson

Helena Wilson: Photographs

12 November 2024 – 23 February 2025

Curator: Jan Mlčoch

GHMP, House of Photography

Address: Revoluční 1006/5, 110 00 Praha 1 – Staré Město

Tuesday-Sunday 10 am – 6 pm, Thursday 10 am – 8 pm

More than 140 photographs document the unofficial art scene and life in Czechoslovakia during the Normalization period. Scenes from dissident gatherings, moments of joy but also the dark side of life in those days. Ordinary life and the search for happiness and the expression of freedom at a time when freedom was restricted. All of this is presented in the exhibition *Helena Wilson: Photographs* staged in the House of Photography from 12 November 2024 to 23 February 2025. To date, this is the most extensive retrospective exhibition of the Czech photographer with whom the broader public became acquainted only after the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Her oeuvre offers a unique testimony to the life in “parallel culture” of the 1970s. The photographs are complemented by artworks of members of the Křižovnická School of Pure Humour Without Wit that Wilson was part of and whose activities she documented.

“Helena Wilson who was forced to emigrate to Canada in the 1970s is a prominent figure of Czech documentary photography. The story of her life and work was influenced in many ways by the historical events and turning points in Czechoslovakia of that era and its transformations. This, too, is captured in the photographs on display in the exhibition. Her

G TISKOVÁ ZPRÁVA HMP

work is a personal testimony to the life of free-spirited people in a freedomless country. The key theme was and continues to be freedom,” says about the artist the exhibition’s curator Jan Mičoch.

Helena Wilson was exposed to the photographic medium from early on as her mother, a student of Jaromír Funke, had herself pursued photography. After meeting her would-be husband Paul Wilson, Helena made friends with non-conformist artists from the circle around the Křižovnická School of Pure Humour Without Wit. She became a photographer of their events and documented works of the School’s individual members. It has been Helena’s engagement for this group that is best remembered today but she also pursued her own projects (e.g. series of documentary photographs, series *Vltava* and *Eggs*), as well as teaching.

Helena’s output is an important testimony to the unofficial art scene in the most dire period of political crackdown in Czechoslovakia, a personal testament of “parallel culture” of those days. When in 1977, following Charter 77, Paul Wilson was expelled from the country, Helena moved to Canada to join him. There, she photographed for art magazines and, in the first half of the 1980s, became a documenter of the arts of the indigenous peoples of North America, especially from the Ontario Province. During her sojourns in and travels through the reserves she also made numerous portraits. In the 1990s, she visited Havana where, as repeatedly before, she employed her social awareness during her photographic exploits of the city’s slum areas.

“The anniversary of the Velvet Revolution that we will be commemorating in a few days’ time makes us contemplate not only Havel’s postulate about the victory of truth and love but also other social values, the achievement of which is endangered by the current situation. The photographs and life of Helena Wilson evoke in us a respect and faith in the overcoming of the many difficulties that we are facing today and that we still have to confront in our present geopolitical reality,” says Magdalena Juříková, director of GHMP.

The exhibition *Helena Wilson: Photographs* spans two floors of the GHMP’s House of Photography. In the introductory section, it presents a mosaic of the everyday lives of ordinary people and figures associated with the parallel culture of the 1970s. Visitors can thus acquaint themselves with faces that formed part of the alternative scene of those

G TISKOVÁ ZPRÁVA HMP

days, among them Ivan M. Jirous, The Plastic People of the Universe, Otakar Slavík, Karel Nepraš, Eugen Brikcius and other members of the Křižovnická School of Pure Humour Without Wit. The images presenting their activities, notably informal pub gatherings or days spent in the countryside out of the reach of the regime's surveillance offer a lively contrast to the uniform public life of those days. The photographer documented these moments as a silent yet compelling manifestation of resistance, showing that life outside the regime's constraints found its own means and spaces. Also exhibited are pictures of significant historical events, such as the funeral of Jan Palach.

"This exhibition gives us a glimpse of the spirit of the times when art was a silent yet powerful expression of resistance. This retrospective view of that complex period and our own history can help us to understand our cultural identity and reminds us of how crucial freedom is in art and thus also in life," observes Jiří Pospíšil, Deputy Mayor for Culture, Tourism, Exhibition, Heritage Protection, National Minorities and Animal Welfare.

This exhibition has been made possible thanks to the photographer's generous donations to the collections of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague and the interest of the Prague City Gallery to map out the hitherto little-known areas of Czech art history. The exhibition mounted at the House of Photography is also an homage to friendship, which is why her photographs are complemented by various works of Helena Wilson's contemporaries. Visitors will therefore have the opportunity to see artworks by Otakar Slavík, Naděžda Plíšková, Karel Nepraš, Jan Steklík, Ludvík Feller and Juliana Strizková-Jirousová. The exhibition therefore stands on the boundary between a period documentary and a testimony to the artist's distinctive approach to questions of freedom and its restriction.

The exhibition is held in collaboration with the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.

The exhibition programme of the Prague City Gallery is supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic.

Media partners: ART ANTIQUES, ArtMap, Artalk, Flash Art, A2, Artiki



Galerie hlavního města Prahy je jednou z nejvýznamnějších galerií v České republice, která se ve své výstavní činnosti zaměřuje zejména na moderní a současné umění. Shromažďuje, ochraňuje a odborně zpracovává umělecké sbírky hlavního města Prahy. V současné době GHMP vystavuje v sedmi objektech: v Domě U Kamenného zvonu, v Městské knihovně – 2. patro, v Colloredo-Mansfeldském paláci, v Domě fotografie, v Bílkově vile, v Zámku Troja a v Domě Františka Bílka v Chýnově.

G TISKOVÁ ZPRÁVA HMP

Helena Wilson: Photographs

12 November 2024 – 23 February 2025

Curator: Jan Mičoch

GHMP, House of Photography

Address: Revoluční 1006/5, 110 00 Praha 1 – Staré Město

Tuesday–Sunday 10 am – 6 pm, Thursday 10 am – 8 pm

The building has barrier-free access.

Entrance fee: 150 CZK full (adults), 60 CZK reduced (pupils and students 11–26 years)

Graphic and architectural design: Jan Šerých

Guided tours

26 November 2024 6 pm: a guided tour with exhibition curator Jan Mičoch

28 January 2025 6 pm: a guided tour with exhibition curator Jan Mičoch

Educational activities

GHMP Education Centre at the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace:

Saturday art workshops

Social and Character Portrait

Saturday 8 February 2025, 1–6 pm

Roads to Freedom / Photocollages

Saturday 22 February 2025, 1–6 pm



Galerie hlavního města Prahy je jednou z nejvýznamnějších galerií v České republice, která se ve své výstavní činnosti zaměřuje zejména na moderní a současné umění. Shromažďuje, ochraňuje a odborně zpracovává umělecké sbírky hlavního města Prahy. V současné době GHMP vystavuje v sedmi objektech: v Domě U Kamenného zvonu, v Městské knihovně – 2. patro, v Colloredo-Mansfeldském paláci, v Domě fotografie, v Bílkově vile, v Zámku Troja a v Domě Františka Bílka v Chýnově.

G TISKOVÁ ZPRÁVA HMP

Art workshops for adults and senior citizens / Integration and intergenerational programmes

The Photogram and the Black-and-White Image

Thursday 6 February 2025, 3–6 pm

Friday 7 February 2025, 11 am – 2 pm and 3–6 pm

Collage and the Monochrome Image

Thursday 13 February 2025, 3–6 pm

Friday 14 February 2025, 11 am – 2 pm and 3–6 pm

Reservations required: eva.pejchalova@ghmp.cz

Interactive tours of the exhibition for all types of schools and other age and interest groups with the possibility of a following art response in the form of one's own creative work. We adapt the events in terms of time, subject and level of difficulty to the specific requirements of every school.

Reservations required: edukace@ghmp.cz

For the latest information about the accompanying programmes, please visit www.ghmp.cz

Contact for journalists:

Jana Smrčková

Head of the Communication, Programmes and Editorial Activities Department

Phone: +420 778 710 688

jana.smrckova@ghmp.cz

www.ghmp.cz



Galerie hlavního města Prahy je jednou z nejvýznamnějších galerií v České republice, která se ve své výstavní činnosti zaměřuje zejména na moderní a současné umění. Shromažďuje, ochraňuje a odborně zpracovává umělecké sbírky hlavního města Prahy. V současné době GHMP vystavuje v sedmi objektech: v Domě U Kamenného zvonu, v Městské knihovně – 2. patro, v Colloredo-Mansfeldském paláci, v Domě fotografie, v Bílkově vile, v Zámku Troja a v Domě Františka Bílka v Chýnově.