

COLLECTION CÉRÈS FRANCO

New arts centre in France houses international collection

RAPHAEL KOENIG

"Visionaries of the world, unite!" is the implicit message of the exhibition "L'Internationale des Visionnaires", now showing in Montolieu, Southern France. Works by over 130 international artists

have been gathered, in a dizzying array of techniques. The majority of these works are part of the collection of the Paris-based Brazilian collector Cérés Franco, who has amassed nearly 1,500 works of naive, art singulier and



below: Daniel Simon Faure, 1789, n.d., acrylic on cloth,
60.2 x 149.6 ins. / 153 x 380 cm

contemporary art since the 1950s. The aim of La Cooperative – Collection Cérés Franco is to make her collection accessible to a wider audience, and eventually to constitute a permanent museum.

The works selected by curator Jean-Hubert Martin for "L'Internationale des Visionnaires" illustrate the eclecticism and global nature of the collection. They also reflect Cérés Franco's personal and aesthetic priorities: a





Francisco Da Silva, *Imaginaire amazonien*, 1966, gouache on paper, 47.2 x 88.6 ins. / 120 x 225 cm, © Bertrand Taoussi

bold chromatic palette and a tendency towards expressive figuration. In the paintings, drawings and sculptures, the multiple distortions of the human body express the most violent upheavals of the psyche.

At a time when the art world pendulum was shifting towards abstraction, Cérés Franco resolutely went in the opposite direction. Born in Brazil in 1927, she discovered German Expressionism in classes taught by art historian Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. When she arrived in Paris, in 1951, she promptly associated with artists from the European avant-garde CoBrA movement – most notably, Dutch painter Corneille (1922–2010). Her taste for works of raw emotional intensity led her to unconventional artists and modes of representation, at the crossroads of *art informel*, *art singulier*, folk art and outsider art.

Her gallery, L'Œil de Bœuf (The Ox's Eye), which she founded in Paris in 1972, became a haven for marginalised and vulnerable artists. They included political refugees fleeing the dictatorships of South America (Mario Murua, b. 1952, Chile) and Eastern Europe (Jacques Grinberg, 1941–2011, Bulgaria), those who worked outside of the contemporary art system (such as figurative painter Michel Macréau, 1935–1995) and painters who experienced mental health problems, such as Stani Nitkowski (1949–2001) whose graphic, often disturbing ink drawings were highlighted in a previous exhibition of the Cérés Franco collection in Montlieu.

Cérés Franco is wary of the ethical implications of

selling and collecting works by non-professional artists.

The works she collected were created by people who actively wanted to be artists, and often associated with various artistic movements. Most of their production was meant to be displayed. Conversely, works produced in psychiatric hospital or art therapy workshops are entirely absent from her collection, which could be said to occupy a space between outsider art and the avant-garde.

Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985) considered Cérés Franco a kindred spirit and recommended her gallery to any artist whose works he held in high esteem but did not correspond with his definition of *art brut*, often on the grounds of their previous artistic training. They would now be described as *artistes singuliers*. For example, Dubuffet introduced Daniel Simon Faure (1953–2002) to Cérés Franco in 1981, and Mario Chichorro (b. 1932), a graduate from the Porto School of Fine Arts, is another case in point: some of Chichorro's polyester bas-reliefs were included in the Neuve Invention Collection in Lausanne.

Regardless of the artist's background, Cérés Franco is drawn to works of particular emotional intensity. In the exhibition, the haunting visions of singular American artist Rosemarie Koczy (1939–2007), whose nightmarish ink drawings channel the trauma of the Holocaust, and of up-and-coming French artist Raphaëlle Ricol (b. 1974) echo the oneiric imagery of a powerful ensemble of works by entirely self-taught artists.

A number of the artists hail from Brazil, a country with which Cérés Franco retained strong connections.