

Press Release

Irène Zurkinden

27 March – 23 May 2026

Opening 26 March, 6 – 8 pm

Karma International is pleased to announce the gallery's first exhibition dedicated to the work of Irène Zurkinden (1909-1987, Basel), bringing renewed attention to one of the most compelling yet still underrecognized figures of twentieth-century Swiss art.

Zurkinden developed her idiosyncratic artistic voice in the tension shaped between her immediate surroundings and her cosmopolitan experiences. Raised in a modest lower middle-class environment in Basel, her family nonetheless provided her with access to artistic education. Her early life was thus marked by an interplay of constraint and independence. From the outset, her work drew on the people and environments closest to her—family, friends, lovers, and acquaintances—as well as the urban landscapes she inhabited. Recurring motifs include intimate depictions of others, self-portraits, café and street scenes, and still lifes, through which she explored identity, gender, and relationships.

In Zurkinden's early years in Basel, she learned the art of careful observation and psychological nuance. She studied at Kunstgewerbeschule Basel, forming connections that would stay with her throughout her life. This network grew significantly during her extended stays in Paris in the early 1930s, when she became immersed in a milieu of artists and intellectuals during a period of interwar freedom. Paris opened the path to freer forms of expression for her, and its café and salon culture deeply influenced her subject matter. In Paris, she encountered Alberto Giacometti, whose investigations of the human figure could be linked to her own interest in psychology, as well as Meret Oppenheim, whose visionary approach encouraged her to experiment more freely. She also met members of the Surrealist circle. While Zurkinden was inspired by their intellectual and artistic energy, she never adopted their style - her work remained grounded in figuration.

During the Paris years, she increasingly explored eroticism in her work, often depicting intimate portraits of women who were her friends or commissioned models. Works such as *L'ennuye mortel, la flamme ...* (1934) reveal her interest in female desire and self-possession, while *Magna la Russe* (1933) captures a striking female figure — a Russian emigrée known in Parisian circles for her charisma and strength. These portraits both suggest familiarity and proximity, as well as a subtle art of observation without a sensationalist undertone.

Alongside these intimate works, formal portraiture was an important part of Zurkinden's livelihood. She was regularly commissioned to paint portraits, which provided a degree of financial stability and allowed her to sustain an independent artistic practice. This dual structure between commissions and more experimental works shaped her production throughout her career. The income from the portraits allowed her to go back and forth between Paris and Basel, maintaining autonomy while raising her two sons, without ever marrying their father.

Despite her regular exhibitions and reputation as a sought-after portraitist in Basel, Zurkinden remained largely peripheral to dominant narratives of modernism during her lifetime, as did many female artists at that time. A significant moment of institutional recognition came late, with a comprehensive retrospective at the Kunstmuseum Basel in 1985.