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LEVEL 6 HISTORY OF ART AND MUSEUM STUDIES

Magdalena Abakanowicz: Inspired by Nature and Undefeated by The System Of Oppression.

How Magdalena Abakanowicz mastered adaptability and turned shortages of materials and limitations of expression under the Communist regime into the development of her unique technique and achieved international success.

Magdalena Abakanowicz was one of the most internationally acclaimed Polish fibre artists and a sculptor, who gained recognition despite living in the country trapped by the communist regime, and despite working in the field of art usually dominated by men. She proved to be a prolific creator by expressing herself in many forms apart from her signature sculpture, such as poetry, prose, film, and visual arts (Milofsky, 1987). She had something important to say and wanted to be heard, so she shared her philosophy, she gave voice to her art in writing and interviews, during her travels, when teaching, and when exhibiting. Abakanowicz lived long enough to enjoy the freedom of creation in reborn Poland, yet a major part of her career fell in a time of restrictions and persecutions before the rule of the Communists and the control of the Soviet Union ended in 1989. Candice Russell (2005, p.6) maintains that '[H]er art is a direct reflection of her experiences' whilst Leslie Milofsky argues that 'we receive her as a Polish artist and associate her work with her own country's history and political policies' (1987, p.369). This paper will explore how the artist's background, personal experience of war, and living under totalitarian policies, along with the limitations imposed by the regime affected her creative journey, the materials she used,

and the techniques she implemented. It will also discuss her strong connection with nature, and how its cycles and processes inspired the artist to search for eternal secrets, patterns, and the place of a human in this mysterious biological chain.

Magdalena Abakanowicz was born in 1930, in a wealthy aristocratic family and raised in their large mansion in Falenty near Warsaw. Distanced from her family by the army of servants, she suffered loneliness and had her happy moments when wandering in the surrounding woods and observing closely nature. Discovering its transformative cycles, textures, surfaces, colours, temperatures, and different forms of life triggered her lifelong fascination with metamorphosis and organic forms. She considered 'structure being the phenomenon which all the organic world on our planet have in common, a mystery which can never be revealed to the very end' (Abakanowicz, 1977 p.35). As she mentioned in many interviews, Hitler's rise to power overshadowed her otherwise peaceful childhood with a fear of a fast-approaching war. After 1 September 1939, her world never looked the same. The family mansion got filled in with strangers, then the family escaped from the Red Army to Warsaw, and the young Abakanowicz worked in a hospital where she could see death, injury, and other horrors of war. She survived but the new reality of the Communist regime which took power in Poland for the next 44 years, stripped her and her family of everything. Communists did not tolerate nobility and aristocracy, there was no place for individuality and private possessions, and no room for the intelligentsia. The new nation was supposed to be a grey mass of lookalike people, with no personality and no ambitions, working together toward the same goal of building, and spreading socialism and its values. Abakanowicz compared the crowd to the swarm of mosquitos, she said 'a human being

turned into a crowd loses his human qualities' (1990, p.4) and that is exactly what the totalitarian government wanted. Already Herodotus noticed that the crowd is easier to rule than the individual (Russel, 2005).

The years of Abakanowicz's art education during the most rigorous Stalinist period were the hardest. She had to lie about her background to get admitted to the Academy and she commented on that later saying, 'the country whose model was imposed on us, deprived us of identity' (1990, p.11). In 1948 she joined Art School in Gdynia, then in 1949 the College of Art in Sopot, and finally from 1950 she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where she graduated in 1954, just a year after Stalin's death. There was no chance for creative freedom during her studies as the only accepted style was Socialist Realism. As soon as she left the Academy, she commenced her own artistic journey and always remained true to her chosen path of creating organic structures using 'every media in which I feel I can express myself' (Drohojowska, 1985 p.110).

No longer restricted by the rules of her school, she remained massively restricted by the constant lack of space- she did not move to a house with a large studio until 1988. This means she had to adapt her technique and practices to the tiny space of a flat in an apartment building which usually did not exceed 28-32 square meters. The second major issue was the material as under the Communist regime there was hardly anything in the shops and obtaining necessary art supplies was often an impossible mission. Milofsky (1987) brilliantly describes how it was more important in Poland to have friends than money because people were exchanging goods, and sharing, or giving away what they no longer needed. This way Abakanowicz collected burlap sacks, textiles, and threads (Milofsky,

1987). She collected rope from the harbors, untwined it, and dyed it, and so she did with threads. Her first gouaches, representing the imaginary world of plants and animals which she described as the creation of an ideal environment for herself, were executed in 1954 on huge bed sheets, sewn together (1990, p.30). They could be easily folded and stocked under a bed- the same quality as her later weaving projects, essential in her small space. It is fascinating that Abakanowicz, confined to limited spaces for most of her life, chose right from the beginning of her artistic career to express herself in creations of enormous size. Perhaps it was her rebellion against the rules which she considered 'enemies of imagination' (1977, p.36) or a way to feel free in a country where freedom was a common dream of the nation. The choice of materials for her projects is also significant, especially from today's perspective focused on ecology, climate change, and other environmental issues. It was the sixties counterculture which brought up these issues first, and Environmentalism became a popular and quickly spreading movement. If that was a driving force behind such a specific choice of medium is arguable, but it is a fact that Abakanowicz had a great awareness of being a part of nature and undergoing the same biological processes as plants and animals do. She spoke of the fibre derived from plants she worked with to be similar to the one human is composed of (1977, p.35) and explained choosing organic materials saying that 'to make something more durable than myself would add to the imperishable rubbish heaps of human ambitions crowding the environment. (...) There is so little room' (Milofsky, 1987 p.368).

As Abakanowicz was drawn to work with soft materials, weaving was a natural next step. Before she got involved in this technique it was considered merely a craft, a painter's project

recreated by weavers. Yet Abakanowicz was never interested in creating a traditional, decorative tapestry. She built her own looms which she used initially to weave wall hangings but soon she drifted away from a flat form and by joining her pieces together, she started to create huge three-dimensional forms. Her first mentors in weaving were Mieczyslaw Szymanski (Hawkins, 2008) and Maria Laszkiewicz, who let Abakanowicz use her studio, and helped her to exhibit at the 1962 Tapestry Biennale in Lausanne, which was the artist's first step into international recognition. She met there a French tapestry master, Jean Lurcat, whom she followed as a mentor (Milofsky, 1987).

In 1967 the artist started to work on the *Abakans*, with which she 'revolutionised the European tradition of weaving and brought the woven object from craft to art' (1977, p.32). These monumental, clothing-like structures are mainly black, with some brown, yellow, orange, and red exceptions. The largest one, Bois Le Duc, measures eight by twenty meters. Made of sisal, hemp, flax, and horsehair, suspended from the ceiling above the ground, they redefined the idea of what sculpture is with their soft, foldable texture. Abakanowicz liked to create surfaces inviting viewers to touch, she trusted her hands and what they sense during the creative process. By working on her form with her hands she could control each detail, and it corresponded with her body rhythm (Abakanowicz, 1977) She wanted to create pieces like chambers, like a womb where one can find safety and comfort. The *Abakans* are so gigantic that the artist had no chance to see them before they were displayed in the exhibition space. This gave the grounds for her devotion to exhibiting- she always designed and supervised each detail of her exhibitions, arriving many days ahead to exert full control.

She considered that some people can have a ‘predisposition to sense the space’ (Abakanowicz, 1977 p.37) just like others have it for music or art.

Lewinski, J. (1975) *Magdalena Abakanowicz* [Medium: photograph]

Photo credit: Bridgeman Images

In 1974 Abakanowicz started working on the new cycle she called the *Alterations*. These are soft sculptures both figurative and non-figurative, made mainly of canvas from burlap sacks sewn together and glued with resin. As Jasia Reichardt noticed, these structures were ‘made without technology, either in terms of materials or technique’ and they were referred to as ‘ecological sculpture’ (1977, p.31). The *Alterations* cycle includes four groups: twelve

headless *Seated Figures* and eighty *Backs*- headless, hunched over torsos, seated on the floor- these two groups are executed in life-size, whilst the sixteen faceless *Heads*, or *Schizoid Heads* as Abakanowicz often called them, are larger than life-size and elongated. On some of them, the hand-sewn cloth broke in places revealing entangled masses of knotted rope and fibre that fill them in, the others are stripped of canvas with bare sisal on display. The last part of the cycle is relief-like *Landscapes,* once more headless, flattened figures in deformed shapes and texture that resembles scars, veins, open wounds, and wrinkles. The *Alterations* is a disturbing cycle, recalling the atrocities of war and oppressive regime, where no one can feel safe, people get arrested and tortured, and individuality is lost because it had to give way to the enforced collective anonymity of 'everyman.'

National Museum in Wroclaw (2020) *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Backs* [Medium: photograph]

When Abakanowicz worked on her soft sculptures, she maintained that '[N]othing should be translated into concrete terms (…) This would result in the annihilation of form' (1977,

p.35). Yet, given the opportunity, she started to work with more solid materials. As a successful artist, she exhibited a lot, and that involved travelling and making fruitful connections in the world of art. When the Communist government imposed martial law in Poland in 1981, Abakanowicz did not return to the country but undertook a series of projects which allowed her to stay abroad. Becoming a visiting professor for one semester at UCLA was one of these projects, an important one, as during that time she 'made her first bronze cast with students at Fullerton State University' (1990, p.30). During the eighties, she continued experimenting with new materials and techniques, resulting in her usual cycles of monumental sculptures but this time executed in bronze, iron, stone, and wood. She also created many permanent outdoor installations in various countries, thirty-three cast bronze figurative sculptures of *Katarsis* in Italy, and seven limestone wheels of *Negev* in Israel among them.

Abakanowicz no longer wanted to be associated with fibre and textile art, her interest shifted, and her style evolved. In 2001 she made *7 Dancing Figures*, a group of bronze sculptures cast in a material that can assume all kinds of textures. This cycle, created in Poland free of Russian domination, over ten years after the regime collapsed, is vastly different from her previous work. Her *Dancers* are active, straight postured and they seem cheerful. No more obediently bent backs, no more scars, and exposed veins, these figures have hands and hold hands. They are no longer alienated; they are together and express their joy. Moreover, they are not hollow trunks like the human figures in older cycles but full-bodied apart from the heads, as they remain headless.

www.malopolska.pl (2012) *7 Dancing Figures* [Medium: photography]

Magdalena Abakanowicz passed away in 2017 leaving no immediate followers but an oeuvre of astonishing size and scale. Extremely hardworking- she worked only during the day, usually for about ten hours, she paid attention to every detail, creating her sculptures carefully and slowly, allowing them to grow at leisure as it suits organic structures. Although she always maintained that her creations were not a response to any political situation or a critique of any regime, her audiences could sense the true meaning of her work. Abakanowicz could not openly criticise the rule of Communists in Poland, because that would have resulted in depriving her of her career. Perhaps, as Milofsky (1987, p.363) argues the artist's relationship with the authorities was 'sustained through symbiotic silences', however, when looking at some of her works, e.g., *The rope- its penetrations- its situation in space,* it is hard to not think of the restrictions and persecutions of the regime. This massive, entangled rope spoke volumes about the lack of freedom and a constant threat, in some of the installations it even resembled a noose. Abakanowicz was a survivor, she survived her lonely childhood, the terrors of war, and the rule of people blinded by destructive ideology. She turned the obstacles into benefits, she adapted her technique to the available materials,

she turned her yearning for freedom into the huge, almost limitless scale of her creations, she used her lifelong interest in nature as an inspiration to create unique artworks, she responded to her fear of the crowd with creating all her projects in cycles- series. This repetition of a design, with differences only in the details, allowed her to arrange her sculptures in an endless array of combinations, adapting them to the space, creating their interaction with the space, and using the space as an extension of her projects. The scale of her soft sculptures allowed her audiences to sense the space in a unique way, interact with their cocooning shapes, inhale the scent of nature, and get lost among them. Being so articulate and eloquent, Abakanowicz helped the viewers to complete the experience by delving into her philosophy expressed in her texts and poems. She did not want to overly explain her art, because she valued the relationship created between the viewer and her artwork, yet she outlined the directions for those who want to explore it in depth.

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