



An artist, says Magdalena Abakanowicz, is a shaman whose work is infused with unknown powers



by Hunter Drohojowska

IN MY CHILDHOOD, WHEN I BEGAN TO USE my hands, I built objects. They were the bridge between me and the reality. I was frightened by the reality." It is difficult to imagine the feisty Magdalena Abakanowicz frightened of anything, but she insists that this was the genesis of her artistic career. The adult versions of Abakanowicz's childhood objects have brought her international acclaim as one of Europe's leading sculptors, with more than 100 group and 43 solo exhibitions in the past 20 years. She was the only Polish artist selected for "An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture" at New York's Museum of Modern Art last year. From 1982 to 1984 a retrospective exhibition of Abakanowicz's work, organized by Mary Jane Jacob, chief curator of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, was presented at that institution and in Montreal, Portland (Oregon), Boston, Dallas, Anchorage and Los Angeles. Selected works from that exhibition, in addition to more recent work, will be shown at the Xavier Fourcade Gallery in New York from September 19 through October 12.

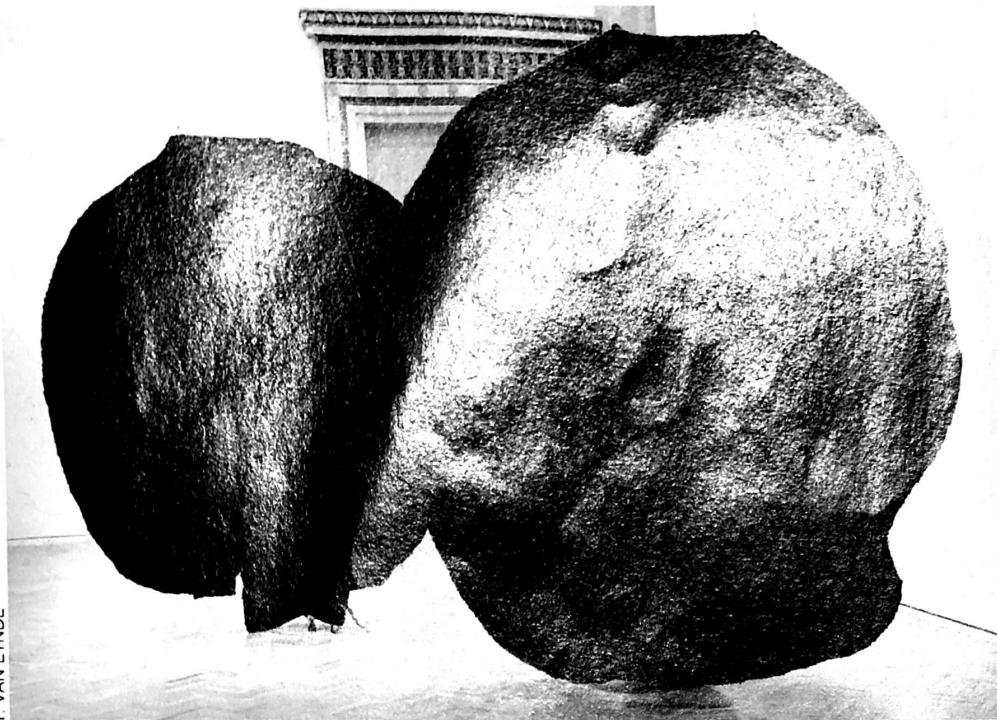
In the fall of 1984, at the Claremont Colleges' Graduate School Galleries near Los Angeles, hundreds went to see

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*Magdalena Abakanowicz, with an installation of her works **Orange Abakan**, 1971 (foreground), and **Black Environment**, 1970-78. **LEFT** **Anonymous Portrait**, 1985.*



ABOVE The distinctive presence of Abakanowicz's woven sculptures, such as **Brown Abakan**, 1968, and **Red Abakan**, 1969, prompted a Polish critic to name them after the artist. BELOW **Cage**, 1981, is one of Abakanowicz's harrowing metaphors about the human condition.

the artist's "Abakans" from the early 1960s. These enormous, erotic three-dimensional weavings of somber-colored sisal, from 12 to 16 feet high, hung like dark shrouds about the gallery space. Some 6,000 visitors went to the University of California at Los Angeles' Frederick S. Wight Gallery to see several series of works from the 1970s and '80s.

Viewers gaped, fascinated by the giant stuffed heads of coarse burlap, their seams split wide so that "brains" of coiled hemp tumbled out. Headless, limbless figures, made of burlap stiffened with resin, sat in clusters. The center and one side of the gallery were heaped high with hundreds of dun-colored pods in a work titled *Embryology*. They were as long as six feet, as small as six inches, and every size in between, each made of burlap crudely stitched to transparent gauze to reveal the tuberous, raggy filling. Here viewers stopped and stared. The pods were as familiar and cozy as potatoes yet as repellent as a clump of rodents, designed to confound easy interpretations.

Confronted with this observation, Abakanowicz responds with a slight smile of agreement. "Nothing in my work is pretty, because I'm not trying to be pleasant for the viewer," she says. "I bring him a message. When people see *Embryology*, the impression is to be confronted by forms they know very well from the surrounding world—like stones, like a kind of gray fruit, or big seeds, or brains. The work is metaphoric. People who look at it see different things, shapes like whales or like eggs, because they are rich in meanings. When you look at dry leaves, they are not elegant, but they tell us things."

A handsome, dignified auburn-haired woman, 54 years old, Abakanowicz discourages small talk but quickly warms to a discussion of her work. She speaks slow, accented English, choosing her words carefully and often writing down her remarks for greater clarity.

During Abakanowicz's exhibition last fall she was artist-in-residence at UCLA. With Jan Kosmowski, her husband of 28 years, she was staying in the very un-European en-

vironment of the Bermuda Apartments, a Westwood complex landscaped with palm trees and gravel. It was a far cry from their flat in Warsaw, but she is accustomed to foreign accommodations after years of personally installing every solo exhibition.

Drinking coffee in the apartment, Abakanowicz recalled her first visit to UCLA in 1971 for the exhibition "Deliberate Entanglements." Organized by Bernard Kestler and including the work of Claire Zeisler and other textile artists, the show did much to further the international development of art in fiber. At the same time Abakanowicz had a solo show, "Fabric Forms," at the now defunct Pasadena Art Museum.

The mere mention of these associations is enough to send Abakanowicz into paroxysms

of protest. "I would like to divide myself from the interest in fabric," she declares. "I don't think there is an interest in wood, or in oil, and I wouldn't like to call Robert Rauschenberg someone who mixes oil." Then she laughs, a deep, throaty rumble. "I use every medium in which I feel I can express myself. I write poems, I make films. And I also make paintings, and drawings, and sculpture in wood, in metal and in fabric."

Examples of all of these were included in Abakanowicz's retrospective: long timbers hacked at the tops with an ax and leaning against the wall; paintings and drawings of abstracted faces; and a succession of clay mounds, varied





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The human body in its various manifestations is the vital core of Abakanowicz's works. Here, *Female Figures*, 1985.

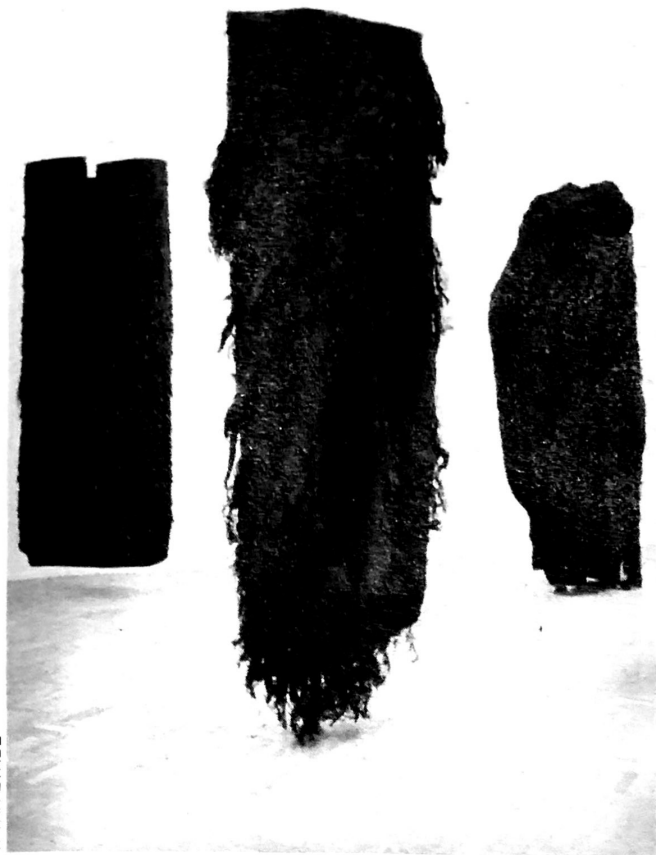
in their mutilated, cracked surfaces. Abakanowicz is clearly concerned that her soft sculptures not be confused with craft, yet it is her works in fabric for which she is best known. They were born with her in Poland, and she cannot cast them away.

These early links are apparent in the poems titled *Soft*, written by Abakanowicz in 1979 when she and her assistant of 20 years, Stefa Zgudka, were hand-stitching and stuffing the 800 pods in *Embryology*. (This metaphorical writing explains her affinity for soft materials and was printed as an introduction to the exhibition "Soft," which she organized for the Kunstmuseum in Zurich in the late 1970s. The show included Surrealist, Dadaist and primitive art, as well as works by Claes Oldenburg, Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Lucio Fontana and Antonio Tàpies.) Abakanowicz describes her experience as a small child "crouching over a swampy pond, watching tadpoles. . . . Through the thin membrane covering their distended bodies, the tangle of intestines was clearly visible. Heavy with the process of transformation, sluggish, they provoked one to reach for them. Pulled out onto the shore with a stick, touched carelessly, the swollen bellies burst. The contents leaked out in a confusion of knots. . . . The never fully explained mystery of the interior, soft and perishable."

Abakanowicz's poems are metaphorical but are based on her observations as a child growing up on a 5,000-acre estate ten miles outside Warsaw. Her family was descended from Polish nobility. (Her surname derives from Abaka Khan, a 13th-century Mongolian ancestor who controlled what is now Iran.) Abakanowicz led a cosseted existence in the 32-room 17th-century mansion. But by her own account she had a lonely childhood, with no friends her own age. She was cared for by nurses, but as a self-described loner she says she preferred solitary walks, where she felt closest to nature. She would hoard twigs, stones and shards—the stuff that would later inspire her art.

At six, when teachers were introduced, Abakanowicz was too shy to answer questions. She escaped to the river, where she would push a canoe through the tall reeds. These experiences are described in her autobiographical prose poem *Portrait x 20*: "There I belonged. With concentration for hours, I looked at the grass and the water. I wanted to subordinate myself to them. So that I might understand the mysteries which separated me from them."

The sculptures that eventually resulted embody that sense of wonder and ephemerality. "I spend one month yearly with nature," says Abakanowicz. "This is how I fuel my battery. I was born with a need for this contact with nature,



*Abakan Open*, 1967, *Abakan Round*, 1967, and *Abakan Edinburgh*, 1971, reveal the increasingly monumental scale of the woven sculptures.

feeling that all that surrounds me is friendly. I feel safer with nature than with people. We are all a product of nature. We are coming and going. We think a neighbor can die, but we, never. But we are only here for a certain time."

The direction of Abakanowicz's art was influenced not only by the Polish landscape but also by the social and political realities of the time. After Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, she and her family lived in fear. In 1943 she saw Nazi soldiers break into her home and shoot her mother. After the Soviet "liberation" of Poland in 1945, Abakanowicz and her family moved to Warsaw, where her parents had to sell many of their possessions in order to survive. Later they made a living by running a newspaper kiosk.

These wartime experiences have certainly colored Abakanowicz's art, but she refutes the suggestion that any specific political comment is intended. Her 1976-82 work *Backs*, for example, consists of 80 separate forms, hollow men made from molded burlap, without heads or limbs, that sit in rows facing a blank wall. One figure sits in a log cage. The huge *Heads* from the early 1970s, with their split expressionless faces, look similarly tortured. Since the disbanding of the free trade union Solidarity in 1981 and the imposition of martial law in Poland, critics have tended to apply contemporary political readings to her sculpture. But Abakanowicz insists, "All experiences of war are important to every human being. But I'm not illustrating. I speak only in a metaphoric way. It's larger, about men in general. In every country something is happening—here, in Italy, in South America. Everywhere there is a conflict between man, society and government. If I talk about problems, it's global. Everything I do is about the human condition. I'm interested in the different beliefs of man, his mythology, the science

man makes as well as his rituals and his religions. For instance, when I showed *Backs* in 1980, I was asked, 'Is this a concentration camp in Auschwitz? Or is it the dance of Ramayana in Bali? Or is it the ritual ceremony in Peru?' And I could answer all of these questions yes, because it is all of these."

Abakanowicz's aversion to narrow political messages in art may be traced in part to her experiences as a student at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw, where she enrolled in 1950 after one year of study in Sopot. Because she was very poor she lived with 15 other students in one room. At the same time she was forced to hide her privileged background, as children of prewar aristocracy were denied higher education.

During the 1950s Stalinist doctrine and Socialist Realism prevailed in Poland. Abakanowicz could not produce the desired illustrational effects, however—just "large smudgy things," she says—and she resisted instruction. "I like neither rules nor prescriptions, those enemies of the imagination," she adds.

In an essay by Jasia Reichardt for the catalogue accompanying Abakanowicz's retrospective exhibition, the artist recalled the frustration of her academy days: "The Sopot art school was still liberal at the time; the Academy in Warsaw already was not. I liked to draw, seeking the form by placing lines, one next to the other. The professor would come with an eraser in his hand and rub out every unnecessary line on my drawing, leaving a thin, dry contour. I hated him for it. I liked the transparency of oil paint laid on a white primed canvas. The professor did not allow me to paint in this way. He said that these were accidental effects. Layers had to be solid. When he came to our vast studio full of easels he would say, standing in the doorway: 'Abakanowicz started well, but she will spoil it anyway.' Of course, I spoiled everything. I had bad grades. I hated the school more and more."

Even today, though Abakanowicz gives classes at the University of Poznan, she maintains that art cannot be taught. "The problem is not in the technique but in what you have to say. It is very good not to know too much because then you can discover your own technique and say exactly what you want," she states.

Despite her poor grades, Abakanowicz graduated in 1954 and began a much despised job as a tie designer in a silk factory in Milanówek. "When I finished my studies, I realized how much I was against all that was accepted and how my imagination did not fit into any existing movements. I had to find my own way," she explains. In her spare time at home she painted enormous gouaches of imaginary plants. Her small apartment couldn't accommodate such large-scale work, and she persuaded a professor at the academy to let her use one of the studios at night. Impressed by her work, he encouraged her to enter a 1955 competition for fabric design sponsored by Cepelia, a cooperative devoted to promoting the popular arts in Poland. Abakanowicz won the competition and was invited to collaborate on other fabric-design projects for Cepelia. These efforts proved frustrating, and, influenced by the criticism of several people that her painting "lacked solidity," she decided to try weaving. After a brief return to the academy, she built a frame loom and began to teach herself.

"I chose weaving," Abakanowicz says, "because I wanted to get as far as possible from all established forms. It is easy to follow, but it is uninteresting to do easy things.

We find out about ourselves only when we take risks. For me there is nothing to follow in art, because art that follows is not art."

In 1960 Abakanowicz was scheduled to have her first solo exhibition of oil paintings and weavings at an exhibition hall in Warsaw belonging to the Ministry of Culture. When the director of the Department of Fine Arts saw the work Abakanowicz was in the process of installing, he said, "Abstract painting! We will not show it to the public."

Despite the director's initial reaction, the exhibition did open. Abakanowicz's work caught the eye of Maria Laszkiewicz, a professional weaver who happened to be walking by the exhibition hall and looked inside. A year later she added Abakanowicz's name to a list of weavers being compiled by the ministry to represent Poland in the First International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland. Abakanowicz was invited to submit a project to the international jury in Lausanne, which was accepted. (This competition was organized by Jean Lurçat with the help of Pierre Pauli, the director of the Biennial. Pauli's wife now runs the Galerie Alice Pauli in Lausanne, which is Abakanowicz's commercial representative.)

No weaving in the Biennial could measure less than 12 square meters—the size of Abakanowicz's living room—and once again Laszkiewicz lent a helping hand. She invited the younger artist to work in her basement on a loom two meters wide. There Abakanowicz prepared the woven reliefs for the Lausanne Biennial and later a group of woven reliefs that won first prize at the São Paulo Bienal in 1965.

The weaving metamorphosed into the "Abakans"—named by the Polish art critic Anka Ptazkowska, who declared that they were neither Gobelins nor traditional weavings and should therefore take their name from that of the artist. "I got that prize at São Paulo for a work of art, not a tapestry," says Abakanowicz emphatically. "I used this woven material that I made myself as a skin for the object that I wanted to create. At a certain moment [in 1974], I didn't need to weave any more; I moved to materials that already exist—old materials that have their own story. I transform them into my materials."

Since her success at São Paulo, Abakanowicz has gained increasing respect in her own country. She is head of the environmental-art department that she organized at the University of Poznan in 1965. Her work is in the permanent collections of the National Museum of Warsaw, the Museum of Modern Art in Lodz and in galleries and museums in nearly every large city in Poland. She teaches at the university three days a month but insists, "You can only develop what the person has inside or help a person find his or her own way."

Although there are very few private collectors in Poland, Abakanowicz's work has been acquired by numerous European and American collectors.

When Abakanowicz began to work with soft wools and fabrics, she was attracted by their inherent mystery. She points out that the Pompidou Center in Paris does not collect weaving, but they own an "Abakan." "They call it a magic object," she says. "Every process of creation begins with something very mysterious. It begins with our imagination, but we don't know what that is." She makes no preliminary sketches, allowing her works to emerge as complete visions in her mind's eye. A piece like *Embryology*, for example, is intuitively created as she works with the materials. "I shape it with my hands and pass into it something that eludes



*ABOVE* *Backs*, 1976-82, consists of 80 separate forms, hollow men that evoke the universal conflict between man and society. *BELOW* The natural world that has always been a source of inspiration for Abakanowicz is reflected in *Embryology*, 1978-81.

conceptualization. It reveals the unconscious," she states. "One of the strongest motives of our time is the search for explanation, the need to explain everything away. Explanation is one means to tame the mystery of art. Talking about mystery has become indecent."

Abakanowicz pauses, reflective. "I believe an artist is a shaman who integrates unknown powers in his work. When I got that prize in São Paulo, I was a complete unknown. They saw my work for the first time, and I think there was a power integrated into it that made people stop and look at it as something extraordinary. It's like a contact with a mystery you can never penetrate to the very end. Art is not a problem. A problem you can divide into parts possible to explain. Mystery is something that embraces us. You cannot explain it, you face it, you feel it. Art has mystery." ■

