



Javier Mendoza-Herald photographer

Magdalena Abakanowicz's fabric creations are currently on exhibit in galleries at UCLA and Claremont Colleges.

## Out of shortages and hardship, Polish artist weaves works rich in implication

By Hunter Drohojowska

I picked up the small, soft gray lump, one of many in a pile. They were as large as river rocks or as small as potatoes, made of gauze crudely stitched around a stuffing. Within, I saw tuberosus veins of rope and fabric. The lump was as plush and inviting as a pillow, yet simultaneously repellent. Tossing it back into the pile, I told the artist, Magdalena Abakanowicz, that it reminded me of a mouse. In a hushed tone, she said, "That's right. But that's beautiful."

She was not being ironic. This 54-year-old Polish artist strives for the edge between beauty and horror, affected by influences both unconscious and literal.

Piles of her soft pods, some up to seven feet long, from the "Embryology" series, fill the Frederick S. Wight Gallery at UCLA through Nov. 11. In addition, there are the "Heads," built of burlap, with "brains" of coiled hemp bursting from the seams. A series of 80 headless figures of burlap and

resin, called "Backs" sit facing the wall. At the Claremont Colleges' art gallery, through Oct. 28, there hang black, brown and red wool "Abakans" — ranging from 12 feet to 16 feet tall — the earliest sculptures woven by the artist. All of her work embraces a combination of the organic — the experience of birth — with the human condition, and death. But Abakanowicz will not deign to explain them to a viewer.

"Art is a language beyond words, and this is extremely difficult to describe, like it is difficult to describe our feelings," said Abakanowicz. "My things are organic, they are not elegant and they are in a certain way old. But with all these mysteries, having their own history, it is difficult for me to talk about them because they are a part of my life."

Abakanowicz's life has been shadowed by a past as tragic as the history of her war-torn country. Her family was descended from Polish nobility. She was raised 10 miles outside of Warsaw in a 32-room 17th century mansion on 5,000

acres. Her childhood was strangely isolated. Without friends her own age, she was raised mostly by servants. During these early years, she grew close to nature, to the organic forms and textures now evident in her work.

In 1939 Hitler invaded Poland. Abakanowicz saw her mother's arm shot off by German soldiers when she was too slow to open the front door. During the war, she was separated from her family. Not yet an adolescent, Abakanowicz helped prepare bandages for the wounded and later carried bricks to rebuild the bombed buildings.

After the war, her parents ran a newspaper kiosk to support themselves. Abakanowicz came to the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1950, where life as a student was extremely hard. She had to conceal her background since the children of the aristocracy were denied places in higher education. She shared overcrowded rooms with whole families and other students,

where they took turns sleeping on the floor. She earned money by donating blood and survived on free soup from the university cafeteria, since meal tickets weren't collected until the second course.

Her first solo exhibition was scheduled in 1960, but the ministry of culture's director of the department of fine arts declared it "abstract painting" and concluded, "We will not show it to the public."

Yet, Abakanowicz persevered to become an internationally known artist, and today she claims that such struggle aids an artist's development. "It was a very healthy battle for the artists. If they don't struggle, they don't know what to say. I've observed artists in Holland or Sweden where every artist can get help to pay for his apartment or whatever. In Poland, the greatest development of art came just after the war and the pressure of socialist realism."

After her first confrontation with the government, a well-known weaver spotted Abakanowicz's work and added her name to a list to be submitted to the "First International Biennial of Tapestry" in Lausanne. Her project was accepted and so began the first weaving. Very soon, however,

She has also pointed out that it was a very flexible medium in the early years, when there was always a possibility it might have to be rolled up and hidden.

This pair of exhibitions is the last stop of a two-year tour that began at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. Many journalists addressed the metaphorical implications of her sculpture with regard to the rise and fall of Solidarity, the free trade union movement in Poland. Whether for reasons of protection or an artist's usual desire to avoid labels and limitations, she denies that her headless emaciated figures, one of which sits in a "cage made of logs," are direct comments on the oppression in Poland.

"I'm not illustrating. I speak only in a metaphoric way. All experiences of war are important to every human being. I don't show works that were made just a few months ago. They were made between 1967 and 1982." Asked whether they aren't metaphors for a populace split from its government, she protested, "It's much larger. It's about men in general. In every country, something is happening. Here, in Italy, in South America. Even in Switzerland. If I talk about problems, I talk about the general problems of man. It's not the problem of the artist to talk about just one thing. It's much more global. For instance, when I showed the backs in 1980, I was asked, 'Is

Abakanowicz began working with found fabrics. In a country where people wait in line for food, materials for art are scarce. For burlap, Abakanowicz buys discarded vegetable sacks from village markets. She also uses sacking and gauze. "I am much more interested in an old piece of burlap than a new one, for the beauty of the object is, to me, in the quantity of information that I can get from it, the stories it has to tell."

Today, her fiber art is exhibited with the works of such advanced contemporary artists as the late Eva Hesse, Joseph Beuys and Carl Andre.

An auburn-haired, handsome woman with sharp, green eyes and a manner that brooks no small talk, Abakanowicz takes exception to the categorization "fiber artist." She points to a row of logs, with heads hacked and shaped; to seven lumps of clay that look like deformed skulls; to charcoal drawings and paintings of faces. "I would not call (Robert) Rauschenberg an oil mixer because he paints. I use every medium in which I feel I can express myself. I started with fabric because I saw it as an extremely mysterious material and I wanted to create the skin for the object. It was important to me (at the time) to create it from the beginning."

this the concentration camp in Auschwitz? Or is it the ritual ceremony in Peru? Or is it the dance of Ramayana in Bali? And I could answer to all of these questions, 'Yes.' It is all this." She adds, "I think all of this is boring," but then remembers one last comment: "To me, these exhibitions are a ceremony that I celebrate for people. To introduce them into my reality. I think that's more important than anything that I said before."

She is impatient to get back to work. Her assistants are busily stitching up a few seams torn in travel. Her husband, Jan Kosmoski, a semi-retired civil engineer, is sorting labels and slides. They won't be going back to Warsaw until January, when she finishes her stint at UCLA as artist-in-residence. She has experience. In Poland, she teaches three days a month at the University of Poznan, 185 miles west of Warsaw. There, she tells the students to rely on ideas, not materials, for their art. When she was asked, several years ago, to lecture at UCLA, she thought, "How could I possibly lecture to people who have so much?" When she saw the students' work, however, she found it superficial. "'Ah,' I thought, 'now I may lecture.' You see, when you have too many materials, it becomes too difficult to work. Shortages don't necessarily make you poor. They can make you rich."