

Magdalena Abakanowicz at UCLA and Claremont

In the Museum of Modern Art's international survey last spring, one of the most dramatic pieces was a gargantuan woven lump by Magdalena

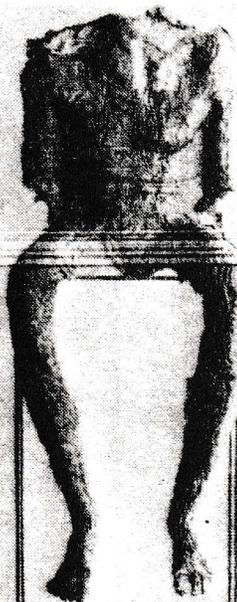
Abakanowicz. This Polish artist, who most frequently works with textiles, gained prominence in the 1960s for her "soft sculpture." Her earliest black and red hand-woven wool hangings, called "Abakans," in an installation called "Black Environment," ranged from 11 to 16 feet in height.

When they first appeared in 1964, critics saw them as breakthroughs in tapestry. Abakanowicz, however, has

always viewed them as sculpture, and works in wood and clay as well as ready-made materials. Unlike many of the ill-fated "fiber art" experimentalists, Abakanowicz was compelled by more than technical innovation, and determinedly distances herself from craft.

It is in fibers, however, that her work is most eloquent.

Most of the work at UCLA refers to the human figure. Ovoid pods, from two inches to eight feet long, are stacked in piles like so many potatoes or stones. Gauze and burlap are crudely stitched over stuffings made from nylon and cord. The semi-transparent skins reveal coiled guts, so the sculptures have interior as well as exterior dimension. The series is appropriately titled "Embryology." Several



Seated Figures

"Heads" are built from stiffened burlap and "Brains" of coiled hemp burst from the coarse seams. The most theatrical work is "Backs" — some 80 headless hollow torsos of molded burlap, each slightly different, all facing a blank wall.

All of Abakanowicz' sculpture is created on a fine boundary between the beautiful and the horrific. The textures of the fabrics invite touch, yet the explicitly organic quality of the shapes also repels. Because Abakanowicz still lives in Warsaw, where she witnessed the tragic oppression of Solidarity, it is tempting to read messages of specific political division and social deprivation in the works. However, in her artist's statement she claims, "To all the ancient fears of man, I add my own." Her art is about the

universal plight of humanity, about the fragility and strength, the temporal and lasting qualities of all people, not just her compatriots.

This survey of her sculpture simultaneously implies the organic beginnings of the human species, and an evolution from the pre-natal state to a condition of civilization. She sketches the division of self that comes with development, a schism that is echoed in the larger political situation, of people separated from the interests of government.

This is the last stop of a five city tour, and a unique opportunity to see work by one of Europe's foremost artists. (Wight Gallery at UCLA, through Nov. 11; Graduate School Gallery at Claremont through C 28.)