

Exhibition: **MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ**
IVAM Institut Valencià d'Art Modern
22nd July – 7th September 2008

Organised by: **Institut Valencià d'Art Modern**

Curated by: **Consuelo Císcar & Marga Paz**

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The exhibition comprises 12 installations made between 1973 and 2000 located in Gallery 7 and on the terrace of the IVAM. In her works she uses a variety of materials such as iron, bronze, wood, resin and textiles like nylon, sisal and burlap. Especially worth mentioning are the series *Figures*, formed by 80 bronze pieces, and *Embryology*, *Schizoid Heads*, *Skull*, *Abakan*, *Giver*, *Backs* and *The Cage*.

The catalogue of the exhibition contains reproductions of the works displayed and texts by the director of the IVAM, Consuelo Císcar, and Marga Paz, curators of the exhibition, and by the artist herself, Magdalena Abakanowicz, in which she analyses her most important pieces.

Magdalena Abakanowicz was born in Poland in 1930. When the artist was just nine years old, the Germans invaded Poland and World War II started. Its dramatic aftermath of dreadful destruction resulted in the death of a quarter of a million Poles and the deportation of the survivors to concentration camps, and wreaked havoc in the cities, especially Warsaw.

These historical circumstances turned the early years of her childhood before the war, when she was surrounded by woods and the forces of nature, into elements that shaped the memory of her dreams and imaginary. There she would seek shelter to hide and escape from the reality in which she lived and this period had a crucial influence on the artistic work she developed over the years.

From her very first works made in the late fifties, we find one of the constants of her oeuvre: fascination for power, monumentality and the mystery of the world of nature. She expressed this by means of organic motifs and biological and corporal forms far removed from the limits of "immediacy" imposed by contemporary reality and rooted in the universal.

Nature is always present throughout her trajectory, albeit under different forms. Especially relevant is the series *War Games*, made between 1987 and 1994, which includes the pieces *Giver*, *Anasta*, *Ancestor* and *Zadra*, among

other sculptures made from huge trunks of fallen trees that represent the physical vitality of human bodies, in clear contrast with the wounds caused by the violence of warfare.

In the mid sixties, coinciding with the moment when the traditional conception of art was expanding considerably with the appearance of new artistic fields, materials and languages, Abakanowicz began to make the first pieces that were to bring her international fame and allow her to leap over the frontiers of her country and overcome the marginalisation and isolation that Poland suffered until the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989.

As a student at the fine arts academy, several courses of textile design she had taken taught her how to weave, print and design fibres, so she began to produce structures made out of large-format natural materials endowed with extraordinary tactile qualities. These abstract forms were baptised *Abakans*, a name the artist continued to apply to these works from that time onwards.

The flexibility of the materials and the fluidity of the forms and surfaces contrasted with the perfect finish of the manufactured products.

After 1973 her interest in the universe of the organic and biological led her to find sources of inspiration in organic metaphors taken from the natural sciences, biology and the human body. That was when she made *Embryology*, which constituted an important shift in her trajectory by introducing new soft manufactured materials like ropes, sackcloth, nylon, cotton, gauze, etc. into her works.

The human figure appeared for the first time in her work in the series *Heads* (1973) and *Backs* (1976), made from the same modest organic materials as her other pieces at that time and characterised by a strong oppressive symbolism that dominates this heterogeneous group of series made up of bodies whose fragmentation, mutilation and deformation make reference to the suffering, fragility and vulnerability of the human being, one of the major themes of her oeuvre.

However, in 1985 another important change took place in her work: she started to cast her figures in bronze. The use of this material permitted her to create permanent monumental sculptures that could be installed outdoors and had an appearance of timelessness. The first of these was *Katarsis*, made up of a group of 33 gigantic headless hollow figures like tree trunks that she made for the outdoor sculpture collection that Giuliano Gori installed at Villa Celle in Tuscany.

She then has since continued to make monumental outdoor sculptures, among which it is worth mentioning especially *Negev*, of 1987, located in the outdoor sculpture garden of the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem and *Space of the Dragon*, of 1988, installed in the Olympic Park in Seoul and *Agora*, recently made for Chicago's Grant Park. In 1999 she exhibited *Bronze Crowd* at the IVAM, a piece that belongs to the Nasher Foundation in Dallas, Texas.

All these works that have formed a network of organic microcosmoses since the seventies spread across the place where they are exhibited, which thus becomes part of them, creating special spaces that make the spectator reflect about human experience, which is the ultimate aim of Abakanowicz's art.

Magdalena Abakanowicz is the author of numerous metaphorical texts about her childhood, the human condition, brain structure and mythology. Between 1965 and 1990 she was a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan. Among the awards she has been granted are the Grand Prix of Sao Paulo Biennale in 1965; the Gottfried von Herder award in Vienna, 1979; the Alfred Jurzykowsky Award, New York, 1982; the Award for Distinction in Sculpture, New York, 1993; she was appointed Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in Paris in 1985.