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ART/ARCHITECTURE

## ART/ARCHITECTURE; The Jackboot Has Lifted. Now the Crowds Crush.

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**MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ**, the Polish artist, is on a roll. Her works in fiber, burlap and bronze have brought her wider international recognition in the last year. She has had five solo exhibitions in three countries -- one each in Italy and Poland and three in the United States. She has also received honorary doctorates in New York and Boston and special awards in New York, Rome and Berlin.

The largest of these exhibitions, "Ninety-Five Figures From a Crowd of One Thousand Ninety-Five Figures," a show of bronze figures, remains on view at the Three Rivers Arts Festival in Point State Park, Pittsburgh, through June 17. The bronzes -- 95 headless and armless figures of walking people, as well as three massive prehistoric-looking "Skulls" and four towering "Hand-like Trees" -- have textured surfaces resembling wrinkled skin, a signature of her work since the 1960's.

Ms. Abakanowicz (pronounced aba-ka-NO-vich), a tall, athletic woman of 70 who swims daily when she is at home near Warsaw, says the themes of solitude and the fear of crowds in her work reflect the severe limitations of space and materials that she experienced in her youth, under the Nazis during World War II and later under the Communists. In 1956, after completing her studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, she met and married Jan Kosmowski, an engineer and scientist. The couple moved to a one-room apartment, the most that the government allowed, measuring about 10 feet by 13 feet. It was both their home and her studio.

"There wasn't even enough space to make paintings on stretched canvas because there was no room to store them," she said. So she painted watercolors on canvases that could be rolled up. But that, she said, was "somehow boring." Sculpture, too, was out of the question because it took up even more space than painting, and, besides, there were no materials.

"I could not pick up stone or marble and go to a foundry because there was no stone, no marble and no foundry to cast it," she said. "This absence brought me to what they call the 'world of

fiber.' It would never have happened if everyday life had been different. I needed to build something around me like a fence, to shut out the unpleasantness."

The first works she produced in fiber were cocoons, which were large enough for a person to walk into. She constructed them by hand, crossing one rope over another, a technique she prefers to call "constructions," not weaving. She devised it as a way to use the sisal she scavenged on the docks along the Vistula River. "I collected all the ropes rejected by the ships," Ms. Abakanowicz said. "I was absolutely not interested in learning how to weave. I pulled out the sisal threads from the ropes, washed them and added dyes, cooking them like a soup in a big pot. Then, I built a wooden frame and on it I crossed the different ropes and cords to get the wanted surfaces."

The thick, nearly rigid sculptures that she calls Abakans were flexible enough to be easily stored. "I could roll them up and put them under the bed or in the attics of my friends or in their basements," she said.

In 1962, one of her Abakans created a sensation at the First International Biennial of Tapestry in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was acclaimed as a work that had changed the centuries-old craft of hand weaving from two-dimensional tapestry to three-dimensional sculpture. Three years later, she won a gold medal for a similar fiber sculpture at the Sao Paulo Bienal in Brazil.

"My Abakans were never flat," Ms. Abakanowicz said. "I wanted to make sculpture, and this heavy, stiff material allowed me to form three-dimensional objects that could be hung in space."

Embraced in the late 60's by the rapidly expanding crafts movement as the most innovative expressions of fiber art, the Abakans -- and the burlap and resin figures that followed -- were accepted as contemporary sculpture in museums and galleries the world over. Her "Abakan Red," a butterfly-like sisal work from 1969, is in the National Museum of Art in Wroclaw, Poland.

At the time, weaving and tapestry were considered people's art, which was often subsidized by governments in the Communist bloc. "But I never got a penny from the government," Ms. Abakanowicz said. She supported herself by teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan from 1965 to 1990 and by selling her work, primarily in Western Europe and the United States.

Last September, Ms. Abakanowicz came to New York to receive the Visionaries Award from the American Craft Museum in New York. It cited her for "her powerful explorations, dealing with the impact of social and political reality on individual identity, that have demonstrated the potential of fiber as an effective and expressive sculptural material."

In 1974, the museum acquired "Abakan Violet," an eight-foot construction that depicts female genitalia. Last year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired "Figure on Trunk," a 1998 bronze of a headless figure standing on a log, which she said expressed solitude. It was exhibited with 40 other bronze figures in the museum's roof garden in 1999.

The pieces in the Pittsburgh show reveal her ambivalence about crowds. While she and her husband usually visit exhibition sites, where she oversees the installation of her work -- as she did for a show last fall at the Marlborough Gallery in Manhattan and the one in Pittsburgh -- she is both inspired by and apprehensive of large gatherings of people.

"I'm frightened by crowds of people, birds or even insects swarming in great masses," she said. "People in an airport, people on a metro or on a tram, can seem threatening, horrible, a brainless entity. Today we are pushed by quantity in general. I create these crowds of figures as a warning: they're saying we are so many."

Ms. Abakanowicz said she can think about crowds only in complete solitude. "But solitude is hard for people because we have the feeling of belonging to a tribe," she said. "I know because I need this traveling I do because I am a member of a tribe, and it re-energizes me enormously to meet so many people."

Photos: Magdalena Abakanowicz, at left, beside her 1969 work in sisal "Abakan Red" in Wroclaw, Poland. Above, her 1998 bronze "Figure on Trunk" on the roof of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Artur Starewicz/Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York); (Jan Kosmowski)