

Agora, Art and Experience

In 1957, Magdalena Abakanowicz joined a group of artists, intellectuals, scientists and politicians in the tiny studio apartment of Polish Constructivist painter Henryk Stazewski. There, ideologies and dreams of new realities coalesced. Abakanowicz, whose work involved gouache compositions on canvas and cardboard, began to challenge and question her own efforts at art, ultimately altering her use of material and adhering to spatial forms of three dimensions.

Abakanowicz's first major accomplishment came in the 1960s and was a series of monumental soft sculpture, created from uniquely woven textiles and suspended from the ceiling. For material, she collected old sisal ropes from Polish harbors, untwined them into threads and dyed them in expressive color. The open-ended works resisted any categorization and took on the name "Abakans," after the artist's last name. Critics were rattled and surprised by the powerful effect of the forms, which they saw as cocoons, tents, chambers, cloaks or trees. Viewers were swept into an environment that unlocked a fusion of trauma, intimacy, solemnity and imagination. The untimely "Abakans" placed the artist in the international art scene, and she received the Grand Prix of the Sao Paulo Biennial in Brazil in 1967.

The "Abakans" of the 1960s and '70s characterized the artist's fundamental mode of production, vision and narrative. Her use of large, superhuman scale—produced in multiple forms of towering presence—marked a distinct space in the history of art. The physicality of touching and molding the organic material with her own hands reflected her attachment to nature. "There is no tool between me and the material I create with. I choose it with my hands. I shape it with my hands. My hands transmit my energy to it. By translating an idea into a shape, they will always pass on something escaping conceptualization. They will reveal the unconscious" (from www.culture.pl, Malgorzata Kitowska-Lysiak, Art History Institute of the Catholic University of Lublin, 2004).

By Sigalit Zetouni

Born in Poland in June 1930, Abakanowicz's childhood was spent in a 32-room country estate, surrounded by servants and tutors, but removed from other children and her own parents. Her father was a descendent of Genghis Khan, and her mother was of Polish nobility. Abakanowicz often found relief in the ancient forests and fields outside of her home. When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939,

Abakanowicz's family fled to Warsaw, where they had to conceal their aristocratic background. During the Warsaw uprising of 1944, Abakanowicz watched women and children being strapped to tanks and used as human shields. She also assisted the nurses in a clinic and witnessed many victims with broken and damaged bodies. The images of war, death and mutilation have always remained with her.

During the 1990s and the current decade, impressions of a crowd and

its individual figures have become key components in Abakanowicz's work. "I immerse in the crowd, like a grain of sand in the friable sands. I am fading among the anonymity of glances, movements, smells, in the common absorption of air, in the common pulsation of juices under the skin," she notes on her website (www.abakanowicz.art.pl). And hence, the artist has been passionately planting crowds of monumental figures around the globe. The entire population of her figures has surpassed 1,000, and they remain in various museums, public and private collections worldwide.

Late in the autumn of 2006, Abakanowicz installed her largest crowd at the southwest corner of Grant Park. It is entitled "Agora" and is composed of 106 cast iron figures, each about 9 feet tall, headless and frozen in a walking movement. The figures are similar in shape, but different in details.

The artist and her three assistants

created models for each figure by hand, and the casting took place from 2004 to 2006 in an industrial foundry near Poznan, Poland. The surface of each figure resembles a tree bark or wrinkled skin, conveying individuality. The figures stand on a gray, concrete base, but they are turned in all directions. They are mostly crowded, excluding four that are placed outside of the group. The work is engulfed by the artist's imagination and is linked metaphorically to centuries of destruction and survival. The crossroads of Michigan Avenue and Roosevelt Road in Chicago have joined the artist's tale of human condition.

Although the figures are faceless, the viewers who walk inside the challenging environment created by the work might sense its overwhelming gaze, similar to the stare one is confronted with looking at a painted figure by Rembrandt. As Roland Barthes writes in *Critical Essays*, "There is no sadness and no cruelty in that gaze; it is a gaze without adjectives, it is only, completely, a gaze which neither judges you, nor appeals to you; it posits you, implicates you; makes you exist." □



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