

Art History Research Paper

HOW
MATERIALS INFORM METAPHOR
IN THE WORK OF
MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ

Submitted by

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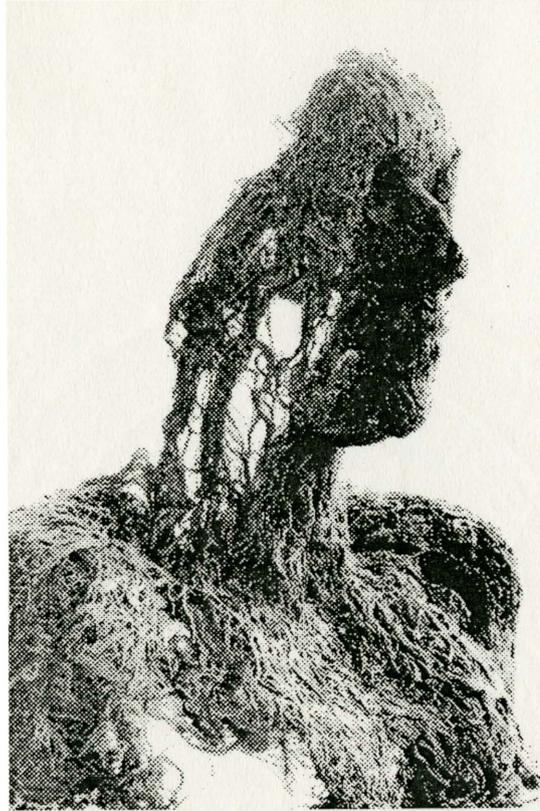


Figure 1: *Self Portrait*
(1976), linen, life-size.
Rose Magdalena, p.111.



Figure 2: Abakanowicz carving the model for a figure. Rose Magdalena, p.88.

In the hands of Polish sculptor, Magdalena Abakanowicz, sisal, burlap, bronze, and wood are transformed into metaphors simultaneously expressing the fragility and strength of humans and the natural world. Deeply personal, drawing upon her experience of the destruction of Poland during World War II, Abakanowicz's work reaches cross-cultural audiences through her ability to turn personal insight into universal expression. The artist accomplishes this difficult task using a visual language of metaphor. Through metaphor, Abakanowicz discusses aspects of humanity that are less tangible by equating them to something more concrete. Careful use of materials allows the metaphors to resonate, even with people who did not experience the devastating effects of World War II. In comparing unlike things, such as sheets of steel to wings or eggs to rocks, Abakanowicz lends

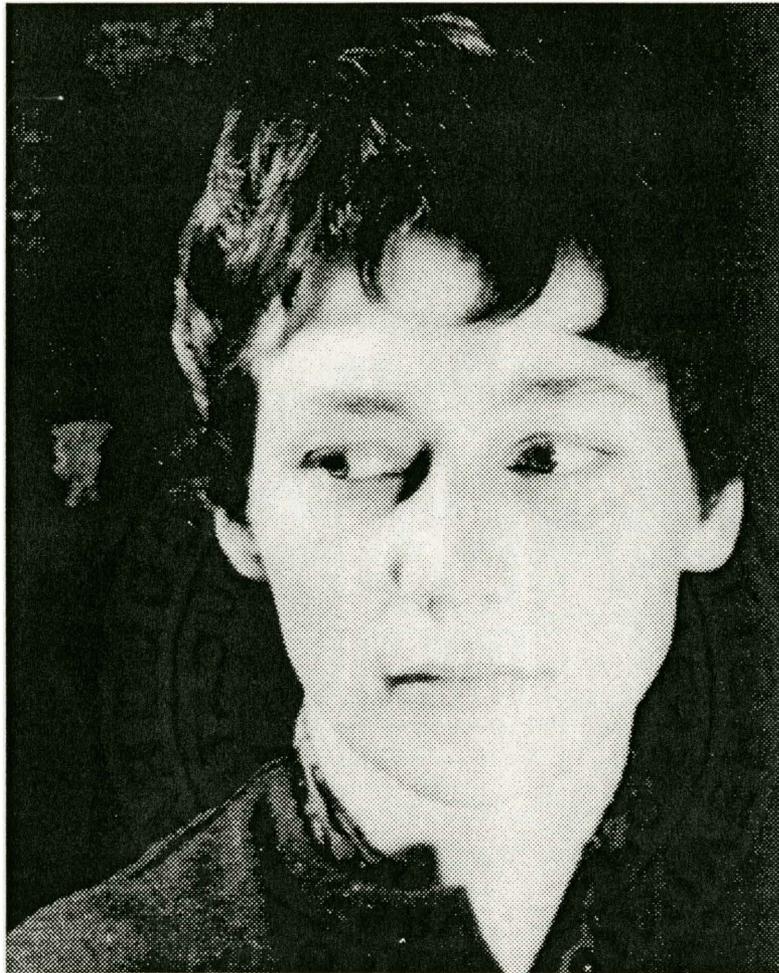


Figure 3: Abakanowicz, (1960). Rose Magdalena, p.191.

insight into the complexities of being human. In her tapestries the materials are more referential to the human body than metaphorical, but in her later work the materials provide contrasts, creating tensions that allude to the constant imbalance of life cycles. Employing the materials as an integral part of her expression, Abakanowicz forms powerful objects that carry her message of the power and frailty of the human condition.

Abakanowicz's sensitive use of materials began early in her childhood as she observed the forest and bogs surrounding her parent's estate. Born in 1930 in Poland to an aristocratic family descended from the Mongolian invader Genghis Khan, Abakanowicz spent a lonely childhood entertaining herself in the vast landscape of her parent's 5,000 acre estate. Her preoccupied father and aloof mother left Abakanowicz alone to observe, at nose-length, nature. Abakanowicz describes her intense interest in the natural world in her prose writings Portrait x 20.

When I learned to use things, a pocketknife became my inseparable companion. Bark and twigs were full of mysteries; and later so was clay. I molded objects whose meaning was known only to me. They fulfilled functions in performances and rituals which I created for myself alone.¹

Writing about how she would sneak out of the family estate early in the morning to rummage through the marshes and the forest, the

¹Daniel Rosenfeld, Ann H. Slimmon, and Judith A. Singesen, eds. Magdalena Abakanowicz: Recent Sculpture (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1993) 23.

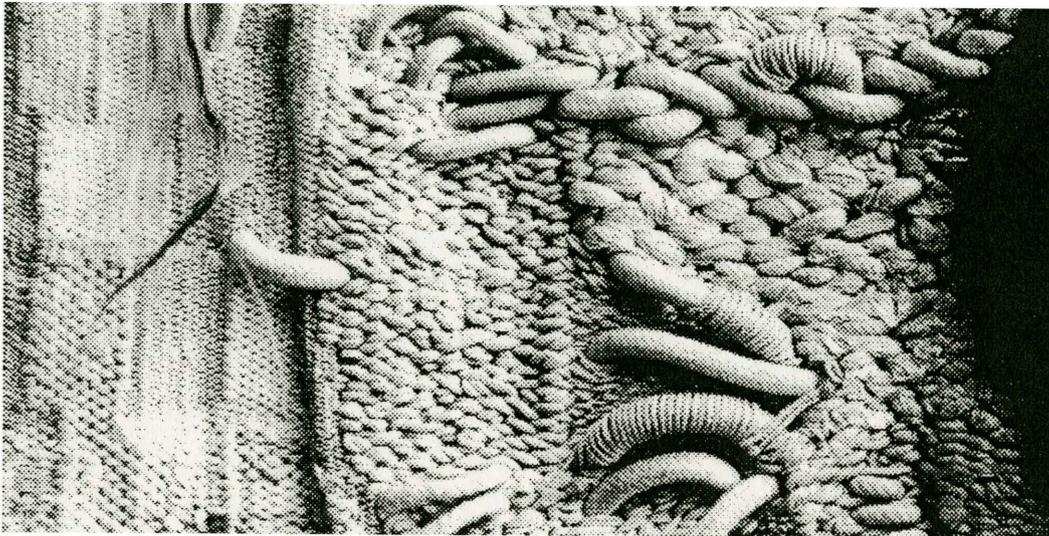


Figure 4: (detail) *White* (1966), cotton rope, silk, and sisal weaving, 4'11"x6'6". Rose Magdalena, p.22.

artist described how she began her life-time occupation of sculpting with natural materials. As a child, in the early morning hours, she would construct small objects out of twigs and grasses, returning to the mansion before she was missed. This keen observation of nature provided a strong foundation for Abakanowicz's art which can be seen in the organic forms she chooses for her monumental tapestries.²

Abakanowicz's first tapestry, *Composition of White Forms* (fig.4), woven with old clotheslines, hand-spun yarn, and cotton rope was accepted into the first "Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie" exhibit in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1962. Large and composed of abstract shapes dominated by texture, the work challenged the boundaries of what was traditionally considered tapestry. Abakanowicz approached the materials as a means to express her concern for the natural world and her passion for the organic. Exaggerating the intersecting of warps and wefts by using uncharacteristically large ropes and allowing the fibers to occasionally escape the grid, Abakanowicz drew attention to the age-old process of weaving.³ Coupled with the root-like quality of the yarn, this exaggeration of the weaving process alluded to the web of life or the intertwining of life and death.

²Biographic information about the artist came from several of the sources listed in the bibliography; the most thorough source was: Barbara Rose, Magdalena Abakanowicz (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994).

³Warp yarns are the vertical and supporting threads of the weaving. Weft yarns are the threads that fill in the weaving--going over and under the warp yarns horizontally.

Abakanowicz commented on her use of textile materials for her expression in 1978:

The fiber which I use in my works, derives from plants and is similar to that which we ourselves are composed...Our heart is surrounded by the coronary plexus, the most vital of threads...Handling fiber we handle mystery. A dry leaf has a network reminiscent of a mummy...When the biology of our body breaks down, the skin has to be cut as to give access to the inside. Later it has to be sewn on like fabric. Fabric is our covering and our attire. Made with our hands it is a record of our thoughts.⁴

Abakanowicz's raw, coarse, and bristly materials that seemed to have a life of their own become an extension of her body. Choosing unrefined yarns that contrast the traditions of tapestry, Abakanowicz uses materials that obviously refer to organic growth. Within the traditions of tapestry highly refined, smooth, and lustrous materials, such as silk, mercerized cotton and worsted wool, were preferred. The allusions to the human body and to the cycles of growth and decay are inherent in the materials she chooses for her expression. Whether she uses the processes of weaving to magnify the fibrous materials that compose our bodies or reduces the network of ancient roots to a manageable size, Abakanowicz translates the mystery of life and growth into tangible visual forms.

When her work emerged from the wall to hang free in space, they dominated rooms like primeval forests--immense, dark and hairy. Their monumental size (*Bois-le-Duc* [fig.8] measures an

⁴Rose, Magdalena 20-22.



Figure 5: *Black Environment* (1970-78)
Sisal, fifteen pieces each one approx.
9'10"x40"x35". Rose Magdalena, p.32.

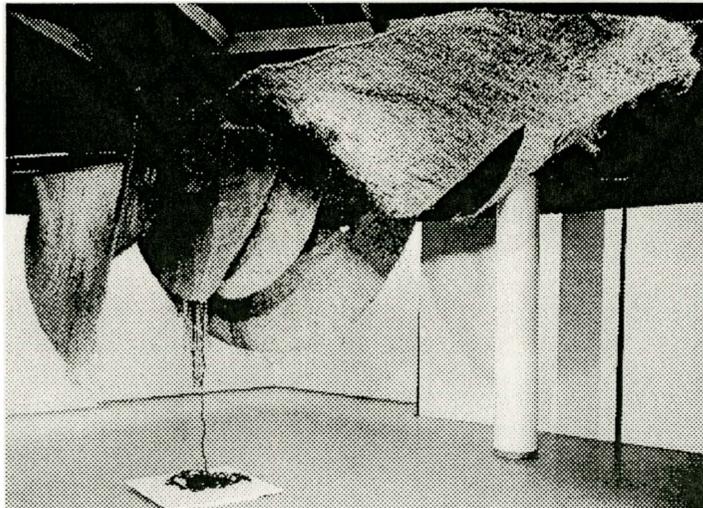


Figure 6: *Baroque Dress* (1969),
sisal, 13x13x20'. Rose Magdalena,
p.24.

overwhelming 26x65 feet) was only possible because of the enlarged warp and weft yarns the artist used. Even so, weaving the tapestries took years. The tapestries, called *Abakans* by art critics, were no longer objects, but environments that simultaneously alluded to the grandeur and mystery of the woods and to the erotic and mysterious nature of sexual organs. Beginning to employ the metaphors her work would later use to convey her ideas of human frailty and strength, the *Abakans* series utilized organic materials to exaggeratedly refer to the human body and it's connection to the natural world.

Black Environment (fig.5), composed of about 20 dark and monumental tapestries suspended from the ceiling is at once menacing and inviting. Like cloaks, ancient trees and lips the forms threaten to take the viewer in at the same time that they offer a comforting womb of protection from the outside world. *Baroque Dress* (fig.6) and *Brown Coat* (fig.7) refer to clothing forms in their titles, but their overwhelming appearance is that of raw, exposed and powerful vulvas. Both exterior and interior, microscopic and universal, these pieces use materials traditionally associated with utility and comfort, decoration and embellishment to allude to humankind's relationship to the earth and each other. Created out of materials that refer to the organic-ness of humans, the pieces magnify and exaggerate the sensual texture of the natural world, exposing the processes of growth and decay. At a time that industry in Poland threatened to consume and destroy so much of the earth's resources,

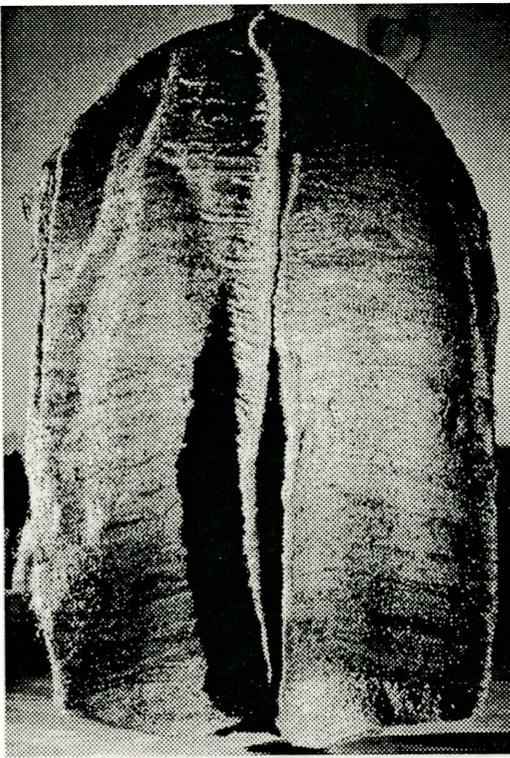


Figure 7: *Brown Coat*
(1968), sisal
9'10"x5'11"x24'. Rose
Magdalena, p.25.

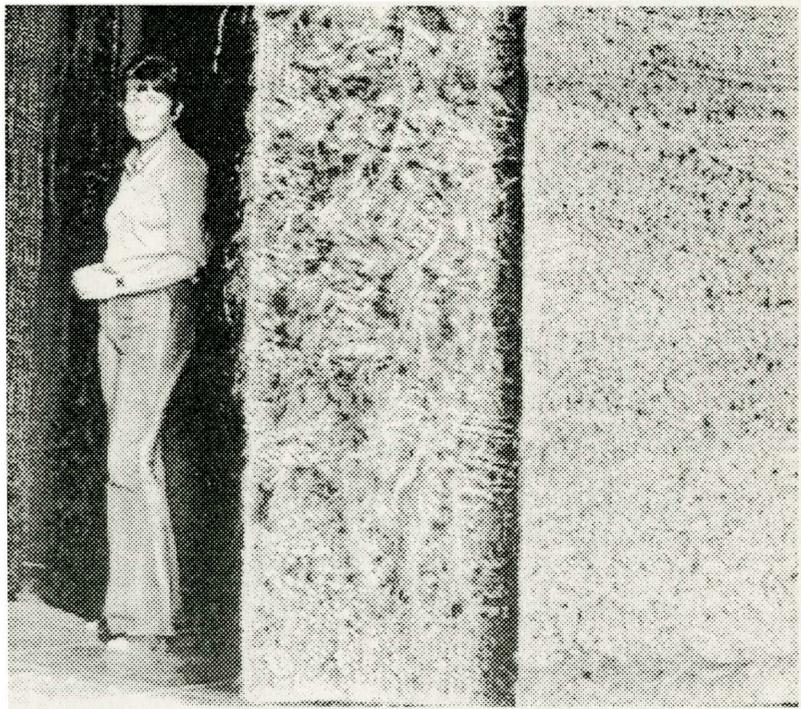


Figure 8: (detail) *Bois-le-Duc* (1970-
71), sisal and wool, 26'3"x65'7"x6'7".
Rose Magdalena, p.30-31.

Abakanowicz's tapestries became monuments to the strength and mystery of the natural world. For Abakanowicz rope, sisal, and hemp were vital to her expression. These materials are not archival, rather they are known for their rapid rate of decomposition. Not just alluding to life, but creating it with organic materials, the artist was able to create environments which placed the viewer in her imagination, surrounding them with her perceptions of nature and the human body.

For the decade of the nineteen-sixties Abakanowicz created variations of the woven textiles, making forms that alluded to forests, clothing, human anatomy, and mysterious interiors. Sometimes woven on site with makeshift looms, Abakanowicz and her assistants would hand-weave the thick and bulky threads through massive warp yarns in a process that barely resembled what people normally associated with weaving. Unafraid to break the rules, and in fact disappointed if her work was accepted by the traditions she went against, the artist would use unorthodox materials like weathered rope from marinas, horsehair, fur, and tar to achieve her expressive goals (fig.8). By using materials in unexpected ways Abakanowicz allowed the viewers to see her work with fresh eyes, an experience that heightened the intensity of her allusions to the growth and decay of skin and the natural world.

In 1972 Abakanowicz experimented with the human form on a life-size scale with manufactured cloth. Though the forms, composed of human manikins with black cloth sewed tightly over



Figure 9: *Heads* (1973-75), burlap and hemp rope, sixteen pieces ranging from 33x20x26" to 39x30x28". Rose Magdalena, p.47.

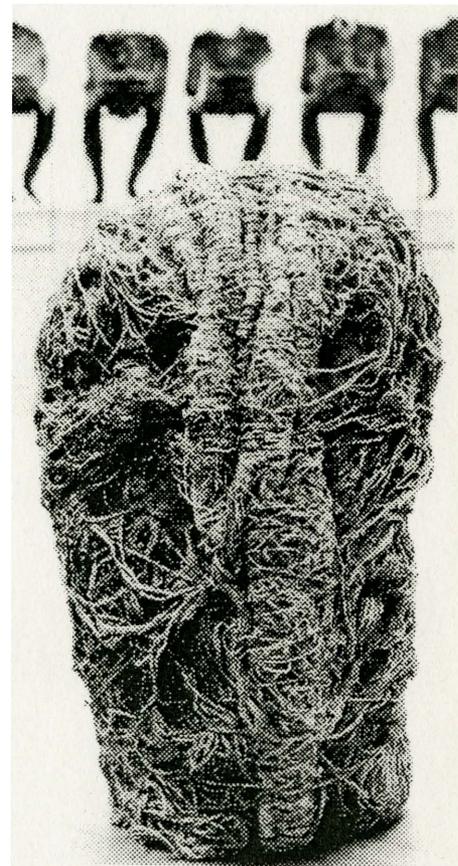


Figure 10: *Head and Seated Figures* (1975), burlap and hemp rope, sixteen pieces ranging from 33x20x26 to 39x30x28. Rose Magdalena, p48.

their bodies, were not successful in themselves, they led to future work that began to address complex ideas of the human condition. While continuing to weave and exhibit the monumental tapestries that dominated her work during the sixties, Abakanowicz began using pre-fabricated cloth in her explorations of a human-scale-inspired expression in the early seventies.

Heads (figs.9-10) was the first work to emerge after her exhibit of cloth-covered manikins in Dusseldorf in 1972. Composed of burlap and hemp around a steel frame, *Heads* look excavated, like Pre-columbian mummy bundles. Burlap and hemp are materials with a high acidic quality, causing the materials to decompose rapidly.⁵ Large boulder shaped forms with hemp rope exposed in tangled masses under torn burlap, the forms evoke feelings of restrained figures and exposed brains. Crude stitches hold the stretched burlap in place, giving a grotesque twist to these natural forms. Their size evokes geologic formations, but their texture gives the viewer the feeling that they are viewing insect eggs in an enlarged state. The title of *Heads* leads the viewer to connect the forms with fragmented body parts, while their aged appearance gives them mythological associations, making them appear more like weathered monuments to ancient gods.

The personal inspiration for the fragmented body parts that

⁵Burlap and hemp are most frequently used outdoors, as protection for fragile plants or to keep hills from eroding-- their quick rate of decomposition adds to their functionality in garden settings.

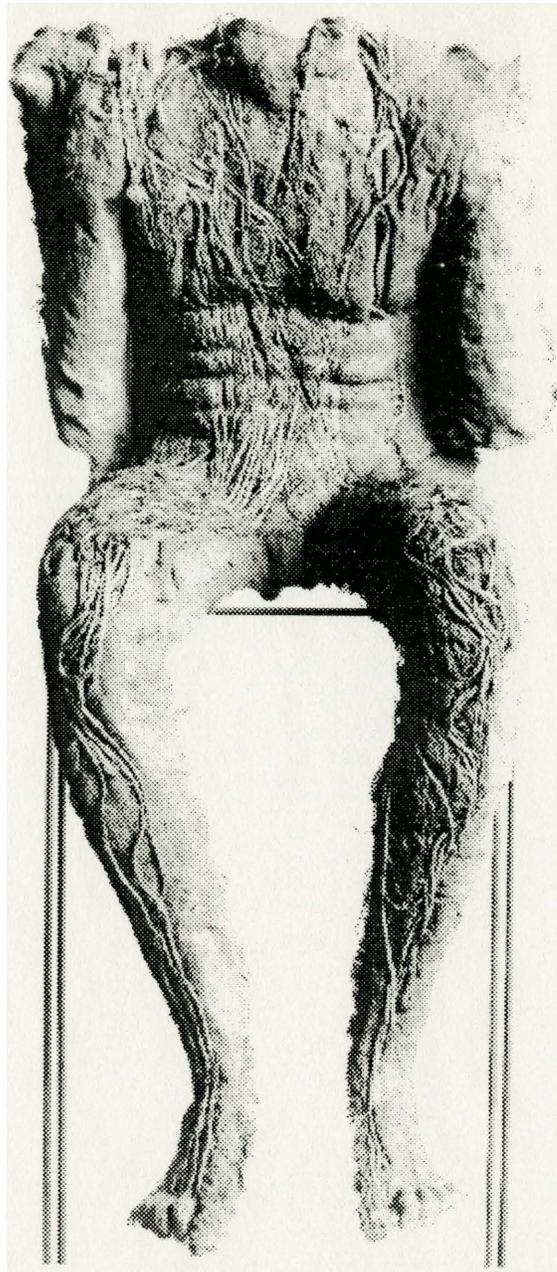


Figure 11: (detail) *Seated Figure* (1974-79) Eighteen burlap and resin figures each approx. 30x18x8". Rose Magdalena, p.51.

appear in Abakanowicz's work may come from her experiences when the Germans invaded Warsaw when she was nine. Abakanowicz watched with her family as Nazi tanks rolled down the road by their house, firing their guns to demonstrate their power. Four years later drunk soldiers bashed down their door and fired the shots that wounded her mother. Abakanowicz was witness to the bullets that severed her mother's right arm at the shoulder and wounded her left hand. The artist refers, in her art work, to the horror she felt as her mother's capable and caring hands were suddenly reduced to meat, unconnected to what they had been before. While viewers may not be aware of the artist's personal history, the fragmentation of the human body in her work conveys feelings of nausea and disgust, as well as profound sadness.

In 1974 Abakanowicz took a plaster cast of the torso and legs of a seated man and began the work by which she is most known. Pressing burlap and sisal into molds of the human torso and stiffening the fabric with resin, the artist created a series of eighteen forms called *Seated Figures* (fig.11). By stiffening the burlap with resin, Abakanowicz impresses a permanence on materials that biodegrade like paper--their high acidic content causes them to burn. The plastic resin arrests the decay of a material that returns to dust, as do humans. Hunched over on thin, metal frames echoing chairs or pedestals, the burlap alluded to skin that was both decaying and growing. While each piece is constructed of identical materials pressed into the same mold, they all take on individual characteristics through the

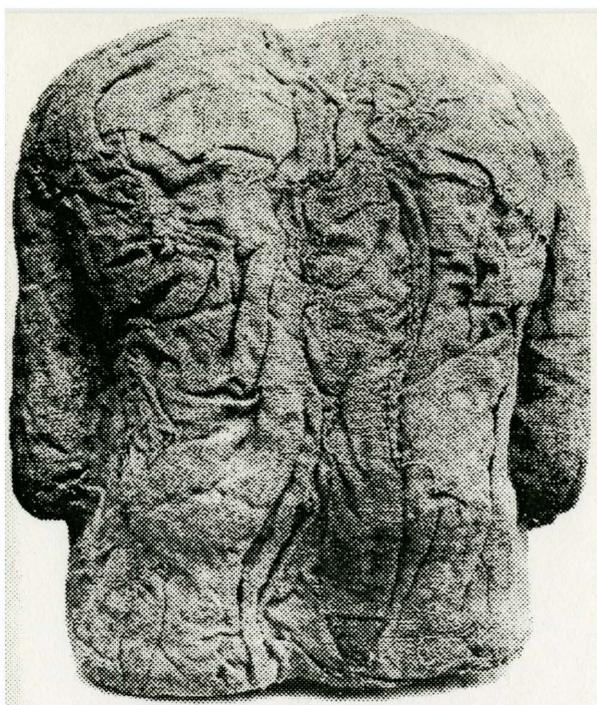


Figure 12: (detail) *Backs* (1976-80), burlap and resin, 80 pieces each one approx. 25x21x23". Rose Magdalena, p.62.



Figure 13: *Backs* (1976-80), burlap and resin, 80 pieces each one approx. 25x21x23". Rose Magdalena, p.64.

subtleties of the folds of cloth in each piece, not unlike the slight differences between humans. When she presses sisal into the forms of the body, the fiber takes on the look of a root that grows despite being in a pot that is too small. These forms evoke the endurance of weeds that push up through the concrete of the urban environment, rebelling against the confines humans have placed on the natural world. By using materials that decompose similarly to the human body after death, but arresting that decay by encasing the burlap and sisal in resin, Abakanowicz comments on the enduring aspects of being human that, perhaps, live beyond physical death. The metaphorical use of these materials profoundly creates a tension between growth and decay, permanence and impermanence. Art critic, Janet Koplos, describes Abakanowicz's use of fibrous materials to convey ideas of the human condition:

Fiber for Abakanowicz is an organic metaphor, not just the thread of existence, the web of time, but also the fibrous texture of wood, the cording of muscles and blood vessels, the thatch of hair. The fiber with which she builds her art is a tangible, flexible, manipulatable material at the same time that it symbolizes ideas so ungraspable that they are the province of philosophy and religion.⁶

With fibers that allude to skin, Abakanowicz began the series *Backs* (figs.12-13), a mass of bowed and downtrodden forms. The frailty of human life is expressed in the decaying burlap while their rigidity declares an undying desire to live. Aged and

⁶Janet Koplos, Rev. of "Magdalena Abakanowicz," Fiberarts 10.2 (1983) 66.

abused burlap speaks to the perseverance of life; coarse and torn, the burlap holds the form of a human, just as old clothing takes on the shape of the wearer after years of use. Both *Backs* and *Seated Figures* are composed of hollow husks, shells evoking the natural world and human experience en masse. Viewed from one side they appear to be full figures, and from the other side they are hollow shells. This interest in the play of opposites occurs frequently in Abakanowicz's work. Both victim and aggressor, these forms evoke feelings of the suppression and endurance of the human spirit. Though crowded together, the mass of figures conveys feelings of loneliness and isolation. Armies or crowds, these repetitions of human forms (fig. 13) seemed to allude to the horrors of World War II at the same time that they are not limited to that expression, but stretch beyond the borders of history to express a general human condition.

Abakanowicz draws upon her early childhood experiences when she elicits the sense of isolation a person can feel in a crowd. Even among her family members Abakanowicz felt like a misfit. In Portrait x 20, Abakanowicz poignantly remembers how her mother taunted her about buying her from a Jew. Acutely aware of her mother's desire for a boy-child, the young artist felt alone and unwanted though the house was filled with many servants who doted upon her. Later, after the Nazi's invaded Poland and then were forced back by the Soviets, her family had to leave their land and lineage as the Soviets began to persecute the Polish aristocracy. Abakanowicz's references to ostracism draw upon her

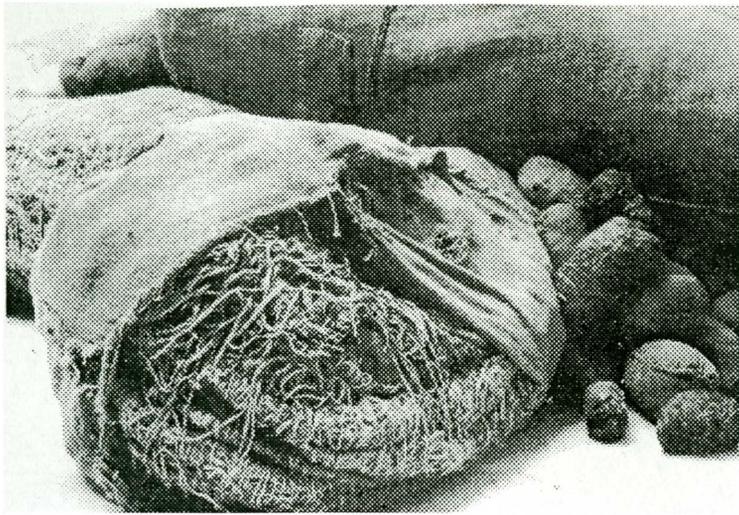


Figure 14: (detail) *Embryology* (1978-81), burlap, cotton gauze, hemp rope, nylon and sisal, 680 pieces ranging from 1" to 8'2". Rose Magdalena, p.73.



Figure 15: *Embryology* (1978-81), burlap, cotton gauze, hemp rope, nylon and sisal, 680 pieces ranging from 1" to 8'2". Rose Magdalena, p.71.

experience of seeing her father, so proud of his family's history, forced to hide his ancestry and support his family by running a newspaper kiosk in a small town outside of Warsaw where no one would recognize the family.

From 1978 to 1980 Abakanowicz worked on the series *Embryology* (figs.14-15) whose expression was founded more in the natural world than on the human form. Eventually 680 individual pieces, *Embryology* is composed of burlap and gauze-covered egg-like shapes ranging from the size of pebbles to large boulders. Seen as cocoons, eggs, rocks, potatoes, and pods, the forms were made of burlap and gauze stuffed with coarse, organic threads--some seemed to be bursting at the roughly sewn seams. Though composed of dead and aged materials, the pods seemed to be growing, as if their drab, dry husks concealed budding new life. The tension created between the appearance of new life contained in 'Frankenstein-ish' materials is at the core of Abakanowicz's expression. These eggs of potential which seems to be bursting with growth, are contained in crudely repaired shells. The tired and despairing qualities of the sutured skin still contains the hope of new life.

Abakanowicz's artistic intent may be to express deeply personal emotions, but her forms allow for a broad range of interpretations. It is in her ability to reach within herself and find emotions and shapes that people across cultural lines can find commonality that the strength of her work emerges. Abakanowicz describes viewer's reactions to her work:

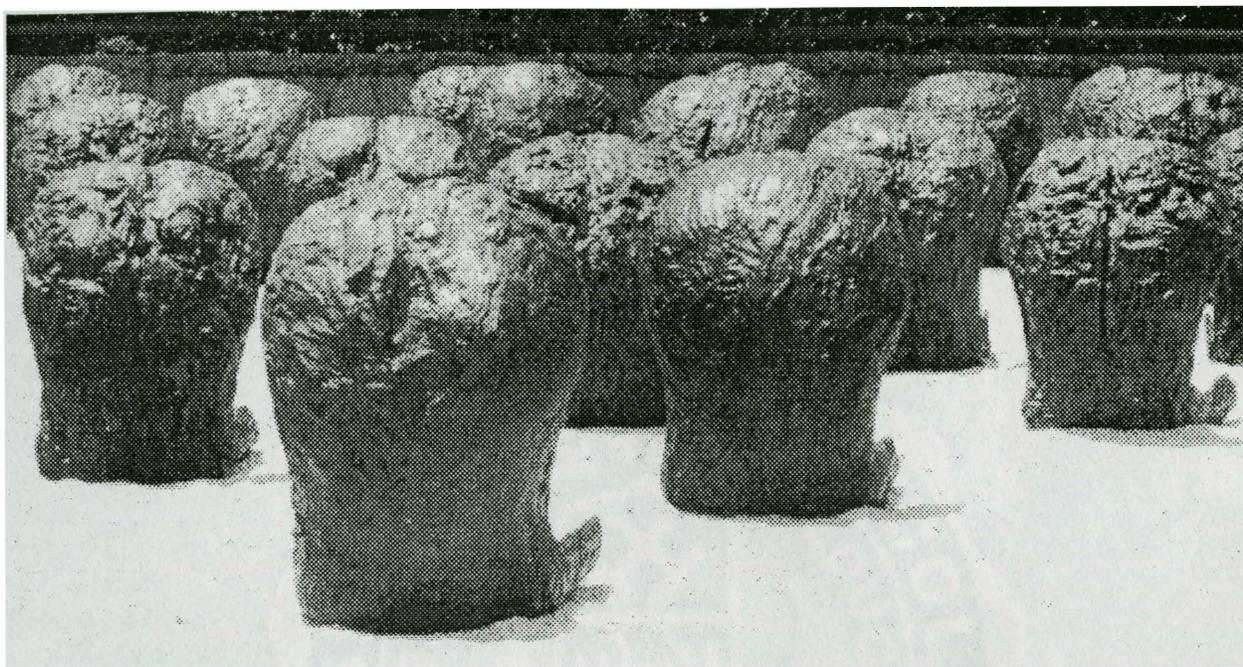


Figure 16: *Becalmed Beings* (1992-93), 40 bronze figures, ranging from 33x24x30" to 37x26x33". Rose Magdalena, p.77.

When people see *Embryology*, the impression is to be confronted by forms they know very well from the surrounding world--like stones, like a kind of grey fruit or big seeds or brains. The work is metaphoric. People who look at it see different things, shapes like whales or like eggs, because they are rich in meanings.⁷

When her work hardens in steel, bronze, and wood its metaphorical qualities take on a less harmonized character. When the burlap and sisal from the *Backs* series are cast in bronze, the allusion to skin and its growth and decay are placed in direct conflict with the permanence of the materials. *Becalmed Beings* (fig.16), created as a memorial for the victims of the atom bomb in Hiroshima, Japan, evokes feelings of intense suffering and endurance. The hardened burlap shapes, familiar from Abakanowicz's *Backs* series, evoke insect-exoskeletons that have survived the crushing intent of a shoe. Hunched over as if carrying a great weight, the texture of the forms allude to the fragile material of skin, while the materials are as lasting as stone. In *Sage A* (fig. 17) and later in *Puellae* (fig.18) the familiar human figure, composed of overlapping burlap pieces, is cast in bronze in a way that reveals the organic nature of the materials. Instead of refining bronze to the highly polished and confident art form as it is frequently experienced, Abakanowicz allows clay from the mold to remain on the forms, alluding to encrustations of lichen on ancient stones. In the hollow of the back the bronze is untouched, allowing the unmolded aspect of the

⁷Hunter Drohojowska, "Magical Mystery Tours," Art News 84.7 (1985): 110.

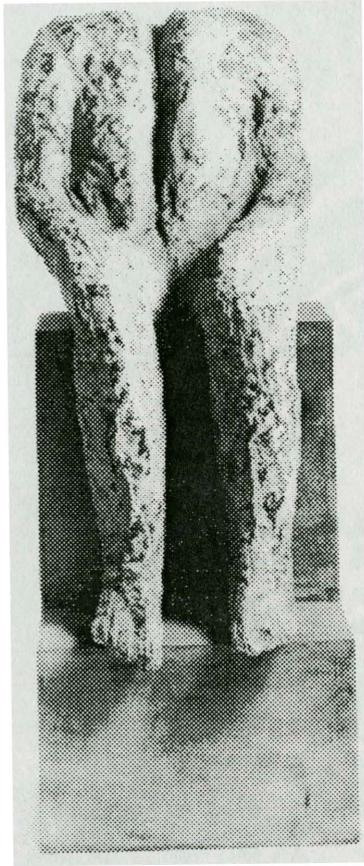


Figure 17: *Sage A* (1988-89), bronze, 58x25x33". Recent Sculpture, 1993, p.52.



Figure 18: *Puellae* (1992-93), bronze, thirty figures, each one approx.40-43" high. Rose Magdalena, p.166-7.

metal to show through. Perhaps by contrasting the endurance of the metal with the eventual decay of the subject matter, Abakanowicz is allowing the viewer to approach the idea of impermanence without confronting them with the reality of the decomposition of the materials that biodegrade as the body does. Art critic, Michael Brenson, addresses Abakanowicz's poetic use of materials to create metaphors:

Each of her materials is used freshly, against prevailing assumptions about it, and yet somehow also in keeping with its own nature. When she suspends her *Abakans* tapestries from the ceiling rather than hanging them on a wall, she develops the organic and environmental possibilities that have been part of tapestries all along. When she leaves her bronze sculptures open so that they look like shells with part of their insides exposed, she echoes the skull-like aspect of plaster and rubber molds. By opening bronze up and leaving its inside exposed, she makes it more like a skin, which both calls attention to the organic nature of bronze and undermines the material's association with secrecy, preciousness and permanence.⁸

War Games (fig.19), a cycle of works created in the late eighties, returns to the monumental size of the *Abakans*. Instead of huge woven forms, Abakanowicz has hewn enormous trunks, wrapping the ends with weathered burlap or steel plates welded together with wound-like seams. Sometimes the trunks are impaled with large plates of steel that evoke huge blades or wings. These massive sculptures are displayed horizontally on steel pedestals indoors and outdoors. The gnarled bodies of the trees metaphorically allude to many diverse things--weapons, farm

⁸Rosenfeld 17.

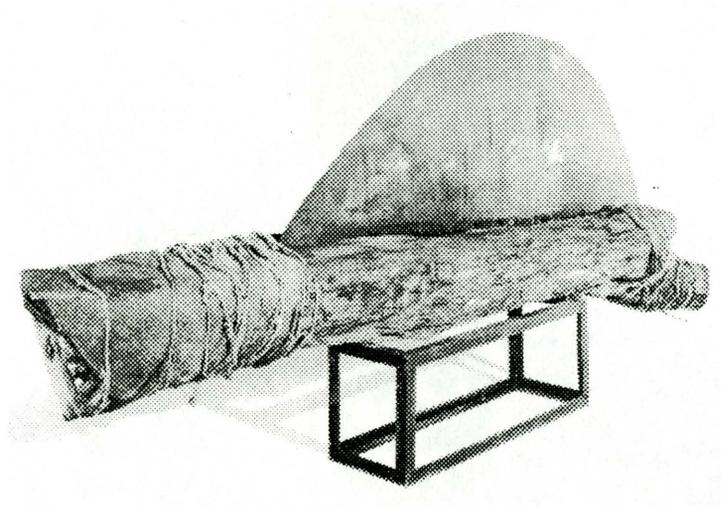


Figure 19: *Winged Trunks* (1989), wood and steel, 106 1/4"x196 7/8"x393/8". Recent Sculpture, 1993, p.60.

implements, wounded or severed limbs, gigantic phalli, and human torsos. Imprisoned in sheets of metal or carefully bound with bandage-like burlap, the organic nature inherent in the wood is emphasized. The tension between the mechanical world and the untainted wilderness seems stressed in this cycle, as well as the damage that humankind inflicts on each other and the environment. Evoking confusion and ambiguity these pieces confront the viewer with the question: are these the severed limbs of victims or the horrifying weapons of aggressors? Through combinations of disparate materials Abakanowicz taps into the age-old dilemma of morality and human worth.

Whether she is using cloth, stone, bronze, wood or steel, Abakanowicz uses the inherent nature of the materials to further her expression. Through the metaphorical language of the materials she chooses, Abakanowicz addresses the human condition and humankind's relationship to the world they live in. Drawing upon her very personal experiences of isolation, ostracism, destruction, perseverance and endurance, the artist is able to generalize enough to make the message meaningful to viewers everywhere without simplifying it so much that it loses its impact. With cloth, Abakanowicz is able to address the eventual decay of the human body as well as the strength and endurance of such a seemingly fragile material. By arresting the inevitable decay of a skin-like material in pieces such as *Backs* (figs.12-13) or *Seated Figures* (fig.11), Abakanowicz comments on the longing of humans to endure beyond the physical decay of the

body. When her forms harden, the focus on permanence and impermanence is emphasized as the material becomes as eternal as mountains, with the potential to outlive humankind. In Abakanowicz's work the choice of materials informs her expression. Through their seemingly unadulterated use and organic texture, her materials are essential to her reference to the human body and the natural world, while providing metaphors that reveal the complexities of life. By comparing unlike objects such as huge tree trunks to severed limbs, or eggs to rocks, and metal to skin Abakanowicz comments on the paradoxical nature of life, where the aggressor can also be the victim; the oppressed be oppressing; and every aspect of life contains an aspect of death.

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