

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

# Art in America

## Magdalena Abakanowicz

NEW YORK | REVIEWS JUN. 04, 2010

at Marlborough Chelsea

by Eleanor Heartney



Like discarded husks, Magdalena Abakanowicz's representations of the human form always seem used up, dried out and left as refuse. The Polish sculptor is well known for her hollow burlap, bronze and plaster effigies, presented as fragments of the human body that have lost all sense of individuality. They have been seen both as evocations of the dehumanizing collectivity that poisoned the Soviet-era Poland in which she came of age and as markers of the larger existential crises of 20th-century life. Born to wealthy

landowners of the minor Polish nobility, Abakanowicz experienced Soviet oppression firsthand, especially that directed toward the former Polish aristocracy and bourgeoisie.

This exhibition extended these concerns, exploring some new combinations of mediums, as well as taking some new approaches to her familiar themes. Among the most effective works here was a group of large plaster-and-wood figures that feature the shells of standing and seated headless bodies. Wood bars lie in front of or poke through the rough plaster forms like armatures that have pierced the surface or have not yet been removed. They ambiguously serve as supports and constraints, either holding the bodies up or keeping them locked in place. Several of these works have also been cast in brushed aluminum. Without the distinction between plaster and wood, the armatures seem to be integral parts of the figures, each of which suggests a version of the medieval Golem constructed out of crude materials and awaiting the breath of life.

Also striking were sculptures comprising fragmentary arms, legs, hands and feet shaped from stiffened burlap and laid on wooden plinths supported by metal stands. Collectively titled “Anatomy” (2009), the works appear in groups—three hands, for instance, or four legs, each slightly different and lined up in a row. The display recalled one of anatomical specimens laid out for study and lent the installation a rather creepy quality, conjuring memories of Nazi eugenic experiments or early forays into ethno-anthropology. A series of small bronze heads displayed nearby accentuated the haunted mood. An unusual subject in Abakanowicz’s oeuvre, the crudely modeled heads differ markedly from the burlap body parts. Smaller than life-size, with faces thrust forward atop elongated necks, the sculptures suggest shrunken heads. The distortions bring to mind the character heads of 18th-century German-Austrian sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt.

Rounding out the show was a set of standing headless figures cast from burlap into bronze, which echoes Abakanowicz’s familiar crowd installations, plus a group of three abstracted stainless-steel birds. Made of irregular metal sheets with prominent welding lines and attached to approximately 8-foot-high poles, the birds hover overhead with outstretched wings. They resemble fighter planes, and without the reference to a suppressed individuality, they lack the pathos of the artist’s human forms. As a whole, the show had the sense of both a summation and an exploration, revealing that this octogenarian artist is still opening up new territory.

Photo: Magdalena Abakanowicz: From the “Anatomy” cycle, 2009, burlap, wood and steel; at Marlborough Chelsea.