

MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ

EVERY TANGLE OF THREAD AND ROPE

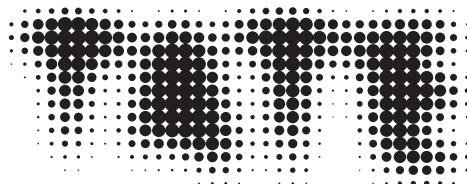
17 NOV 2022 – 21 MAY 2023

LARGE PRINT GUIDE



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Concourse

MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ

In the 1960s and 70s Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930–2017) created large woven sculptures that became known as Abakans (after the artist's surname). These ambiguous forms made from thread and rope defied categorisation and challenged the existing definitions of sculpture.

This exhibition surveys a transformative period of the artist's early career when her weavings came off the wall into three-dimensional space. Abakanowicz first emerged as a leader of the New Tapestry movement of late 1960s Europe. Artists associated with the movement began to claim fibre as a valid medium for the creation of art. To this end, Abakanowicz saw importance in being recognised as a sculptor by major art galleries and museums. She exhibited internationally, bringing her monumental, fibrous forms into new relationships or 'situations' within the gallery – paving the way for the installation art of today.

Abakanowicz's work also draws upon her childhood memories, including the traumas of the Second World War.

Born into an aristocratic family of Tatar heritage whose circumstances declined over the course of the conflict, she was 15 years old when the war reached its conclusion. Later, living in Poland under the Communist regime, she dedicated herself fully to her career as an international artist. Abakanowicz brought natural fibres to the attention of the art world and developed an intensely personal artistic language. Her environmental attitudes, such as her wish to work and live in harmony with nature, feel particularly timely today.

Supported by



ABAKANOWICZ
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Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego



Fundacja
Marty Magdaleny
Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

Exhibition organised by Tate Modern in collaboration with the Fondation Toms Pauli at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne/Plateforme 10 and Henie Onstad Art Centre, Høvikodden

Curated by Ann Coxon, Curator, International Art, Tate Modern and Mary Jane Jacob, Independent Curator and Dina Akhmadeeva, Assistant Curator, International Art, Tate Modern

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ROOM 1

ROOM 1: CLOCKWISE

1. BEGINNINGS

Following the Second World War, Abakanowicz pursued an education in painting and weaving, graduating from the Academy of Plastic Arts in Warsaw in 1954. This room shows the development of her work during the period that followed, from 1955 to 1965.

Censorship and restrictions of the arts in Poland enforced by the Soviet regime seemed to ease in the initial mid-1950s post-Stalinist Thaw and trans-media experimentation flourished. Opportunities for 'craft' or 'folk art' were particularly well-supported through the state-sponsored Association of Polish Artists, of which Abakanowicz was a member. Although Abakanowicz experimented with pieces created for interior design and with painting on fabric, she was more interested in the expressive potential of weaving.

Living with her husband in a cramped one-room apartment, Abakanowicz used the studio looms of established artist and weaver Maria Laskiewicz (1891–1981) to produce large, experimental works. This improvisatory style of weaving without a 'cartoon' (template) shocked the critics when

Abakanowicz first exhibited her work at the Lausanne Biennial of Tapestry in 1962. By 1965 however, she was presented with a Gold Medal in Applied Arts at the São Paulo Biennial, using the prize money to buy a bigger apartment with a studio.

In this room, paintings of living organisms on draped fabric are presented alongside early weavings and industrial designs. The works carry the differing influences of Polish avant-garde developments in informel art (concerned with matter) and constructivism (concerned with spatial and geometric concepts).

Image credit:

The artist at her loom, 1966.

Artwork © Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego. Photo © Jan Michalewski

[Vitrine 1]

Jacquard project for Tkanina polska (Polish Textiles) book cover

1952

Graphite on graph paper

Together, these three objects show the design, making process and resulting fabric cover for the 1959 book Polish Textiles. Abakanowicz was the youngest of the thirteen artists commissioned to design a cover for the various editions of the book. She created this geometric design in 1952, when still a student at the Faculty of Textiles at the Warsaw Academy of Arts. The design was translated to a set of punched cards, also seen here, which would be used in the operation of a jacquard loom.

Private Collection

X85364

Tkanina polska

Polish Textiles

Edited by Ksawery Piwocki (Warsaw, Arkady, 1959)

1959

Fabric and print on paper

Collection of Cezary Lisowski, Design Archives Foundation
Z76058

Jacquard project for Tkanina polska (Polish Textiles)

c.1959

Set of jacquard punched cards

Private Collection

X79560

[Vitrine 2]

Untitled

c. 1958

Screenprint and paint on cotton

Private Collection

X84819

Untitled

c. 1958

Screenprint and paint on cotton

Private Collection

X84822

Kompozycja zielona Green Composition

1956–7

Gouache on cotton canvas

Abakanowicz's early education in painting alongside weaving resulted in this piece and the other painted work on cloth, **Kompozycja (Composition)**, hanging nearby.

They are filled with butterflies, fish, birds, plants and other organic forms. Hanging freely, unstretched and unframed, they begin to test the spatial possibilities of textile. Both the works shown here were included in Abakanowicz's first solo exhibition, held at the Polish Ministry of Culture's public gallery in Warsaw. The Polish authorities closed the show before it opened to the public, declaring it to be 'too formalistic' and not actively engaged with the building of socialism.

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X84664

Kompozycja
Composition

1960

Oil paint on canvas

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X84662

Kompozycja
Composition

1960

Gouache on linen

Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź

X76599

Helena

1964–5

Wool, cotton, sisal and horsehair

Abakanowicz created **Helena** as part of her commission for the 8th São Paulo Biennial in Brazil. It was one of five large-scale wall weavings shown, each given the name of a woman, some from history or mythology. There, joining **Helena** (perhaps referring to the artist's mother's name) were: **Ana, Andromeda, Cleopatra and Dorota**. A later work from 1965 is the nearby **Desdemona**. At the biennial, Abakanowicz was awarded the Gold Medal in Applied Arts. She could not secure the Polish government's permission to travel to Brazil personally, but the international recognition was significant for her career.

Marlborough Gallery, New York

X81126

Desdemona

1965

Wool, fleece, sisal, cotton, artificial silk
and horsehair

Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź

X76600

Untitled

1965

Ink and gouache on papers on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and
Marguerite Magnenat

X77290

Untitled

1965

Ink and gouache on papers on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and
Marguerite Magnenat

X77289

Untitled

1965

Ink and gouache on papers on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and
Marguerite Magnenat

X77291

Kompozycja fakturowa biała
Textural Composition White

1961–2

Sisal and cotton

ASOM Collection

X78484

Słońce

Sun

1963

Wool, cotton and artificial silk

Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź

X76601

[Vitrine 3]

Untitled

c. 1960

Oil paint on canvas

Private Collection

X84666

Design for 'Tapisserie 21 brune'

1963

Ink and gouache on papers on paper

Private Collection

X79101

Design for tapestry 'Teresa'

1963

Gouache on papers on paper

Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, Gift of the Artistic
Directors on behalf of Abakanowicz Arts and Culture
Charitable Foundation

X84859

Tapisserie 21 brune

1963

Wool

Tapisserie 21 brune and other works shown here, such as **Słońce (Sun)**, evidence Abakanowicz's participation in state-run craft programmes of the early 1960s. Polish craft cooperatives employed artists as designers and artisans as producers. This was a common source of income for artists during post-war Communism, alongside their own independent artistic pursuits. We know from Abakanowicz's handwritten records that the weaver of **Tapisserie 21 brune** was Maria Łydzba, at the Rękodzieło cooperative. The weaver of **Słońce (Sun)** was identified only as Pelcia.

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego
X80815

ROOM 2

ROOM 2: ANTI-CLOCKWISE

Showcase with Horns

1997

Iron, glass and animal horns

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X79646

2. ORGANIC WORLD

Throughout her life, Abakanowicz maintained a strong connection to the natural world and the biological, organic matter of life. As she said: 'I see fibre as the basic element constructing the organic world on our planet ... It is from fibre that all living organisms are built, the tissue of plants, leaves and ourselves ... our nerves, our genetic code, the canals of our veins, our muscles ... We are fibrous structures.'

Weaving with sisal (the fibre from a flowering plant) and sometimes incorporating wool and horsehair, her textiles from the mid-1960s broke with the rectangular format of traditional tapestry and began to confront the viewer with curved forms hanging freely in space. Works from this period are brought together here, alongside objects,

drawings and smaller pieces from throughout the artist's career. Together, they demonstrate Abakanowicz's lifelong preoccupation with the powerful energies of nature.

The artworks and objects shown in this room give an indication of the items Abakanowicz displayed within her home and studio. Animal horns, hides, shells, cocoons and other objects provided inspiration and were sometimes incorporated into work alongside plant and animal fibres. Her fascination with nature began as a child, living in her family's seventeenth-century manor house deep in the Polish forest: 'Strange powers dwelled in the woods and the lakes that belonged to my parents. Apparitions and inexplicable forces had their laws and their spaces...'

Image credit:

The artist in her home, 1981.

Artwork © Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz
Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego. Photo © Artur Starewicz/
East News

Czarna

Black

1966

Sisal, rope and horsehair

Marlborough Gallery, New York

X78483

Assemblage noir

1966

Sisal, wool, hemp and horsehair

Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds

X76338

Diptère

1967

Hemp, sisal and horsehair

At times, Abakanowicz titled her works in French. Here, the word diptère refers to the English Diptera, an order of insects that use one pair of wings to fly.

This includes, most commonly, the fly. In the 1990s Abakanowicz produced drawings of flies (also in this room) recalling her earlier work.

ASOM Collection

X76348

From the Cycle

'Anonymous Portraits II'

1989

Cotton, resin, sand and wood

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X85006

Głowa nosorożca
Head of Rhinoceros

c. 1990

Burlap and animal horn

This rhino head was made by the artist from stiffened burlap. It is reminiscent of souvenir heads of hunted animals – known as ‘trophy heads’ – which adorned the walls of her ancestral home. The artist recalled the game brought in from the hunt. ‘The wild boars were huge. Later, their hides lay on the floor, dressed, complete with fangs and hooves.’

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego
X84663

Head

1976

Sisal

Henie Onstad Collection
X76607

Showcase with 'Pink Faces'

1996

Iron, glass and polyester

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X85004

Showcase with 'Object in Old Suit'

1996

Iron, glass, burlap and animal horns

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej i
Jana Kosmowskiego

X84744

Showcase with 'Unknown Object'

1996

Iron, glass, feathers, animal horns and steel

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X84746

Hand

1975

Sisal

The fragmented body became a subject of Abakanowicz's work from 1973 onwards. At 12 years old, in 1943, she witnessed her mother's arm severed at the shoulder by gunfire as the horrors of World War II invaded her family home. Later she cast hands, faces and heads using reclaimed burlap sacking and resin, also forming them from stretched, bound and knotted threads. Her own face was used as the basis for the anonymous portrait seen nearby.

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat
X76606

Abakan bez nazwy Unnamed Abakan

1969

Sisal

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego
X80904

Head

1974

Burlap and resin

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and
Marguerite Magnenat

X76605

Abakanowicz's drawings document her continued interest in the natural world and states of transformation. Working between figuration and abstraction, Abakanowicz made use of monochromatic colours by employing mediums such as gouache, ink and, as seen here, charcoal. She made many of her large-scale drawings by leaning over large sheets of paper positioned on the floor, which produced a sweeping gestural effect.

From the Cycle 'Flies'

1993

Charcoal on paper

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X85085

Black Face

1994

Charcoal on paper

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X84741

From the Cycle 'Flowers' - Vere Dignum Flower

1999

Ink and charcoal on paper

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X79559

From the Cycle 'Flies'

1994

Charcoal on paper

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X85084

From the Cycle 'Flies'

1994

Charcoal on paper

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X84760

Kokon

Cocoon

1987

Animal horns and steel

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej
i Jana Kosmowskiego

X85005

ROOM 3

ROOM 3: CLOCKWISE

Pregnant

1970–80

Sisal and horsehair

Harkey Family Collection, Dallas, Texas

X79558

Abakan étroit

1967–8

Sisal and wool

In 1967 Abakanowicz began to make her first fully three-dimensional forms. She said of them, 'The fabric I made was stiff, its surface grew into reliefs similar to tree bark or animal fur.' Abakan étroit is one of her earliest free-standing works, inviting the viewer to observe it from all sides.

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of the Association

Pierre Pauli

X76604

Abakan - Situation Variable II

1971

Sisal and rope

Art collection of the city of Biel-Bienne, Switzerland

X76337

Unknown artist, Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik,

Blackwater region

Didagur – Female Initiation Mask

1970s

Plant fibre, clay, cassowary feathers

This object was also displayed in the artist's studio. In 1976 Abakanowicz travelled to Papua New Guinea to visit its rainforests and journey by canoe on the Sepik River. She was especially moved by the art of the various Sepik peoples, which she understood to be 'an expression of man's interaction with his physical and supernatural environment'. A year later, she received this mask as a gift from a friend who accompanied her. Made in the Blackwater region of the Middle Sepik River, it would have been used in ritual initiation dances.

The Andrzej Wawrzyniak Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, Poland. Donated by Magdalena Abakanowicz in 1978

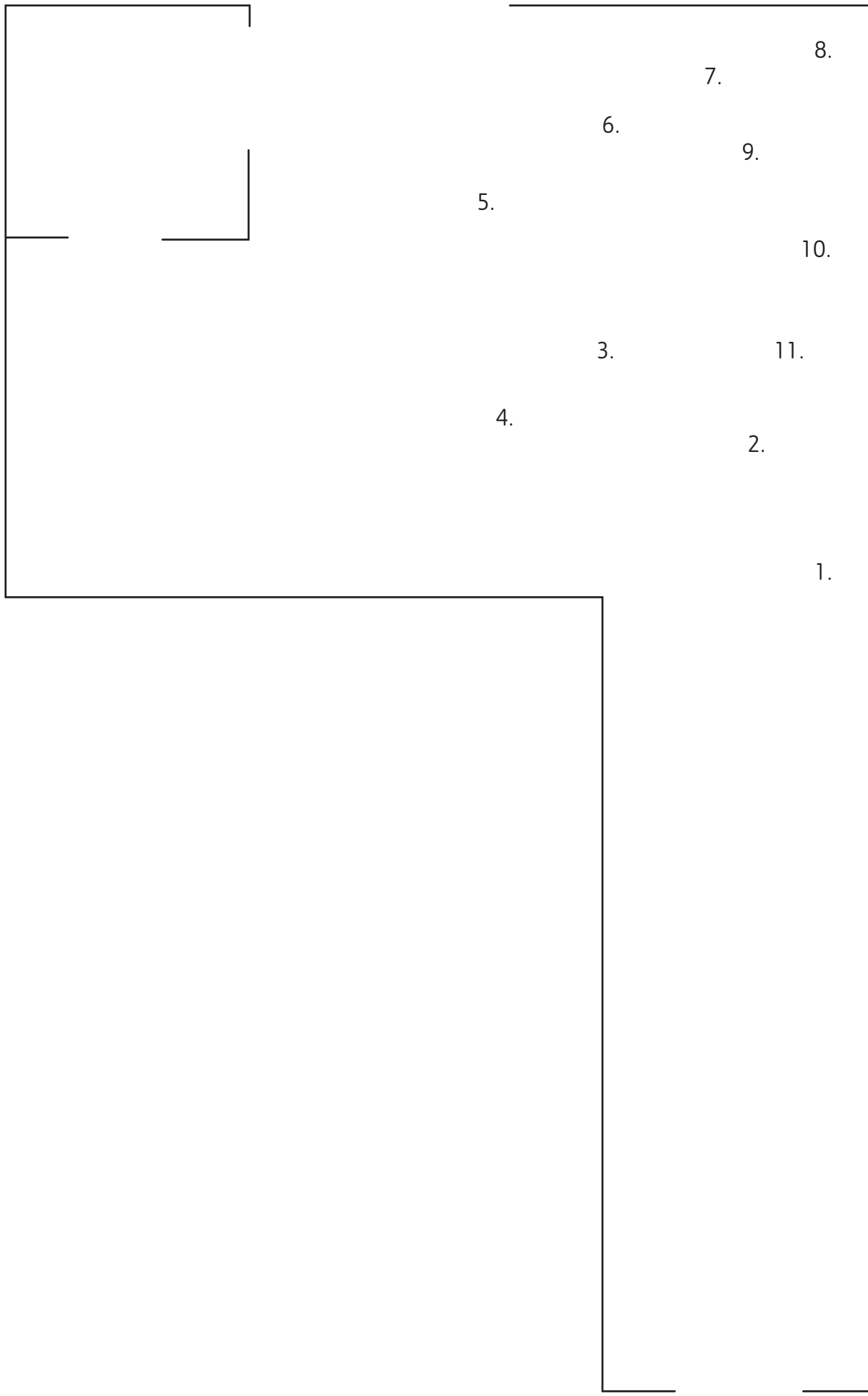
X79562

3. A FIBROUS FOREST

Baffled by the ambiguity of Abakanowicz's work, in 1964 an art critic first coined the term 'Abakans', after the artist's surname. Abakanowicz later adopted this term to refer to her large three-dimensional works, which she presented in dense arrangements. When installing an exhibition she determined their placement, often clustering works together in dialogue with each other and the surrounding gallery space.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Abakanowicz participated in an increasing number of international exhibitions. She referred to her installations as 'situations' and later as 'environments' into which she introduced found elements alongside her hand-woven forms. The artist was interested in the immersive and performative possibilities of each arrangement in a particular space, lighting the artworks to produce dramatic shadows on the surrounding walls.

The works presented in the central space here are grouped together to echo some of Abakanowicz's own installations. They also recall her interest in the forest's ability to provide shelter. 'The Abakans ...' she stated, '... were my escape from categories in art, they could not be classified. Larger than me, they were safe like the hollow trunk of the old willow I could enter as a child in search of hidden secrets.'



**1. Tuba
Tube**

1976

Sisal burlap

Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz
Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego
X80814

**2. Abakan Brązowy IV
Abakan Brown IV**

1969–84

Sisal

Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź
X76620

3. Black Garment

1968

Sisal

Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam
X76273

4. Brown Coat

1968

Sisal

Henie Onstad Collection

X76281

5. Abakan okrągły

Abakan Round

1967–8

Sisal

National Museum in Wrocław

X76145

6. Ubranie Czarne VI

Black Garment VI

1976

Sisal

Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź

X76324

7. Abakan vert

1967–8

Sisal

Private collection, Warsaw

X76335

8. Winter

1975–80

Sisal

Grażyna Kulczyk Collection

X82999

**9. Abakan Festiwal
Abakan Festival**

1971

Sisal

National Museum in Wrocław

X76149

10. Abakan Brown

1969

Sisal

Röhsska museet, Göteborg

X76279

11. Abakan otwarty

Abakan Open

1967–8

Sisal

National Museum in Wrocław

X76146

ROOM 4

4. PETRIFIED ORGANISM

In the 1970s, Abakanowicz began grouping her sculptures in new combinations for different exhibition spaces. The work shown here is a total 'situation' devised by the artist, combining a pair of giant garment-like, hanging forms that have been created from industrially woven cloth and ropes that spill out onto the floor. The hollow 'garments' evoke a protective shell or coat, while the entwined fibres of rope suggest the complexities of the nervous system or intestines.

Abakanowicz had begun to use the sisal from ropes to weave her works when other materials were less readily available. She explains how she sourced local materials and prepared them at home in Warsaw: 'Along the Vistula River one could find old, discarded ropes. They had their own history. They became my material. I pulled out thread, washed and dyed them on our gas stove.'

Rope later became an important element of her forms and 'environments'. She would occasionally use it to lead the viewer between spaces or even to connect different buildings within a city. As she stated, 'The rope to me is like a petrified organism, like a muscle devoid of activity. Moving it, changing its position and arrangement, touching it, I can learn its secrets and the multitude of its meanings ... It

carries its own story within itself, it contributes this to its surroundings.'

Image credit:

Red Rope, 1972.

Edinburgh International Festival, Scotland (artist at centre).

Artwork © Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz

Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego. Photo © George A. Oliver
[Glasgow]

Zespół czarnych form organicznych

Set of Black Organic Forms

1974

Rope, canvas and sisal

Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

X76283

ROOM 5

5. ABAKANY

In 1969 Abakanowicz collaborated with the avant-garde film director Jarosław Brzozowski (1911–69) and experimental composer Bogusław Schäffer (1929–2019) to create the film *Abakany*.

The strange, lunar or desert-like landscape is in fact the sand dunes of Słowiński National Park in Łeba on the Baltic coast of Poland. The artist planted her Abakans in the sand, supported by wooden armatures. The film captures the effect of the fibres blowing in the wind. Brzozowski died in the same year, and the film was completed by cinematographer Kazimierz Mucha (1923–2006) with indoor sequences showing Abakanowicz working in her studio and gallery space.

Image caption:

On the set of *Abakany*, 1970.

Artwork © Fundacja Marty

Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego,

Photo © Barbara Stopczyk

**Jarosław Brzozowski,
Kazimierz Mucha
Abakany
Abakans**

1970

35 mm film transferred to digital, colour, sound

Running time: 13 min 5 sec

WFO (Wytwórnia Filmów Oświatowych) 1970

X80997

ROOM 6

ROOM 6: CLOCKWISE

6. INVENTED ANATOMY

Frustrated at being labelled a fibre-artist, Abakanowicz began to use other materials in the 1980s, although she continued to use burlap and sisal to make increasingly figurative sculptures. In 1978 she began a new series of ambiguous forms titled *Embryology*, made from a combination of fabrics and fibres bundled and bound into rounded, organic masses. 800 of these forms were originally shown together at the Venice Biennale in 1980, when Abakanowicz was invited to exhibit in the Polish national pavilion. Referring to *Embryology*, she explained, 'The contents, the inside, the interior of soft matter fascinated me... By 'soft', I meant organic, alive. What is organic? What makes it alive? In which region of throbbing begins the individuality of matter, its independent existence? ... They were completing my physical need to create bellies, organs, an invented anatomy. Finally, a soft landscape of countless pieces related to each other.'

Embryology is both the title of a work and the description of a wider idea that Abakanowicz explored through her practice. Although Abakanowicz did not identify herself as a feminist, her woven sculptures have been seen by curators and writers as emblematic of powerful imagery associated

with the female. Birth, life, vulnerability, and decay are suggested by forms that resemble nests, wombs and eggs.

Image caption:

The artist at work on Embryology, 1978-81

Artwork © Fundacja Marty Magdaleny Abakanowicz Kosmowskiej i Jana Kosmowskiego. Photo © Artur Starewicz/
East News

Embryology

1981

Ink, charcoal and graphite on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat

X77293

Embryology

1981

Ink on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and Marguerite Magnenat

X77292

Embryology

1981

Ink on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and
Marguerite Magnenat

X77295

Embryology

1981

Ink and charcoal on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Pierre and
Marguerite Magnenat

X77296

Abakanowicz made these ink drawings after she had shown Embryology 1980 at the Venice Biennale. Rather than producing drawings as plans or design for her soft sculptural environment, she saw these studies as separate artworks. The rounded shapes are reminiscent of embryonic forms of life, scientific slides or early pregnancy scans. Working on wet paper, she allowed the ink to bleed into the fibres in a manner recalling the frayed threads of her woven forms.

Untitled

1971

Ink on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Alice Pauli

X77298

Untitled

1971

Ink on paper

Fondation Toms Pauli, Lausanne. Gift of Alice Pauli

X77297

Abakan Styczeń – Luty
Abakan January – February

1972

Sisal

National Museum in Wrocław

X76147

Abakan Orange

1971

Sisal

Tate. Presented anonymously 2009

T12980

Embryology

1978–81

Burlap, cotton gauze, hemp rope, nylon and sisal

Tate. Presented anonymously 2009

T12958

Czarna kula
Black Ball

1975

Sisal

Private collection, Warsaw

X76333

Abakan Red

1969

Sisal

Tate. Presented anonymously 2009

T12979

Abakan Orange

1968

Sisal

Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

X76286

ROOM 7

Anasta

1989

Wood and steel

Anasta is part of Abakanowicz's series **War Games**, which she created between 1987 and 1995. The works are made from felled trees found in the Masurian Lake District, Poland. Abakanowicz wrote, 'I looked at these huge bodies, muscular, wounded, but full of strength and personality: trunks with amputated limbs, in gestures of pain or protest or helplessness. Erotic, with large spread legs, nearly naturalistic, nearly too female—like shameless effrontery.' Viewed as bodily forms, she wrapped them in burlap and metal cladding. The series title **War Games** indicates Abakanowicz's later exploration of humanity's capacity for violence and destruction.

Marlborough Gallery, New York

X76609

