



ALINA
SZAPOCZNIKOW

BODY LANGUAGES

15 March to 6 July 2025

IN COLLABORATION WITH
THE MUSÉE DE GRENOBLE



“My gesture is addressed to the human body, 'that complete erogenous zone,' to its most vague and ephemeral sensations. [...] I am convinced that of all the manifestations of the ephemeral the human body is the most vulnerable, the only source of all joy, all suffering and all truth [...].”

Alina Szapocznikow, 1972

EXCERPT FROM THE WALL TEXT GROUND FLOOR

With the second institutional solo exhibition devoted to the Polish sculptor ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW (1926 KALISZ, PL—1973 PASSY, FR) in the German-speaking region, BODY LANGUAGES offers the rare opportunity of getting to know the oeuvre of one of the most fascinating female artists of the twentieth century who, in spite of her innovative artistic output, only achieved international recognition in the last two decades. The central focus of Szapocznikow’s sculptural and graphic works is on the human body, through which she uncompromisingly thematizes the fragility of existence and the paradoxes of life. Her untiring investigation of unconventional sculptural practices, materials, and forms makes her one of the pioneering female sculptors who made fundamental contributions to the expansion of the sculptural.

BODY LANGUAGES brings together more than 80 sculptures and drawings and extends from the mid-1950s until shortly before Szapocznikow’s early death at the age of 46. The emphasis is on the sensorily disquieting and humorously provocative oeuvre which the Holocaust survivor develops—in the context of contemporary artistic developments and her own biographical experiences—during her most experimental creative phase from the mid-1960s onward. The exhibition sheds light on Szapocznikow’s renunciation of traditional figurative sculpture towards her *objets maladroits* (“awkward objects”), her own designation for her later works.

Would you like to know how to pronounce the artist’s last name?
Szapocznikow: [ʂapɔtʂ̨ ˈɲikɔf]

FIRST UPPER FLOOR INTRODUCTION

After studying sculpture in Prague and Paris, Alina Szapocznikow returns to her native country of Poland in 1951 together with her future husband, the art critic (and later director of the Art Museum in Łódź) Ryszard Stanisławski, for more than a decade. The couple lives in Warsaw and together adopts a child named Piotr. Initially still full of hope, after the traumatic experiences of the Second World War, that she could also contribute as an artist to the establishment of a more just world, Szapocznikow accepts the Socialist Realism proclaimed in 1949 to be the new state doctrine in Poland. At first, she works for the most part within its restrictions and receives several commissions for public monuments.

The first level of the exhibition casts light on the time from 1955 onwards in which Alina Szapocznikow breaks with the representational conventions of Socialist Realism, until her move to Paris in 1963. When the "thaw" after the death of Stalin in 1953 leads to a temporary loosening of political and cultural restrictions, Szapocznikow's work becomes more daring with regard to contents and more expressive in its form. Provided with a formal language marked by the Czech avant-garde of the postwar era and by the most recent developments in Paris, she experiments with various materials and techniques, combines figuration and abstraction, and begins to focus on the instability and vulnerability of the human body. The belief in the inviolability of the body and the psyche was shaken by the Second World War in such a fundamental manner that it was scarcely possible any longer to assert the integrity and the notion of intact corporeality.



A The bronze sculpture **Trudny wiek** (Difficult Age, 1956/1984) shows a young girl on the threshold of becoming an adult. The erect posture, the hand supported on the hip, and the fixed stance convey self-confidence and a mood of openness to change. With this sculpture, which—through its bodily energy and stretched neck—emanates a self-evident “being grounded in oneself,” Szapocznikow is already clearly undermining the affirmative, heroic language of Socialist Realism, in which women embodied the role of the guardian of national values. In her nakedness, the rebellious nude is in no way exposed, but is instead present in a double sense: the corporeality is not suffused with shame; and not least of all, the impudent ponytail, quite in fashion at that time, situates the sculpture in the present. A comparable indication of the contemporaneity of the depicted figure may also be found in the plaster bust done in three primary colors and entitled **Portret Barbara Kusak** (Portrait of Barbara Kusak, 1955), which shows a female friend of the sculptor wearing a fashionable turtleneck sweater.

B The diversity of formal means and stylistic approaches, which Alina Szapocznikow utilizes in her works within so brief a period, is illustrated by the bronze **Ekshumowany** (Exhumed, 1955/1957). It shows a mutilated, sitting person whose mouth is open as if in a scream. The sculpture was first produced out of cement over an iron skeleton and then, two years later, cast in bronze. Its formal design is reminiscent of the petrified victims of the volcanic eruption in ancient Pompeii. For the first time, Szapocznikow depicts a decomposing human body and thematizes its vulnerability.

Exhumed is an accusation. The sculpture arose as a tribute to the Hungarian activist László Rajk, who was murdered in 1949 under the Stalinist dictatorship and was rehabilitated during the “thaw.” At the same time, the wounded body issues a summons to commemorate all victims of war and violence, a resonance that is emphasized by the universal title only subsequently assigned to the work by Szapocznikow.

C The small sculpture **Monstrum II** (Monster II, 1957) likewise shows a maimed body whose rough surface structure is reminiscent of burned skin. In contrast to the sculpture **Exhumed**, this figure shaped in lead—in spite of the lack of lower legs and feet—is vertically oriented. It “stands” on two rods upon which—as if on makeshift crutches—it

supports itself, so that the stumps of the limbs hang unanchored in the air as bulging clumps. It can be supposed that Alina Szapocznikow, who comes from a Jewish family, frequently saw wounded and mutilated bodies. After the outbreak of the Second World War and the occupation of Poland, she is deported as a 14-year-old to the ghettos of Pabianice and Łódź, where she assists her mother in working in hospitals. She survives internment in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. After the liberation by the Red Army, she does not return to Poland but begins as a 19-year-old to study sculpture, first in Prague and later in Paris.

D At the end of the 1950s, Alina Szapocznikow participates in several competitions for Holocaust memorials. **Dłoń. Projekt Pomnika Bohaterów Warszawy II** (Hand. Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto II, 1957) was created in response to the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943, when the prisoners fought bitterly for several weeks against the National Socialist tyranny. The sculpture resembles a scream. The cramped fingers of the gigantic, upwardly opened hand seem to pierce the air. The hand as pars pro toto for the human being may likewise be found in **La Main** (The Hand, 1947) by Alberto Giacometti, whose oeuvre Szapocznikow had seen during her studies in Paris. In spite of sharing the same subject, the two works make entirely different statements: Whereas Szapocznikow uses the stiffened gesture to point towards the struggle against an unjust regime, the focus of Giacometti’s sculpture is on the impotence of the struggling creature.

E In **Ręce I. Szkic do projektu pomnika w Oświęcimiu** (Hands I. Sketch for the design of the monument in Auschwitz, 1958), Szapocznikow further develops the motif of the hand in the direction of a group of figures. The design was praised by the renowned jury, which includes Henry Moore; its monumental realization is photographically simulated by Roman Cieślęwicz (see the biography on the ground floor). The sculpture is made of patina-covered plaster, a suitable material because of its physical characteristics and low price, as well as due to the fact that the results of the model thereby convey an impression of sculptures planned on a larger scale.

F **Autoportret II** (Self-Portrait II, 1966) already foreshadows Alina Szapocznikow's most experimental and innovative phase of artistic production during the 1960s in Paris (second upper floor), in which casts of bodies—most often her own, but also of other persons—become the repertoire of forms for her sculptural practice. At this point in time, Szapocznikow has moved far beyond the sculptural conventions of idealization, modelling, or mimetic recognizability. The little bronze cast is composed of impressions of different parts of the body and issues an invitation to view it from all sides. Front and back sides, positive and negative forms complement each other, combining into a surrealistic picture-puzzle that is simultaneously complex, personal, sensual, mysterious, and perturbing. The mouth—almost symbolic of her refusal to speak about the acts of cruelty she witnessed as a Jewish prisoner in the ghettos and concentration camps—remains closed in all her works consisting of body casts.



G The **Film** “Journal de voyage en Pologne. De la liberté des Beaux-Arts en Pologne ou Jdanov n'est pas polonais” by Jean-Marie Drot (1966) conveys an impression of Alina Szapocznikow's charismatic personality. It was shot in her studio in Warsaw six years before her early death and was broadcast in 1969 on French television.

H **Maria Magdalena** (1957–1958) was considered at the end of the 1950s to be the sculptor's most representative work. Oscillating between expressive abstraction and figuration, the sculpture is exemplary of Alina Szapocznikow's marked interest in unstable equilibrium and apparent instability. The moving figure with extended arms is widest at the level of the shoulders; in combination with the small head stretched upward and the leg section tapering almost to a point, a spindle-like form emerges. The bronze still evokes the human body but deprives it of the solid ground upon which sculptures traditionally stand. Through the title she assigns to the figure apparently overcoming gravity, Szapocznikow establishes a direct connection to the long tradition of depictions of the saint and protectress Maria Magdalena as the personified expression of grief and pain.

I The sculpture rising upwards from the floor and entitled **Pnąca** (Climbing, 1959) is created only a year after **Maria Magdalena** and combines organic and amorphous forms. The voluminous and simultaneously delicate-limbed sculpture is reminiscent of a floral, metamorphic process in which two offshoots sprout, wind upwards, and seem to be supporting each other. The overcoming of gravity, the “growing,” is only possible through the deliberate distribution of volumes and the ensuing tension, which maintain the sculptural body in an unstable equilibrium.

Pnąca was created in the context of a second competition proposal for the “Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto.” Szapocznikow undermines each and every form of the monumentality of a memorial—instead, through the choice of a fragile body, she points to the possibility and necessity of an antiheroic awakening.

J In the delicate **Drawings** (1959–1963) in immediate proximity to the large sculpture, Alina Szapocznikow also seems to be investigating the connection between organic and anthropomorphic forms of body and nature. The series begins with a floral study and increasingly directs the gaze into the interior of the body. Szapocznikow considered herself to be first and foremost a sculptor; however, drawing was a fundamental part of her sculptural practice right from the start and bears witness to her desire for direct expression. More than 600 drawings and monotypes have been preserved. In this exhibition, we are showing a selection of nearly 40 drawings. Only seldom does Szapocznikow use this medium to provide concrete designs for sculptures. Instead, the drawings have an autonomous energy; they offer space for endless variations and trials of a formal idea, which can also become the conceptual trigger for her sculptural works.

K **Rozłupany** (Shattered, 1960) is one of the first sculptures which Szapocznikow created out of polyester resin—in this case dyed with dark pigment. Starting in the mid-1960s, her work with the new industrial plastic materials will lead to Szapocznikow's most pioneering works. The abstract formation, curving inwardly and outwardly, is reminiscent of a human ribcage which is pierced by metal rods and whose ribs are exposed. The brutal impression of a ripped open, wounded body is enhanced by the inclusion of amber-colored polyester crystals. **Shattered** is displayed at the 31st Venice Biennale, where Szapocznikow exhibits some of her works together with three other artists. It is here that the French art critic Pierre Restany becomes aware of Alina Szapocznikow; he is the founder and name-giver of the group Nouveaux Réalistes. In the following years, he becomes an important advocate of her work.

L Two accompanying graphic studies and two large-format **Monotypes** (circa 1961), whose wing like shape corresponds with the sculpture **Shattered**, can be seen on the wall behind. The partly colored studies (1959–1963) on the opposite wall likewise show mysterious openings, rips, and claw-like protuberances, which raise associations with fragility and menace, but also with eroticism—themes that will have a defining influence on her oeuvre throughout her lifetime.



M The bronze **Rozwinięta** (Developed, 1964) with a black patina was long thought to have been lost; it was only rediscovered in 2024 and identified as a work of Alina Szapocznikow. In this exhibition, the sculpture is being put on display for the first time outside the Museum of Art and History in Meudon, to whose collection it belongs.



SECOND UPPER FLOOR INTRODUCTION

After Alina Szapocznikow has lived in Poland for more than a decade, she—together with her son Piotr and her new partner the graphic designer Roman Cieślewicz—returns to Paris in 1963. She lives in Paris until her death in 1973. She is in contact with the members of Nouveau Réalisme as well as with the artists' collective Panique and firmly determined to lay claim to a place right at the center of current artistic developments in Europe. In 1962, shortly before her move to France, she makes the first plaster cast of her leg in Warsaw. Serial casts, mostly of her own body parts—in other words, the fragmented body as sculptural material—soon become the trademark of her artistic practice just like the use of unconventional sculptural materials.

Thus the second level of the exhibition concentrates on Szapocznikow's most innovative phase of artistic production and shows how she expands the traditional approaches of figurative sculpture, through her pioneering experiments with regard to both material and form, for the purpose of attaining a new sculptural vocabulary: with her *objects maladroits* ("awkward objects"), as she herself describes her works in her important text from 1972, she pursues no less ambitious a goal than to record "the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and absurdity." Szapocznikow's "awkward objects" are both sensual-disquieting and humorous-provocative. They bear witness to her interest in Surrealism, Nouveau Réalisme, and Pop Art—as well as in unpredictable, unstable forms.

N Soon after moving to Paris, Alina Szapocznikow begins to integrate machine parts into her cement forms. Thus the three-legged, larger-than-life sculpture **Machine en chair** (Fleshy Machine, 1963–1964) embodies an amorphous being between whose dish-like wings a disc has been implanted in place of a head. With its metallic patina, the assemblage **Człowiek z instrumentem** (Man with Instrument, 1965) is a much more explicit expression of the connection between industrial readymade and shaped bodily form; the interplay between human being and machine is investigated. In the same year she creates the famous sculpture **Goldfinger** (1965). This fetish-like sculpture, entirely covered in a patina of gold, is composed out of the upward-pointed front axle of an automobile along with two provocatively balanced casts of female thighs. The work refers to Alina Szapocznikow's interest in popular culture and towards the objectification of the female body in an era of consumerism. The title "Goldfinger" alludes to the James Bond film from the year 1964, whose extensive advertising campaign showing a naked woman covered with gold paint probably provided the impulse for the realization of the sculpture. Even if Alina Szapocznikow's "Goldfinger" was for the most part ignored by the French press, it gained the attention of Marcel Duchamp and of the American art critic Peter Selz, thereby earning Alina Szapocznikow the famous prize of the William and Noma Copley Foundation in 1966. She likewise explores the interplay between equilibrium and maximum instability in the contemporaneously created bronze **Filozof** (Philosopher, 1965). The philosopher settles his heavy, oversized head onto a bending body which narrows in a downward direction and, in its massive fragmentation, only maintains contact with the ground through a single foot.



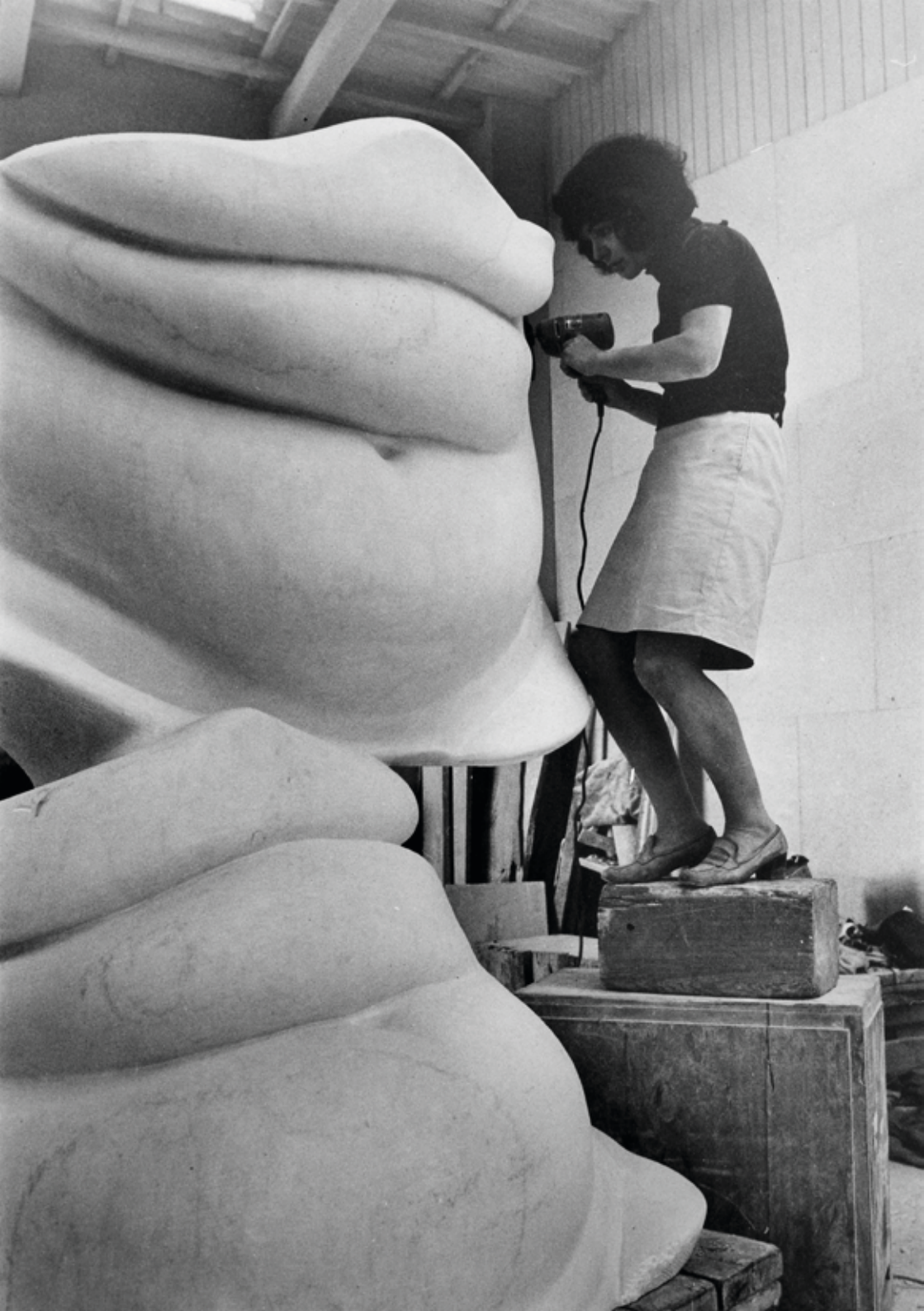
- From 1966 onward, Alina Szapocznikow begins to experiment with new industrial materials such as polyester resin as well as—starting in 1968—polyurethane foam. She thereby engages in a systematization of the process of making casts of the body. The human body becomes the primary point of departure for the sculptural form; from then on, multiplied casts of mostly sensitive parts of the body become the crucial building blocks of her artistic vocabulary. Plastic materials, which up to then had been used primarily for household goods and in industrial production, fascinated Szapocznikow because of their capability of shifting from a liquid to a solid state; they opened up new creative possibilities. **Soliter (Samotny)** (Soliter [Solitary], 1968) and **Nemrod (Sinobrody)** (Nemrod [Bluebeard], 1968) are two early examples of her work with cast polyurethane which turn the aspect of unpredictability in the creation of the sculptural form into a productive component. Both works belong to the so-called **Expansion Series**, whose title makes reference to the rapid expanding of the liquid plastic before it solidifies. While they are still a viscous, amorphous mass, she immerses casts of her friend's belly and arranges them into abstract forms. With **Nemrod** the bellies seem to sink down into the bath of black lava; while in **Soliter** an ample stomach has settled down as if placed upon a hand mirror.

With the sensory disturbing sculpture **Noyée (Plongée)** (Drowned [Plunged], 1968), which shows a naked, headless female torso made of skin-colored polyester resin submerged in black polyurethane foam, she moves the process that was to become decisive for her a little closer to realism through color contrasts.

These works mark the beginning of Alina Szapocznikow's most intensive phase of creation in Paris: after only a short time, one innovation leads to the next one. Until 1968, she retains her studio in Warsaw and travels regularly to Poland. When, during the March unrest of that year, she witnesses the anti-Semitic campaign initiated by the government of Władysław Gomułka, memories of her own deportation are reawakened, with the result that she definitively relinquishes her Polish domicile. She applies for French citizenship, which she is granted in 1972.

“Rather than perpetuating the long-standing faith in mimetic representation, Szapocznikow offered cast copies of the real instead – as if the body as a vessel of joy, trauma, or eroticism could not be adequately represented, but instead only cast from life.”

Elena Filipovic, 2011



P From the very beginning, Alina Szapocznikow's study of sculpture in Prague and Paris went hand in hand with part-time activity as a stone mason. Quite early on, she augmented these skills, among other things, with the plaster-cast process, thereby acquiring capabilities regarding a wide variety of technical procedures to which she had recourse throughout her professional life in order to realize her sculptural works.

Already while working on the Expansion Series, she plans to produce various belly sculptures in Carrara marble, such as **Petits ventres** (Small Bellies, 1968) and **Marmurowe brzuchy** (Marble Bellies, 1969). Both sculptures show sections of the curved belly of her female friend, including navel and ample folds of skin; they transcend the contrast between the solidity of the material and the softness of the motif. Through the enlargement and diminution on the one hand, and the daring act of stacking on the other, these familiar bodily zones are transferred into a seemingly abstract form.

The large sculpture **Marble Bellies** arises in the framework of a sculpture seminar at the famous Carrara quarry in Querceta, Italy; this is the first time that it is being shown in an exhibition outside of that country. Querceta is also the place where Alina Szapocznikow and Louise Bourgeois met each other in 1969. At that time, both were relatively unknown in the international art world; but as female sculptors they asserted themselves in a setting dominated almost entirely by men and shared a similar interest in material, technique, and contents. The encounter gives rise to an ongoing exchange based on admiration and competition.

Q **Jeu de galets** (Pebble Game, 1967) investigates the potential of the connection between art and play, temporality and sculpture. It is a matter of locating the individually shaped stones in the bronze landscape. In contrast to the other sculptures which, in spite of the stimulation of the haptic sense, are not allowed to be touched, here Alina Szapocznikow issues the invitation to a tactile experience and emphasizes the haptic relationship to the material which is of such fundamental importance for sculptural practice. Please note that activation is possible during guided tours; by means of the QR code on the title label, it is possible to access the film from 2015 entitled "Playing with pebbles of Alina Szapocznikow".

R Whereas bodily forms come to the fore in Alina Szapocznikow's sculptures, her **Monotypes** lead to the inner reaches of the body—to its liquids, muscles, and tissues—and are reminiscent of X-rays. In creating the Monotypes, Szapocznikow most likely worked with stencils, which she colored with a black, greasy oil pencil in order to leave their imprint on paper. The powder-shaped texture of the paint indicates that the stencils were made out of porous cardboard or wood. This method offers Szapocznikow the freedom to work autonomously—without either assistants or printing equipment.

S In her **Souvenir Series**, Alina Szapocznikow includes photographs in her sculptural work for the first time and is thereby a pioneer of photo sculpture. In these works, the photographs of individuals—comparable to body casts—attest to what has been. The objects **Pamiętki (Boltanski, Twiggy)** (Souvenirs [Boltanski, Twiggy], 1967) with photographic portraits of her artist friend Christian Boltanski and of the fashion icon Twiggy, who is presented in a reproduced media image, are covered with polyester resin that extends a semi-transparent skin over the black-and-white photographs. This causes the objects to resemble miniature bodies evoking a space that is someone else.

The photographic sculpture **Pamiętka I** (Souvenir I, 1971) numbers among the rare works in which Szapocznikow uses the medium of photography in order to address her personal experiences and traumas that arose during the Holocaust. The montage brings together two photographic images which, on the basis of a family photo where Alina Szapocznikow is sitting on the shoulders of her father, connect a happy memory with a horrible experience, illustrated by the reproduction of the archival photograph of a dead prisoner at Auschwitz. The object covered with fiberglass and polyester resin is conceived as a pictorial body which hangs on the wall and whose lower edge rolls like a scroll in an upwardly direction, thereby partially reducing visibility. The material combination extending across the photographic images like a transparent veil enhances an impression that is the equivalent of a moment of gazing through eyes filled with tears.



T Likewise in 1971, she created the work **Fotorzeźby** (Photosculptures, 1971/2007) consisting of 20 silver-gelatin prints which are accompanied by a collage with text on paper. The black-and-white photographs present objects made of chewing gum that Alina Szapocznikow shaped with her mouth into sculptural forms and subsequently had photographed by Roman Cieślewicz. The depiction of the miniature sculptures follows a documentary style, which, through the gesture of the presentation, transforms the chewing-gum objects to traditional sculptures. This work emphasizes the idea that the sculpture is directly determined by the body or by body-related activities: through the act of chewing, the pliable material acquires a shape and hardens as soon as it has left the oral cavity. With her photographic sculptures, Szapocznikow emphasizes the form to be found in everyday life and a notion of the work that celebrates spontaneity in the artistic process. “Look around you,” she observes in the text accompanying the photographic series, “creation lies just between dreams and daily work.”

U When in 1968 it was suspected that she has breast cancer, Alina Szapocznikow begins her **Tumor Series**, which uninhibitedly imparts a shape to the foreign presence in her body through a wide range of formulations. For example, she sends amorphous shapes in a small format to female friends as New Year greetings, or has herself photographed in the garden of her studio while, provocatively and lovingly, she snuggles up against bulky chunks.

With **Grand tumeur II** (Large Tumor, 1969), she thematizes not only the current existential threat to her, but also for the first time—through the medium of photography—her memories of the horrors of the Holocaust. In **Tumeurs accumulées II** (Accumulated Tumors II, 1970), she augments photographs embedded in polyester resin with gauze, underclothes, and newspapers; out of these disparate items, she creates a proliferating, amorphous conglomerate that seems to be growing into the surrounding space. With the tumor-works that also characterize her graphic output at this time, the artist imparts a form to the life-threatening challenges of her illness; she translates internal images of proliferating, disintegrating tissue into a sometimes grotesque language.



“We can, therefore, only speculate that some unprocessed life experiences surfaced and impressed themselves into Szapocznikow's innovative and daring forms, however much she sought to escape their memory. In their traumatic repression, however, they became the force that shaped her aesthetic originality. Her work is thus a monument to history because she fought against that history as a sculptor.”

Griselda Pollock, 2018

V At the same time, Alina Szapocznikow develops her fetish objects, into which she integrates clothing that makes reference to previous contact with her body. In both **Sous la coupole (La métamorphose)** (Under the Cupola [The Metamorphosis], 1970) and **Sculpture (Fétiche IV)** (Sculpture [Fetish IV], 1971), she includes nylon stockings which detach themselves, for instance, from poured polyurethane foam or from the moldings of her body and develop a morbid life of their own. Thus upon the black composition at ground level in **Sculpture (Fetish IV)**, there arise, out of an obscure texture with casts of a breast and of the lower half of a face, two ghostly shapes facing each other.

“I like to work with pliable materials, where every touch leaves a trace. I feel the need for kneading the material; I want to crumple it and touch it with my fingers. This physical contact with the material gives me a sense of relaying myself to the sculpture.”

Alina Szapocznikow, 1968



W In 1965 with **Goldfinger**, the female body in the context of sexualization and fetishization becomes an explicit subject in Alina Szapocznikow's formal invention and, starting in 1966 in her extensive series **Lampe-bouche** and **Sculpture-Lampe** (1970), acquires a focus with a functional albeit surreal aspect: her illuminated objects consisting of impressions of lips, breasts, and molded phalluses actually find everyday use as lamps and, taking their leave from sculpture conceived as a unique, auratic work of art, enter into popular culture as objects of consumption.

For her polyester-resin sculptures, Alina Szapocznikow utilizes the endless possibilities of reproduction inherent to the material: for example, in the multiplications of her own mouth, or with the impressions of the lips of female friends (including the actress Julie Christie). The unusual hybrids of flesh-like material and everyday object connect the figurative element with the dark eroticism and humor of Surrealism. As if on a flower stalk, red-colored lips grow upwards, lips becomes blossoms in a foliate calyx made from impressions of a breast. In **Deser IV** (Dessert IV, 1971) an illuminated mouth lies in a glass dish together with pieces of shiny, red fruit that are supported by the impression of a breast. With these provocative forms alluding to the female body as a commodity-shaped, pleasure-providing attraction reduced to a single aspect, Szapocznikow anticipates the concerns of feminist art—in an era when theories concerning identity and gender were not yet popular.

In larger series, but always handmade and thus undermining the coolness of Pop Art, the artist's series raises questions about mass production and consumer society, which are increasingly being negotiated in their ambivalence in the art of the 1960s. In her investigation of the individual body, Szapocznikow consistently includes a focus on the role of the collective body in art and in society.



“Plastic materials [...] seem perfect to me for attempts to express and capture our age because of their repetitive possibilities, their lightness, their colors, their transparency, and their inexpensiveness.”

Alina Szapocznikow, 1968

X The tiny female nude of the sculpture **Fiancée folle blanche** (Crazy White Bride, 1971) leaning ecstatically—as if in a fainting spell—against a gigantic, flesh-colored phallus is a special example of Szapocznikow’s profeminist actions. In the context of that era, the object was a particularly radical manifesto of the autonomy of female erotic pleasure and of the male’s reduction to the role of providing that pleasure. Displayed in 1972 at an auction in Paris, the provocatively ecstatic depiction triggered a scandal and led to the work’s being withdrawn from the auction.

Y Already aware of her approaching death, Szapocznikow creates from 1971 on her final, deeply moving series of works entitled **Herbarium** and presenting polyester casts of her own body and of that of her son Piotr. Alina Szapocznikow’s sensual corporeal forms have now lost their volume, differentiate themselves on a two-dimensional level and describe a flat area spreading outwards. The individual works of “Herbarium” are Szapocznikow’s most intimate material reminders of the evanescence of the human body.

The title refers to the collecting of preserved, flattened plants. Whereas the volume of the body can still be sensed in **Autoportret – Zielnik** (Self-Portrait – Herbarium, 1971), the impression of Piotr’s head in the work **Herbier** (Herbarium, ca. 1971–1972) has been drastically flattened and appears to be painfully deformed. In **Herbier bleu I** (Blue Herbarium I, 1972), casts done in polyester resin are arranged upon a wooden panel like residual, crumpled coverings, as if the

living, form-endowing mass had been sucked out of them. The works of **Herbarium** are Alina Szapocznikow’s most fragile, indeed her most vulnerable sculptural statements. Yet they also reflect her endeavor to lend permanence to the ephemeral through an expanded understanding of sculptural form.

Z Arising in parallel to her Herbariums are colored drawings and watercolor studies of her son **Piotr** (1971–1972) as well as the cycle **Paysage humain** (Human Landscape, 1971–1972). Human figures blend with landscapes, appear as hybrid beings in a state of weightlessness, within a dematerializing space. These intimate pictures by Alina Szapocznikow—some of them realized with pen, ink, and delicate watercoloring—are personal but also universal interpretations of death: as a union of the body and the matter surrounding it.

“Through casts of the body I try to fix the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and absurdity, in transparent polyester.”

Alina Szapocznikow, 1972

Alina Szapocznikow investigated the languages of the body, its fragility and its vitality. By means of the media- and material-aesthetics of her era, she successfully found an entirely individual form of expression for the great themes of human existence: evanescence, pain, and death; but also sensuality and eroticism. Today Alina Szapocznikow—on the basis of her pioneering experiments in sculpture with regard to both material and form—is considered alongside Lynda Benglis, Louise Bourgeois, and Eva Hesse to be one of the seminal female sculptors of the twentieth century who made a fundamental contribution to an expanded notion of the sculptural.

Alina Szapocznikow's life is that of an indomitable female artist. Her oeuvre, which she created within less than two decades, bears witness to her artistic independence, joy in experimentation, and deep confidence in an ability to find forms that outlive the present. Even today, her "awkward objects" are just as visionary as at the time of their creation. On March 2, 1973, Alina Szapocznikow dies at the age of 46; she lies buried at the Montmartre Cemetery in Paris.

"Szapocznikow was determined for each work to exist as a moment of departure rather than as a point of arrival."

Marta Dziewańska, 2018

Curated by Ute Stuffer (Director Kunstmuseum Ravensburg) and Prof. Dr Ursula Ströbele (HBK Braunschweig). An extensive catalogue will be published by VfmK. The exhibition is a collaboration with the Musée de Grenoble and is additionally supported by



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