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## UNRAVELLING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN MATERIALS, SENSES, AND PERCEPTION IN MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ'S WEAVING ART

I touch and find out the temperature. I learn about roughness and smoothness of things. Is the object dry or moist? Moist from warmth or from the cold? Pulsating or still? Yielding to the finger or protected by its surface? What is it really like? Not having touched, I do not know....

Under the skin the flesh is precisely shaped. Springly. Everywhere, in the wholly enclosed, porous skin-covering-pulsation. All uniformly heated, saturated with moisture, with thick red juice, white mucus, jellylike secretion. All stretched on bones. Inside them—canals, intertwined with nets and threads, soft and fragile. Hot, greasy. It belongs to me. It is me. It causes me to be.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The body of works and statements by Magdalena Abakanowicz undoubtedly underscores the profound significance of the senses and the body as significant, if not the most substantial, sources of inspiration for her artistic endeavours. This profound connection is particularly evident in her artistic textiles, which have propelled Abakanowicz to international acclaim. Born in Falenty in 1930, Magdalena Abakanowicz spent her formative years in Krępa, where her upbringing was influenced by a world over-

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Jane JACOB and Jenny DALLY, eds., *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Writings and Conversations* (Milan: Skira 2022), 58.

shadowed by war and pervasive fear. These experiences undeniably left a lasting imprint on the artist's psyche. In her memoirs, alongside poignant recollections of the war, Abakanowicz often reflects on her proximity to nature and the formative role it played in her upbringing, saying, "I was incessantly engaged in digging into the ground, moulding objects, and creating meanings known only to myself."<sup>2</sup> Throughout her extensive career, Abakanowicz embarked on an unceasing quest within her artistic practice. There came a pivotal moment when she deemed that she had fully realised her expression within a particular medium or technique, leading her to venture forth and construct forms yet unknown to her.<sup>3</sup> Over the years, she has created textiles, drawings, sculptures, and installations, with each artistic endeavour imbued with meticulous attention to the chosen material, never haphazardly selected but rather an integral part of the creative process.

Despite the apparent significance of the senses and the human body in Abakanowicz's art, a comprehensive examination of this subject is still warranted. Although viewers and researchers recognise the stimulating effect of Abakanowicz's art on their senses,<sup>4</sup> a substantial gap exists in understanding the underlying mechanisms and implications. This knowledge gap persists, possibly due to the perception that discussions on the senses lack scientific rigour.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, further investigation is necessary to bridge this gap and gain deeper insights into the multisensual nature of Abakanowicz's art. Noteworthy among the scholarly works that have delved into this topic is Marta Smolińska's seminal publication,<sup>6</sup> which explores the senses within the context of the erotic nature inherent in Abakanowicz's works. While Smolińska's research serves as a methodological framework that has inspired the present inquiry into the senses in Abakanowicz's art, the proposed approach advocates a comprehensive analysis that extends beyond the erotic and carnal dimensions of the artwork while acknowledging their undeniable relevance.

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<sup>2</sup> Magdalena ABAKANOWICZ, "Głód tłumy," interview with Jakub Janiszewski, *Wysokie Obcasy*, no. 30 (2008): 32.

<sup>3</sup> Magdalena ABAKANOWICZ, "Conversation with Betty Park" in JACOB and DALLY, *Writings and Conversations*, 176.

<sup>4</sup> Dominik KURYLEK, "Nowoczesna pajęczyna w muzeum sztuki," in *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, ed. Dominik Kuryłek and Roman Dziadkiewicz (Kraków: Muzeum Narodowe, 2010), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Richard SHUSTERMAN, "Thinking through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40, no. 1 (2006): 9–13.

<sup>6</sup> Marta SMOLIŃSKA, *Haptyczność poszerzona: zmysł dotyku w sztuce polskiej drugiej połowy XX i początku XXI wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

This article analyses and interprets the multisensual nature intrinsic to the fabrics created by Magdalena Abakanowicz, the prominent Polish artist. It explores the impact of the wall-hanging fabrics and Abakans on viewers' sensory perceptions and the significance of the senses within Abakanowicz's artistic practice. This investigation delves into a crucial aspect of reflecting upon the art of one of the most influential female artists of the 20th century, providing insight into why her artworks, particularly the Abakans, continue to resonate and deeply move audiences over several decades. In this text, the phenomenon of Abakanowicz fabrics is not simply attributed to their innovative character within the realm of weaving. If the sole reason for the uniqueness of these works lay in their novelty and excitement during the 1960s, their significance would diminish with time. However, this has yet to be the case.<sup>7</sup> The enduring relevance of Abakanowicz's art stems from its multisensual essence, which manifests itself at every stage of contemplating these works. The extent to which it evokes physical and sensory engagement within the viewer's body contributes to a distinctive aesthetic experience, elucidating the profound impact of the multisensual dimension inherent in her artistic creations. By skilfully activating our senses, Abakanowicz anthropomorphised her works, inviting a deep and personal connection between the viewer and the art.

The fascination and pronounced interest in the senses and the body expressed by Magdalena Abakanowicz aligns well with the theoretical framework offered by the phenomenological approach, particularly the philosophical contributions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty's work, articulated in his influential publication, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), posits that the body plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the world.<sup>8</sup> Inseparable from the reality presented to us, the body serves as a prism through which we apprehend and interpret our surroundings. While it is improbable that Abakanowicz was directly familiar with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy,<sup>9</sup> the convergence and shared points of inquiry between the artist and the philosopher suggest a socio-cultural and historical connection. Thus, the phenomenological examination of the

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<sup>7</sup> The recently curated exhibition at Tate serves as evidence of this; "Every Tangle of Thread and Rope," Tate, accessed May 1, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/magdalena-abakanowicz>.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Fenomenologia percepcji*, trans. Małgorzata Kowalska and Jacek Migasiński (Warsaw: Aletheia, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> The Polish edition was published in 2001. Although the artist spoke French, there is no direct confirmation of knowledge of Ponty's work.

body, as expounded by Merleau-Ponty, emerges as a fundamental methodological tool within this article.

However, the exploration of the senses and perception extends beyond the purview of philosophers alone. Numerous art historians, including Rudolf Arnheim,<sup>10</sup> Alois Riegl,<sup>11</sup> and Ernst Gombrich,<sup>12</sup> as well as cognitive psychologists, physicists and artists, have accorded significant importance to these subjects. Particularly noteworthy is the somaesthetic framework developed by Richard Shusterman, which builds upon Merleau-Ponty's ideas and introduces conscious somaesthetic observation as a valuable cognitive tool.<sup>13</sup> The concept of practical somaesthetics,<sup>14</sup> derived from the scholarship of Shusterman, was used in the analysis of Abakanowicz's artistic practice. Drawing inspiration from Shusterman's ideas, the study examined Abakanowicz's direct bodily and sensual involvement in the creative and curatorial processes. Another notable scholarly contribution is Mark Paterson's book, which delves into the realm of the senses. Paterson introduces the concept of the cutaneous sense, which refers to the immediate skin sensation that informs our perception of an object's material and spatial qualities upon physical contact.<sup>15</sup> Building upon Paterson's terminology, the analysis conducted within this study explores the sensual experiences evoked by Abakanowicz's art. Furthermore, art historical methodologies are employed for formal analysis, enabling an assessment of the artworks' characteristics and facilitating conclusions about how the form and materiality of the artworks affect the viewer.

<sup>10</sup> Rudolf ARNHEIM, *Sztuka i percepcja wzrokowa*, trans. Jolanta Mach (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Alois RIEGL, *Late Roman Art Industry* (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985). More on this subject in Wojciech BAŁUS, "Dotykanie wzrokiem. O pojęciu haptyczności w klasycznej nauce o sztuce," *Konteksty*, no. 4 (2019): 202–7.

<sup>12</sup> Ernst GOMBRICH, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Richard SHUSTERMAN, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84–85; Shusterman believes 'somaesthetic' refers to the study of the lived experience of the body as a foundation for aesthetic and ethical understanding. It explores how bodily sensations, movement, perception, and reflection shape our aesthetic preferences, ethical values, and overall well-being. Somaesthetics emphasises the integration of theoretical knowledge and embodied experience, highlighting the significance of bodily engagement and somatic awareness in various aspects of human life.

<sup>14</sup> SHUSTERMAN, 29–30. Practical somaesthetics refers to the actual engagement of a person's body and senses in a particular undertaking, in this case an artistic and curatorial practice. Furthermore, the author leveraged their personal experience of direct interaction with the Abakan to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its haptic qualities.

<sup>15</sup> PATERSON, *The Senses of Touch*, 2.

Credit is due to Marta Smolińska's pioneering work on the haptic trend in Polish art, laying the groundwork for exploring the role of the senses.<sup>16</sup> Her contributions delve into the intricacies of sensory perception, establishing her as a prominent figure in the discourse on haptic art. Smolińska's concept of extended hapticity inspired this research,<sup>17</sup> which combines personal, tactile experiences with a commitment to scientific objectivity. This article analyses Magdalena Abakanowicz's weaving art from 1962–1969 within the context of multi-sensory and embodied cognition.

#### THE FORMATIVE YEARS AND ARTISTIC EDUCATION

Magdalena Abakanowicz spent her early formative years in Krępa, near Warsaw. A careful analysis of the artist's extensive testimonies highlights the profound influence of this period on her artistic development. The immersive engagement with nature and the cyclic processes of birth and death within the surrounding landscape served as profound pedagogical forces. Recognising the transformative impact of a close relationship with nature, particularly during one's formative years, is imperative to grasp the essence of Abakanowicz's artistic output. It imparts a heightened awareness of the universal laws governing existence.

However, Abakanowicz's immersion in the natural environment, which fosters a profound sensory experience, was violently disrupted by World War II. The invasion cast the artist into a world fraught with fear and uncertainty, compelling her to confront the fragility and vulnerability of life, mirroring the transience of nature. One particularly distressing episode etched in her memory was witnessing the devastating impact of a gunshot, as she saw a bullet pierce her mother's arm, rend through tissues and muscles, transform a once-living and functional limb into a lifeless object. Memories of that turbulent time undeniably found expression in the works Abakanowicz embarked on after abandoning the medium of fabric.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> SMOLIŃSKA, *Haptyczność poszerzona*.

<sup>17</sup> SMOLIŃSKA, *Haptyczność poszerzona*; extended hapticity constitutes a scholarly proposition to investigate art by duly considering the dynamic interplay of sensory faculties and their persistent collaborative engagement.

<sup>18</sup> "Magdalena Abakanowicz: A Timeline," Tate, accessed June 15, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/magdalena-abakanowicz-10093/magdalena-abakanowicz-a-timeline>. Cf. Abakans with *Hand* (1976), and the following series: *The Seated Figures* (1974–1984) and *Backs* (1976–1980).

In the post-war period, Abakanowicz and her family resettled in the Tricity region. She started her artistic education at the Public High School of Fine Arts in Gdynia-Orłowo, where she initially faced criticism of her alleged lack of sculptural sensibilities during the entrance exams.<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, she pursued a year of study at the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Sopot, a pivotal period that definitely steered her interests towards artistic textiles. The institution in Sopot actively contributed to the post-war renaissance of weaving art in Poland, where artists crafted vibrant textiles for interior embellishment.<sup>20</sup> In 1950, Abakanowicz moved to Warsaw, intending to enrol in the Faculty of Textiles at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, culminating in her graduation from the esteemed institution in 1954.

Abakanowicz's artistic approach, including her selection of materials, was influenced by pre-World War II concepts. A prominent figure who must have exerted considerable influence on Abakanowicz's artistic trajectory was Eleonora Plutyńska, whose own mentors included influential figures such as Karol Tichy and Józef Czajkowski,<sup>21</sup> who was instrumental in shaping Polish design, including artistic textiles. Their instruction emphasised the creation of artworks using locally sourced and natural materials, coupled with a dedication to masterful craftsmanship achieved through direct engagement with the chosen medium. Central to their ethos was the notion of "direct contact between the artist and the material",<sup>22</sup> accentuating the artist's sensual and haptic connection with the creative medium. Even in her early years, Abakanowicz demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to the senses, which, combined with her educational pursuits and interaction with the avant-garde of that era,<sup>23</sup> resulted in extraordinary creative accomplishments. Fabric, often relegated to a purely ornamental realm, metamorphosed into a veritable work of art under Abakanowicz's transformative vision. Her profound insights and visualisation of the sculptural potential

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<sup>19</sup> Magdalena ABAKANOWICZ, "Głód tłumy," 32.

<sup>20</sup> Anna DEMSKA, "Polska tkanina dekoracyjna okresu podwilżowego – nowe perspektywy, nowe techniki," *Formy*, no. 15 (2022).

<sup>21</sup> Marta KOWALEWSKA, "Rzeźbienie w przestrzeni," in *Abakanowicz. Metamorfizm*, ed. Marta Kowalewska (Łódź: Centralne Muzeum Włókiennictwa w Łodzi, 2018), 14–16. Abakanowicz falsely stated that she completed her diploma under the supervision of Eleonora Plutyńska, although in fact it happened under the supervision of Anna Śledziewska.

<sup>22</sup> Hubert BILEWICZ, "Żakardy w Ładzie," *Spółdzielnia Artystów ŁAD 1926-1996* (Warsaw: Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, 1998), 181.

<sup>23</sup> Magdalena MOSKALEWICZ, "Knots: Abakanowicz and the Polish Art Scene in the 1960s," in *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, ed. Ann COXON and Mary Jane JACOB (Poznań: Zysk i S-ka, 2022), 31–63.

inherent in fibres played a pivotal role in this process, fully realising textiles' multisensual and tactile possibilities and captivating critics and audiences alike.

#### THE HAPTIC ESSENCE OF ABAKANOWICZ'S FABRICS: A MULTISENSUAL EXPLORATION

Magdalena Abakanowicz's textile creations embody a profound haptic quality that captivates our senses on multiple levels, encompassing visual, tactile, olfactory, auditory, and kinaesthetic experiences. Below we delve into the multisensual nature of Abakanowicz's textiles and examine the artist's corporeal engagement and sensory involvement throughout her creative and curatorial process.

During the 1960s, Abakanowicz embarked on her initial fabric endeavours. She specifically opted for fibre as her medium of choice, referring to it as something that "embodied age, which contained the whole of our history".<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, the inherent softness of the material enticed her, evoking bodily sensations and the mysterious depths of living organisms. Emphasising that fibre serves as the fundamental building block of our world, Abakanowicz sought to elevate fabric as an independent art object, challenging the conventional perceptions of its utilitarian role. Despite facing misunderstanding, she persistently fought against the prevailing biases of critics. Abakanowicz believed that through the fabric she could summon, in keeping with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the innate sense of the natural world and reflect the embodied experience of engaging with it.<sup>25</sup> She aimed to convey how the world deeply impacts our beings. Exploring Abakanowicz's work through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's ideas is driven by their shared recognition of the body as a vital locus of cognition and understanding. Within her woven objects, the artist strived to create an environment akin to our surrounding reality, engaging our senses: "Create the possibility of penetration through cracks and openings, reaching the farthest corners of the interior."<sup>26</sup> As highlighted by Smolińska, Abakanowicz frequently employed the term 'penetration', which encompassed both her

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<sup>24</sup> "Conversation with Jeff Makin" in JACOB and DALLY, *Writings and Conversations*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> MERLEAU-PONTY, *Fenomenologia percepcji*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Wojciech KRUKOWSKI ET AL., eds., *Abakanowicz* (Warsaw: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Zamek Ujazdowski w Warszawie, 1995), 74.

artistic quest and the viewer's role.<sup>27</sup> Through her creations, Abakanowicz reconstructed the primordial experience of sensual cognition, showcasing the process of existing in the world and the inherent value of embodied encounters. How did she achieve this? Let us now turn our attention to select fabric works for closer examination.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's weaving works often bear titles containing women's names or feminine adjectives. This choice is significant as English translations of those titles often miss the gender-specific meaning and, more importantly, these names direct the viewer's attention to a particular individual. In 1964, Abakanowicz created *Andromeda II*, measuring 195 x 285 cm,<sup>28</sup> for which she used hand-spun wool, cotton rope, and horsehair. These materials were characteristic of Abakanowicz's work during this period, each possessing a distinct natural origin, structure, and weight. Notably, the inclusion of horsehair, an unconventional material in fabrics at that time, can be associated with the artist's Tatar roots, as highlighted by Dorota Jagoda Michalska.<sup>29</sup> Horses played a vital role in Mongolian society, embodying a culture of constant movement. Abakanowicz deeply admired the natural and animal world, and her use of organic materials aimed to convey this respect in the creative process. Conversely, wool has primary significance due to its historical association with human civilisation and manufacture of clothing in various regions. Wool resonates with fundamental human needs such as warmth and shelter. The artist imbues her works through her choice of materials with immediate, embodied meanings that resonate with the viewer.

The fabric predominantly comprises dark colours, created with fibres dyed in brown, violet, red, and light beige hues. The dyeing process likely occurred in a home setting, using a giant boiler on a gas stove.<sup>30</sup> The composition of the fabric features irregular vertical patches of colour, with a semicircle woven in light yarn at the centre, partially overlaid with a dark

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<sup>27</sup> SMOLIŃSKA, *Haptyczność poszerzona*, 227.

<sup>28</sup> *Andromeda II* is part of the Fondation Toms Pauli collection in Lausanne, Switzerland.

<sup>29</sup> Dorota J. MICHALSKA, "Złota horda abakanów," *Szum*, no. 20 (2023), accessed May 6, 2023, <https://magazynszum.pl/zlota-horda-abakanow>.

<sup>30</sup> This is how the process was recalled by Abakanowicz's assistant, Stefania Zgudka, with whom she began collaborating in 1964. It can be concluded that the fabrics were dyed at home before; "Muzealne rozmowy: 'Jak najmniej świata zewnętrznego,'" interview with Stefania Zgudka, Tomasz Piątkowski and Magdalena Grabowska, May 17, 2021, Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, accessed May 6, 2023, <https://mnwr.pl/muzealne-rozmowy-jak-najmniej-swiatea-zewnetrznego>.



purple stripe. The texture of the fabric shows variation, achieved through the application of different weaving techniques and the inclusion of convex elements. During the creative process, Abakanowicz actively embraced the material's unique properties, ensuring that the textile prominently displayed the distinctive characteristics of each fibre. The material's thickness, weight, and texture were central to determining how it was manipulated. Understanding these properties relied heavily on skin sensations,<sup>31</sup> as visual perception became somewhat secondary. The tactile aspects, such as the roughness, brittleness, or softness of the material, were essential considerations in the weaving process. By engaging directly with the material and intimately familiarising herself with its qualities, Abakanowicz could reflect its essence in her work.

The surface of *Andromeda II* exhibits a combination of flat areas and plush yarn that assumes a carpet-like form, enticing the sense of touch. Within the left portion of the composition, the horsehair above is skilfully wove—dark and slightly undulating, it cascades freely upon the fabric's surface. This element enhances the work's dynamism, facilitating movement evoked by the viewer's interaction. In *Andromeda II*, which has an abstract character, Abakanowicz adeptly reveals depths and various planes. By incorporating a broad purple stripe that overlays a beige semicircle, followed by a vertical, thin white line within the left segment, the artist demarcates two distinct spaces between which a white semicircular form emerges. Significantly, Abakanowicz accentuates this arrangement by employing a convex weaving technique, imparting a carpet-like texture to a substantial portion of the fabric. The artwork bears indelible imprints of the artist's hands, guided by an intimate familiarity with the material acquired through hours of painstaking weaving. Engaging with *Andromeda II* activates multiple senses within the viewer. The varied texture, protrusions, bumps and undulations adorning the work's surface stimulate sight and touch, simultaneously facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the world.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, if one were to bring *Andromeda II* closer to one's nose, a discernible aroma of dry, natural fibres would delicately permeate the air, adding an olfactory dimension to the sensory experience.

Another example of the artist's two-dimensional textile work from this period is *Kompozycja Biała*, created in 1966 and measuring 158 x 188 cm.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> PATERSON, *The Senses of Touch*, ix.

<sup>32</sup> PATERSON, 182.

<sup>33</sup> *Kompozycja Biała* is part of the Central Museum of Textiles collection in Łódź.

In this instance, Abakanowicz employed natural materials, such as cotton and silk cords, flax, sisal, and light horsehair, woven onto a linen warp. The fabric predominantly features bright, sandy colours, with a distinctive dark element at the centre, woven with rough and coarse sisal. Next to it, to the right, is a deliberate gap in the fabric. This opening resides within a semi-circular shape that separates it with a lighter colour, reminiscent of the said fabric. This configuration carries suggestive qualities, resembling the contours of a female body. The fabric, composed of thousands of fibre components, actively evokes bodily associations that are further accentuated through organic materials. Parallel to the human skin, composed of numerous microscopic elements, fabric represents a cohesive entity formed by individual fibres. Consequently, the opening in the surface of *Kompozycja Biała* becomes a significantly disquieting element, appearing somewhat improper. Abakanowicz explores convexity, similar to her approach in *Andromeda II*, as she attempts to emphasise the fabric's sculptural qualities. Within the semicircular field, thick cotton cords traverse the fabric, surpassing the size of other threads, intersecting, crossing over and under them. This incorporation of elements renders the surface more intricate and complex. On both sides of the semicircular form, the artist artfully integrates horsehair, allowing it to flow freely on the fabric's surface. This technique directly alludes to the desire to engage with the work through the sense of touch.

Between 1964 and 1965, Magdalena Abakanowicz created the intricately crafted *Helena* fabric, which measures 300 x 480 cm.<sup>34</sup> This abstract textile exhibits irregular areas and shapes, presenting a range of neutral colours from white to beige, warm brown, green, and black. The diverse weaving techniques employed in *Helena* are similar to those in the fabrics mentioned above. However, in this work, the surface displays occasional, distinct elements such as contrasting cords or carpet-like sections. In the creation of *Helena*, Abakanowicz explores a different facet of tactile and visual exploration. She focuses on the interplay between yarns with varying levels of fluffiness and stiffness and observing how different colours manifest within each context. As the artist observed, the black shade of matte wool possesses a different quality than that of shiny silk.<sup>35</sup> From a distance, the fabric reveals a complex and nuanced composition featuring multiple shades. Upon closer inspection, the viewer discerns individual fibres with

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<sup>34</sup> *Helena* is owned by the Marlborough Gallery, New York.

<sup>35</sup> "Polska Szkoła Tkaniny. Magdalena Abakanowicz Dorota," Desa Unicum, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://desa.pl/pl/aukcje-dziel-sztuki/tkanina-artystyczna/dorota>.

distinct textures and thicknesses. Some fibres are exceptionally soft and seamlessly woven, while others display a rougher, slightly lustrous texture. Abakanowicz draws parallels to the intricate and diverse textures in the natural environment, ranging from lush forests to serene meadows and swamp landscapes, each rich in their unique tactile properties. Tufts of fluffy and entangled yarn protrude from various locations, resembling animal fur. The manipulation of convex elements strongly resembles a European Bison's hair in colour and texture. The textile exhibits sensory characteristics reminiscent of natural elements, such as the tactile roughness of branches, the firmness of tree bark, and the delicate softness of grasses and animal fur.

The exploration undertaken by Magdalena Abakanowicz in the realm of wall-mounted fabric led her to a significant realisation—that fabric, as an artistic medium, shares striking similarities with sculpture. Philosophers of art have long recognised sculpture as a quintessentially tactile form of creative expression.<sup>36</sup> It is noteworthy that the same holds for fabric art. Both artistic endeavours are inherently intertwined with the sense of touch, engaging the artist and the viewer in cutaneous interaction. As we have seen in the preceding paragraphs, the fabric creation process profoundly connects to the haptic realm, encompassing the tactile relationship between the artist and the material. Likewise, for the viewer, observing the intricate textures of the fabric, even when the fabric retains a relatively flat appearance, incites a somatic response. However, Magdalena Abakanowicz ventured further in her weaving endeavours. In 1966, she transcended the limitations of wall-mounted fabric and transformed her works into fully executed spatial objects. These “swollen with transformations”<sup>37</sup> tapestries expanded in both scale and three-dimensionality. The focus of this discussion centres around the Abakans, about which the artist, despite her ambivalent stance, expressed a tender sentiment, describing their growth as possessing a slow rhythm akin to the creations of nature.<sup>38</sup> Like natural formations, these tapestries possess an organic quality and serve as objects for contemplation. Simultaneously, Abakanowicz underscored the significance of the object's physicality and its relationship with the natural environment.

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<sup>36</sup> PATERSON, *The Senses of Touch*, 192.

<sup>37</sup> KOWALEWSKA, “Rzeźbienie w przestrzeni,” 38.

<sup>38</sup> KRUKOWSKI, *Abakanowicz*, 28.

Let us examine the artwork titled *Red Abakan* from 1969.<sup>39</sup> This piece, measuring 405 x 400 x 382 cm, is consistently presented at a distance from the wall, suspended from the ceiling by barely visible ropes, creating the illusion of levitation. *Red Abakan* is constructed from scarlet-red dyed sisal and forms an oval fabric comprising two main elements. A flat surface serves as the backdrop for introducing an irregular shape that culminates in a pointed element extending significantly beyond the central part of the work. The Abakan consists of loosely connected parts, enabling the spreading of fabric sheets. Theoretically, the viewer can adjust the Abakan in a manner that resembles the act of moving brush from the way while traversing through the forest. The potential for manipulating the work challenges the conventional concept of sculpture, beckoning the viewer to engage with the form using their entire body to explore. At the intersections of materials, fleshy and thick clusters are incorporated, imparting a sense of weightiness. The artwork's surface exhibits various weaves, contributing to its uneven and intricate nature. In certain areas, twisted and fluffy fibres rest freely against the fabric. The piece's overall shape is highly evocative of sensuality, often described in terms of its resemblance to a vaginal form.

*Red Abakan* represents a fully sculptural artwork. I had the opportunity to personally experience the tactile qualities of another sisal Abakan by directly touching it with my bare hands. This material is rough, relatively inflexible, and lacks pleasant tactile qualities. It gives a sense of hardness, although I discovered during this encounter that it is also quite brittle. Notably, the sisal possesses a distinctive, enduring natural fragrance. Being close to one Abakan is sufficient to grasp the organic nature of the material through olfactory perception. While the olfactory aspect may not have been paramount to the artist, it undoubtedly formed part of her profound interest in natural materials with polysensory properties. As a soft sculpture, Abakan triggers a distinct sensation of "being with" for the viewer, engendered by its active materiality, as manifested in its surface and texture.<sup>40</sup> However, physical interaction with Abakanowicz's fabrics is optional for a multisensual experience. While it may appear that multiple senses are operating independently, as Paterson contends, the inherent potential of tactility stimulates synesthesia—a system enabling a continuous exchange of data among the senses, thereby activating them collectively.<sup>41</sup> Observing

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<sup>39</sup> *Red Abakan* is part of the Tate Modern collection in London.

<sup>40</sup> PATERSON, *The Senses of Touch*, 93–94.

<sup>41</sup> PATERSON, 94.

*Red Abakan* entails perceiving its size, volume, and weight. Given its three-dimensional nature as a soft sculpture, the viewer must engage their entire body and participate in movement-related activities. This includes circling the artwork, approaching and distancing oneself, and trying to gain glimpses of its interior or see-through form. One cannot help but notice the substantial and commanding presence of the large, weighty form that dominates the space. In this sculpture, Abakanowicz also evokes a sense of ambition and determination that accompanied her during the creative process. The artist sought to transform fabric into an object divested of the utilitarian functions typically associated with craftsmanship. Here, she translates the language of her aspirations into a defined form, with a pivotal element being the spire that traverses the space, extending beyond the central part of the artwork. This element further accentuates the work's grand scale. Viewers can position themselves directly below it, looking up, or stand next to the main components, experiencing the enveloping materiality firsthand. *Red Abakan* undeniably evokes associations with the natural and organic world through its form. Despite its abstract nature, its shape elicits connections with the human body, other living organisms, or enigmatic, indeterminate interior spaces.

The subgroup of Abakans known as the *Garments* is equally intriguing from a multisensual standpoint. These works by Magdalena Abakanowicz typically feature dark, often entirely black, sisal material. As the name suggests, they allude to garments, which serve as external coverings that conceal and protect the body from external elements. Here, Abakanowicz looks in a different direction compared to *Red Abakan*. In the latter, she appears to examine the human body as a living organism, revealing its tissue that is usually hidden from the eye. In contrast, the interior of the works we shall examine remains concealed, emphasising the importance of safeguarding it. Created in 1974, *Black Garment V* measures 300 x 170 x 60 cm and consists of structures supported by metal wire. It resembles an oversized coat or suit within which one could seek refuge. Inside these garments lies a dark and isolated environment permeated by the scent of sisal. The garments direct viewers' attention to the interior, revealing a spatial dimension inside. In numerous photographs, one can observe the artist herself actively engaging in direct interaction with her works, establishing a haptic connection with them. She envisioned a similar engagement for the viewer, stating, "By inviting people to the opening, I want to invite people to treat the objects shown as directly as they treat their own clothes. I want them to

enter the objects' interiors, touch them, and penetrate the hollows and cracks with their hands."<sup>42</sup> While direct physical contact with the *Garments* is nowadays prohibited, they retain their inherently haptic nature. Abakanowicz's deliberate selection of materials with polysensory properties and her skilful utilisation of three-dimensional forms generate a wide array of sensory experiences.

Over time, Abakanowicz progressively delved into and underlined the haptic and multisensual nature of her fabric art in terms of display. She transformed her soft sculptures into immersive installations, meticulously arranging them to enhance the visitor's experiential journey. Grouping these artworks in a single space, she fashioned an environment that resonated with the senses, drawing inspiration from the natural world. Abakanowicz's involvement in curating her exhibitions underscored her profound appreciation for the interplay between space and human presence. She explained her intentions, stating, "I am not concerned with technique but with the outcome. However, the outcome does not represent the final form of the artwork but rather a situation I can create using woven objects. I aim to construct situations that engage and envelop the viewer."<sup>43</sup> Exhibitions like the one in Södertälje (1970), to which Abakanowicz's words alluded, served as spaces where viewers could encounter new possibilities of communing with fabric through an amalgamation of diverse sensations. One of the possibilities the artist spoke about is noticing and sensing the organic relationship between the human being, her or his body and the fabric, and how "we are all fibrous structures".<sup>44</sup> The notion of "versatile experiences"<sup>45</sup> encapsulates the comprehension of the multifaceted nature of art experience. Abakanowicz's created environments seemed to culminate in an intensified focus on the sensorial engagement of the embodied viewer within her work. Stepping into these environments activated the full spectrum of senses. The gathering of Abakans amplified impressions related to the perception of woven textures, weight, and volume, rendering olfactory engagement redundant. The abundant presence of soft sisal sculptures filled the room

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<sup>42</sup> "Magdalena Abakanowicz by Magdalena Abakanowicz," Södertälje Konsthall, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.sodertaljekonsthall.se/en/exhibitions/textil-skulptur>.

<sup>43</sup> Magdalena ABAKANOWICZ, "Rope Environments," conversation with Judith Bumpus, in *Magdalena Abakanowicz. Crowd and Individual. Catalogue of Exhibitions and Permanent Installations*, ed. Michael Beck and Andrea Knop (Düsseldorf: Beck & Eggeling Kunstverlag 2015), 121.

<sup>44</sup> COXON and JACOB, *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> "Magdalena Abakanowicz by Magdalena Abakanowicz."

with their distinct, dry, organic aroma. Additionally, an aspect not previously mentioned but acutely felt in the encompassing environment of the assembled Abakans was their impact on auditory perception. The soft bodies of the sculptures absorbed all sounds, effectively soundproofing the space. This auditory dimension further contributed to the impression of a separate and singular environment scrupulously constructed by Abakanowicz.

### CONCLUSION

Magdalena Abakanowicz demonstrated a profound engagement with art that aimed to impact the embodied, feeling subject. She initially chose fibre and weaving as her primary material and medium, recognising their polysensory nature. This analysis examined how her artistic choices translated into the recipients' experience, revealing the artist's practical somatic involvement in fabric creation and presentation. Abakanowicz gradually introduced viewers to the woven world she crafted, progressing from relatively flat matter to three-dimensional forms that enveloped all senses. Like Merleau Ponty's perspective, she understood the body as the central locus for constructing meaning and comprehending the world. Abakanowicz endeavoured to embody the human experience through her fabrics and soft sculptures, anthropomorphising her works by activating our senses. Despite their abstract nature in the formal realm, these artworks elicit olfactory, tactile, auditory, proprioceptive, and kinesthetic responses, evoking a sense of presence and vitality. As observers engage with the artworks, they begin to define their relationship to the woven objects. Moreover, this multisensual experience creates a broader understanding of the interplay between the body and the world.

These distinctive qualities of Abakanowicz's art have given her work a timeless appeal and the ability to resonate deeply with individuals. She "made the body" visible non-literally, using fibre to evoke humanity and the human form. The significance of her art lies in its embodiment aspect and its multisensual experiences, providing a relevant and enduring contribution to the artistic landscape.

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UNRAVELLING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN  
MATERIALS, SENSES, AND PERCEPTION  
IN MAGDALENA ABAKANOWICZ'S WEAVING ART

Summary

This article comprehensively studies the multisensual experience in Magdalena Abakanowicz's weaving art. While previous research in this context has focused on the erotic nature of her works, this study addresses the broader aspect of multisensual engagement. Drawing on a phenomenological approach and the philosophical contributions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it explores Abakanowicz's involvement in creative and exhibition practices. The research incorporates insights from scholars such as Richard Shusterman, Mark Paterson and art historians. Using art historical analysis and direct haptic contact with Abakanowicz's works, the study analyses the materials and techniques of three fabric types. The findings reveal that the enduring interest in the artist's work lies in anthropomorphising quality that activates viewers' senses, fostering a profound connection between the audience and art. The article demonstrates how Abakanowicz skilfully influences viewers' senses and emotions through material choices, techniques, and personal involvement. Ultimately, it highlights the significance of considering sensory reflection as a crucial aspect of art historical analysis.

**Keywords:** Abakanowicz; textile art; multisensuality; haptics

ODKRYWANIE INTERAKCJI MIĘDZY MATERIAŁAMI, ZMYŚLAMI I PERCEPCJĄ  
W SZTUCE TKACKIEJ MAGDALENY ABAKANOWICZ

## Streszczenie

Wielozmysłowe doświadczanie sztuki Magdaleny Abakanowicz, mimo pozornej oczywistości, zostało podjęte naukowo wyłącznie raz, w kontekście erotycznego charakteru tych prac. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi kompleksowe opracowanie zagadnienia wielozmysłowości w sztuce tkackiej artystki. Czerpiąc z podejścia fenomenologicznego, zwłaszcza filozoficznego wkładu Maurice'a Merleau-Ponty'ego, poddano refleksji zaangażowanie artystki w praktykę twórczą i wystawienniczą. Korzystano z dokonań naukowych Richarda Shustermana, Marka Patersona oraz historyków sztuki. W oparciu o narzędzia typowe dla tych ostatnich, wsparte bezpośrednim haptycznym kontaktem z pracą Abakanowicz, przeprowadzono analizę materiału i techniki trzech typów tkanin. Wynikiem przeprowadzonych badań jest ukazanie kluczowej cechy, która jest przyczyną trwałego zainteresowania sztuką artystki. Abakanowicz poprzez uaktywnianie zmysłów odbiorców antropomorfizowała swoje prace, umożliwiając głęboki i osobisty związek między widzem a sztuką. W artykule przedstawiono w jaki sposób za pomocą wybranych materiałów, technik oraz osobistego zaangażowania w proces twórczy i wystawienniczy artystka oddziaływała na zmysły i emocje widzów. Niniejszy tekst dowodzi konieczności uznania refleksji nad zmysłami za niezbędny element analiz z dziedziny historii sztuki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Abakanowicz; sztuka tkacka; zmysły; haptyczność

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