

Magdalena Abakanowicz's "Abakans"

Michael Brenson

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In 1967 Magdalena Abakanowicz began the monumental fiber works that established her reputation and set the stage for all the sculpture she has made since. These cloaks-carpets-chambers-forests are called "Abakans."¹ They were the focus of Abakanowicz's attention for six or seven years. The series, or cycle, as many Polish artists refer to their groups of works, includes around twenty-five individual pieces, as well as *Bois-le-Duc*, a 65-foot-long, 26-foot-tall installation of black, brown, and reddish fabric from 1970–71, and the *Black Environment* (fig. 1), whose fifteen billowy forms open and close like flowers or shells.²

All the "Abakans" resemble clothing. Some, like the *Black Garment* (fig. 2), are plain and humble and almost

raggedy, like camel skin coats worn by nomadic tribes wandering the steppes of Asia. Some are plain yet refined, like *Big Black Garments* (fig. 3), suggesting costumes of itinerant magicians or musicians who would be equally at home in palaces and caves. Some suggest the black robes of a peasant priestess that, even without her, would preside over and become the sanctuary of a transformative rite.

But Abakanowicz's primary interest in these works is not clothing. The "Abakans" are clearly, emphatically non-utilitarian.³ They are suspended from the ceiling. Most offer a single large mass—many are around thirteen feet tall—of dense yet supple fabric hanging to within a few inches of the ground (fig. 4). In addition, they are profoundly metaphori-

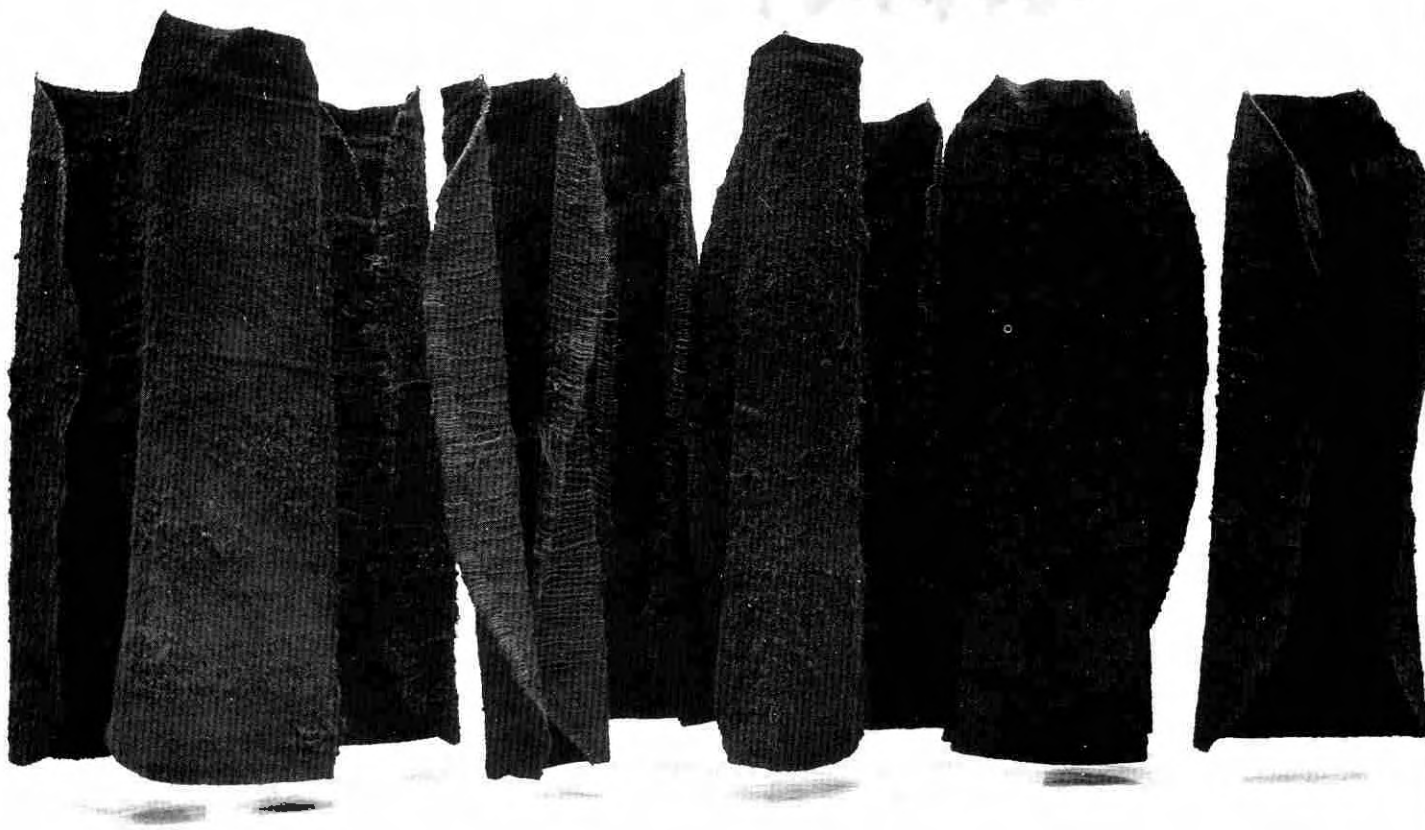


FIG. 1 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Black Environment*, 1970–78, sisal, 15 pieces, each ca. 118¼ × 39½ × 35½ inches. Collection of the artist.

FIG. 2 Magdalena Abakanowicz,
Black Garment, 1969, sisal,
117¼ x 70½ x 23½ inches. Stedelijk
Museum, Amsterdam.



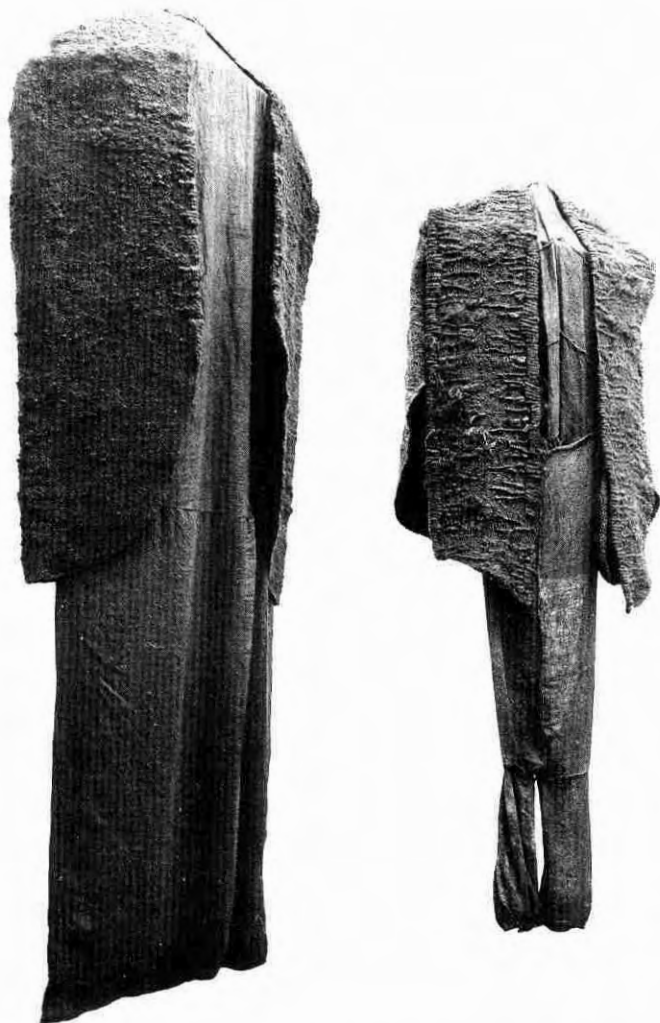


FIG. 3 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Black Garment Roundet* (left) and *Black Garment with Sack* (right), from *Big Black Garments*, 1974, sisal, each 197 x 79 x 39½ inches. Collection of the artist.

cal. Almost all are not only objects but also spaces. Almost all seem to proliferate with natural associations. They can suggest the rocking of underwater vegetation, the burst of a rain-swollen cloud, the patrolling flight of a prehistoric bird.

Indeed the "Abakans" challenge any notion of clothing as a discrete category. They connect garments to skin, to hide, to bark, to cocoons (fig. 5), to tents (fig. 6), to the security and sexuality of a mother's robe, to the mobile home of a mother's belly. Like all of Abakanowicz's cycles, the "Abakans" lead outward, away from what they might appear to represent, into psychology and history, toward fundamental links between human beings and nature that are always waiting to be recognized and explored by the imagination.

As much as any works of their time, the "Abakans" redefine monumentality. Although they have the authority of hard sculpture, they are soft. Although they can seem imposing, even forbidding, they are also shy and gentle, and they encourage intimate contact. Most are extremely female in the sheltering regenerative power of their interiority and in the sexuality of the vertical vaginal-like openings through which they are entered. All were meticulously made, first on and then apart from a loom. "I collected old sisal ropes in harbors as I had no money," Abakanowicz says, "untwined

them into threads and dyed them."⁴ Working with her assistant Stefania Sgudka, a graduate of the Zakopane weaving school, Abakanowicz immersed herself in the intimate labor. "I wanted to be responsible for every square inch," she says.⁵

Because of the special importance of their interiority, the "Abakans" are not only extraordinarily visual but insistently nonvisual. Although rich in visual incident, they invite an experience in which vision has to be put aside. To enter the "Abakans" and to remain inside them is to listen to darkness, to feel the soft fabric as skin, to allow the sensation of interiority to become a condition. The interiors, or voids, of the "Abakans" are like independent organisms with realities of their own. Abakanowicz makes the invisible as essential—and as sculptural—as the visible.

So if the "Abakans" are worn, they also wear. If they are uniforms of ritual, they are also implements and actors in those rituals and are even—and perhaps most of all—the sites in which those rituals occur. They are not only meant to envelop a body, they are bodies themselves. Abakanowicz's garments are not barriers between individual and history, or individual and nature, but bridges between them. They are ways in which people can find privacy and shelter and yet at the same time expose themselves to their own uncertainties and fears, and through this ritual surrender and recognition enter more deeply into the mystery and magic of themselves and nature.

Abakanowicz was born in 1930 just outside Warsaw and raised alongside a primeval forest in eastern Poland that remained a refuge and guide throughout her solitary and anxious youth.⁶ Both parents were aristocrats. Her father was a descendant of Abaka-Khan, a twelfth-century Ilkhan of Persia, who was a great-grandson of Genghis Khan. Both mother and father were distant, from each other and from her. The constant presence of their many servants made Abakanowicz that much more aware of her separation from her mother. "I suffered terribly not having my mother with me all the time," she says.⁷ She disliked the conventional teaching methods of her tutors.⁸ She loved ghost tales. "I was interested in all kinds of mysterious beliefs and old folk stories," she says.⁹

From a very early age, Abakanowicz was drawn to the nurturing grandeur of the forest. She regularly explored it by herself and remembers the excitement of observing everything and "learning about all that was alive" and feeling that "all was at one with me."¹⁰ She "built little houses out of branches and leaves. It's a wonderful feeling when you can be



FIG. 4 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Abakans*, 1967–71, sisal, pieces range in height from 118 to 197 inches. Collection of the artist.

in nature, isolated enough not to get wet when it rains, but you listen to everything and you hear the rain falling.”¹¹ The forest was like a great organism to her. Its mysterious interior was its dark deep belly; its leaves, soil, trees, and brush were its tissues, membranes, bones, and skin.

In 1939 the German army invaded the family estate, and Abakanowicz no longer felt sheltered in her woods. In 1944 her family fled to Warsaw to escape the Russian army pushing through Poland from the east. Later that year the Nazis razed Warsaw to the ground. During the war the family lost everything. Then in postwar Communist Poland, aristocrats became the class enemy. “This was a very difficult moment because we, as family, lost our identity,” Abakanowicz has said. “We were deprived of our social position and we were, like, thrown out of society. We were punished for being rich. So I had to hide my background. I had to lie. I had to invent.”¹² While attending the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, Abakanowicz made money by giving blood, doing construction work, coaching sports, and cleaning streets.¹³

The “Abakans,” like so much of Abakanowicz’s work, communicate a rare mixture of aristocratic confidence and entitlement, earthy simplicity and humility, and loss. Almost

all of them are defined by a proud uprightness and self-sufficiency, as well as by a stripped sparseness and a profound sense of abandonment. Nobility and dignity remain intact, indeed inviolable, even though the waiting, even prayerful image may seem bereft.

Living conditions played a role in the “Abakans” as well. Although Abakanowicz and her husband, Jan Kosmowski, a civil engineer, were able to move out of their one-room apartment two years after she won the grand prize at the São Paulo Bienal, her studio was still just a small room with a nine-foot ceiling, and she had no storage space. This meant that if she wanted to make monumental works, she probably had to think of them in terms of multiple parts and soft materials. The “Abakans” could be folded up and put away.¹⁴

It is important as well to suggest a general picture of Poland in the 1960s. After Stalin’s death in 1953, there was considerable hardship in Warsaw but also considerable creative energy, not only in the visual arts, but also in music, theater, and film. Beginning in 1957, Abakanowicz attended regular gatherings of artists, intellectuals, scientists, and politicians in the one-room apartment of the Polish Constructivist painter Henryk Stazewski. These people were passionate about ideas and eager to imagine “a new reality.”¹⁵



FIG. 5 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Abakan Great Black*, 1967, sisal, 118¼ × 59 × 39½ inches. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Artist and other work at left.

As the years passed, Poland continued its strange political cycles. The country would be subjected to severe repression, then controls would ease, then the state would crack down again, then there would be increasing freedom. In terms of hope for substantial political reform, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crackdown on students, intellectuals, and Jews in Warsaw, both in early 1968, were crushing. Both events created, or reinforced, the sense throughout Eastern Europe that politics was not an area for change. Since Polish authorities tolerated creative freedom in a way that Stalinist Russia, for example, did not, it was possible to imagine fighting for freedom in the arts but not on the streets of Warsaw or in the corridors of the state.

The "Abakans" represent Abakanowicz's first major attempt to create an encompassing multilayered artistic reality that would draw extensively from her distant and immediate past, with its conquering tribes and heraldic pageantry and then its violent dispossession and displacement. It is a

reality that weaves together expansion and contraction, freedom and confinement, exposure and refuge, continuity and change. The "Abakans" allowed Abakanowicz and others to experience the blackness of recent Eastern and Western European history and still find a way to invent and to dream.

These are the first works of Abakanowicz to propose an answer to a question she has struggled with throughout her career. How is it possible to acknowledge that violence and loss are never going to disappear, and that they may even be part of what makes people human—as well as inhuman—and still imagine a way to renew and progress?

The "Abakans" weave together destruction and creation, whose interrelationship has been one of twentieth-century art's great themes. Roughly two-thirds of them are black (one is orange, one yellow; three are red, three brown). Black is the color of mourning. It is the color of the widow's dress, a color so prominent in many old European villages that it becomes an inexorable chord in the village song,

Mourning seems part of the air the "Abakans" breathe. But black, for Abakanowicz, is very much a color of life. It is, she says, the color of the "deepness of sea and sky. It is the color of mystery, of inside. Of night in which you only feel without seeing."¹⁶ So in the "Abakans," through black alone, mourning is incorporated into an artistic event that encourages the kind of wonder that can be felt listening to the nocturnal breathing of the forest or sea.

Destruction and creation are woven together in other ways as well. Because *Black Garment* looks like hide and *Black Environment* suggests bark, there is a sense that these works are trophies. The suspended hide can almost seem to celebrate the killing of animals. The bark, which appears to have been peeled off intact, can seem to commemorate the skinning of trees. The individual suspended fabrics in *Black Environment* hang from the ceiling like sides of beef. On one level, these works appear to be mementos of the violation of nature.

But these strips of hide and bark are so organic that they remain very much alive. They do not seem in any way disabled. Each individual envelope of bark in *Black Environment* seems as eager, and as able, to offer solace as a blanket held open to someone coming in out of the cold. Furthermore, the mysterious and magical interiors of the "Abakans" remain totally intact. And the energy of the surfaces is such that the hide and bark are every bit as vital as autonomous entities as they would be on animals or trees.¹⁷ The "Abakans" bear within them the memory of trauma, but they also spread the word about nature, and the ways in which its will and imagination can inspire the human imagination to think big and conceive a world of enchantment in which trauma is just one part.

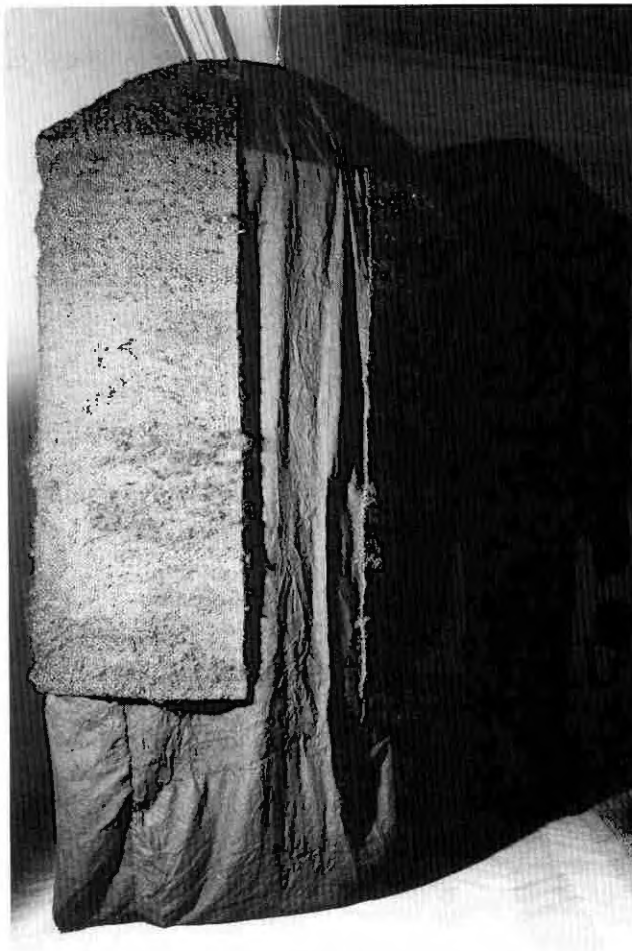


FIG. 6 Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Big Black Garment*, sisal, 197 x 78½ x 39¾ inches. Sonia Henies og Niels Onstadts Stiftelser, Kunstenter, Hovikodden, Norway.

Notes

1. According to Barbara Rose, "A Polish critic first used this word in 1965 to refer to the works" that Abakanowicz "was showing at Zacheta, the main exhibition hall in Warsaw"; Barbara Rose, *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 23. Jasia Reichardt mentions this critic's name, Hanna Ptaszkowska, and notes that the term "Abakan" was used in 1965 to describe the same works shown at Zacheta "when they traveled to the São Paulo Bienal"; in Mary Jane Jacob et al., *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (New York: Abbeville, 1982), 46. Abakanowicz adds that originally the word "Abakan" referred to woven reliefs that "had nothing to do with anything known as weavings so they were called after my name." Then they began to refer primarily to the later free-hanging woven forms. "I began to use the name 'Abakans' after a year or so for the three-dimensional woven forms," Abakanowicz writes. Magdalena Abakanowicz to Michael Brenson, June 20, 1994.
2. For a discussion of *Bois-le-Duc*, see Jacob et al., *Abakanowicz*, 67–69; and Rose, *Abakanowicz*, 23–24, 30–31.
3. In 1969, discussing the "Abakans," Abakanowicz wrote: "Ultimately it is the total obliteration of the utilitarian function of tapestry that fascinates me"; quoted in Jacob et al., *Abakanowicz*, 48.
4. Abakanowicz to Brenson, June 20, 1994.
5. Abakanowicz, conversation with Brenson, New York, May 4, 1994.
6. Most of the critical discussion of Abakanowicz's childhood continues to be inspired by her prose poem, "Portrait X 20," which is published in Jacob et al., *Abakanowicz*, 18–29.
7. Abakanowicz to Brenson, June 27, 1994.
8. See Rose, *Abakanowicz*, 10.
9. Abakanowicz to Brenson, June 17, 1994.
10. See introduction to "Portrait X 20," in Jacob et al., *Abakanowicz*, 18.
11. Abakanowicz, conversation with Brenson, New York, May 4, 1994.

12. Michael Brenson, "Survivor Art," *New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 1992, 54.

13. Rose, *Abakanowicz*, 12. Of this school, Abakanowicz has said: "All the teachers knew what was right and what was good and what was not, so I decided to leave this system of classification which had nothing to do with my feelings. So I turned to weaving, which was nothing, which was crap, and I decided to make out of this my fine art," quoted in Brenson, "Survivor Art," 54.

14. Since her apartment was not big enough to install the "Abakans," she could really see them only when they were shown. "This is why the exhibitions at that time became for me very important because it was the moment when I could really live with space, hang the things up, and discover them. So I hung them on the ceiling, I put them one into another, I combined them into big blocks, I combined them with threads and ropes and everything. I would always come about ten days before the exhibition to install it myself and to really build it up out of all these pieces that I had brought with me," Abakanowicz, conversation with Brenson, New York, May 4, 1994.

15. See Brenson, "Survivor Art," 54; and Rose, *Abakanowicz*, 13.

16. Abakanowicz to Brenson, June 27, 1994.

17. The vitality of the surface and interior has remained inviolable in Abakanowicz's work, even in the recent *War Games* and *Hand-like Trees* sculptures, where images of wounded stumps offer unmistakable evidence of the grim destruction of nature in Poland since the "Abakans" were begun.

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