

# BIG IDEAS

## Walking Figures

Magdalena Abakanowicz (Warsaw, Poland)

**WHO MADE THIS SCULPTURE?** *Walking Figures* is the creation of Magdalena Abakanowicz who was born in Poland in 1930 to an aristocratic family. Her family endured the war-torn years of WWII, which broke out when she was nine years old, but the magnitude of that event, and the following five decades of political unrest in Poland, made a lasting impact on the artist. From 1950-55, Abakanowicz studied Fine Art at the University of Warsaw. She has also received honorary awards from the Royal College of Arts in London, and the Academy of Fine Art in Lodz, Poland. Her artistic production has included works in paint, fibre arts, and clay. She is most noted for her large scale figurative sculptures and has created over a thousand of them. These figures are often installed in



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large groups, increasing their visual and visceral impact, but they have never been seen all together.

Abakanowicz, burdened with doubts and uncertainties, looked for answers in the non-verbal metaphoric language of objects she found and created. She felt compelled to do so. She spent her early years in post-war Poland, a country which remained under Russian domination until 1989. Socialistic realism was the obligatory doctrine of art at the time, and professors would impose their point of view on the students contributing to a coercive, pressure-filled atmosphere. Abakanowicz hated the education system, and at times resorted to giving blood donations in order to make money for her survival.

Warsaw, Poland's capital, was destroyed during the war—house after house was burned and bombed. The Academy of Fine Art occupied an old half-demolished palace. In one dormitory room, sixteen students were housed sleeping on bunk beds that were piled three levels high. Once she had completed her stud-



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ies, Abakanowicz slept in railways stations until she could find a tiny room to rent with her own bed. Through art, and only with art, could she explore her imagination and escape from her reality. The caretaker at the Academy would let her into the empty studios at night and allowed her to paint there.

To create a painting surface, she sewed together sheets and created canvases for herself, some as large as 10' x 13'. The only available paints were water soluble powders which she used to paint rainforests filled with imaginary flowers, birds, and butterflies. They surrounded her, but at dawn she would have to hide her magical painted world under the bed. Later on, as she achieved success in her field, she still had to fight to introduce her vision of reality into the established world of art criticism, deriving from different cultures and civilizations. As soon as she found more space to live in, she started to make three dimensional objects—at first they were soft, and then with time, and having obtained significant commissions, she moved into using bronze, stone, iron, concrete, wood, and resin.

Abakanowicz's exhibition history is lengthy and spans from 1962 to the present. Her work has been displayed all over the world, including the National Museum in Stockholm, Sweden, Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, England, La Musee d'Art Moderne in Paris, France, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, USA, the Venice Biennale in Venice, Italy, and at Taguchi Fine Art in Tokyo, Japan.



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**WHAT IDEAS ARE BEING EXPLORED IN THIS SCULPTURE?** Abakanowicz builds “spaces to contemplate”. She wants people to enter inside of the art work, inside the imagination of man, and to be confronted with the wisdom of nature. She believes that every human being is born with sensitivity and intuition which we can clearly see in children's drawings before they are eroded by the influence of civilization. The eighteen enormous, headless, cast iron figures of 'Walking Figures' are approximately 9 feet tall, shell-like, and frozen in their movement. They appear to be walking aimlessly without the guidance of reason or sight. The figures appear menacing as they are robotic, ancient, and without heads. The figures were identically cast, but later given subtle individual identities through various surface treatments. The sombre tone and sheer weight of the figures make reference to both time and loss. This monumental sculpture, located in Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park, is a legacy piece from the 2005-2007 Vancouver Biennale.

**HOW WAS THIS SCULPTURE MADE?** *Walking Figures* is part of a group of 106 figures cast during two years (2004-2006) in the huge industrial foundry in Srem near the city of Poznan, Poland. The figures are similar in general shape, but different in details. Models for each figure were made by hand, by the artist and her three assistants. The surfaces of the figures are like tree bark or wrinkled faces expressing a differ-

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ent individuality for each sculpture. Another set, named *Agora*, is comprised of 106 figures and is featured as a permanent installation in Chicago's Grant Park. An agora was a meeting place in ancient Greece, it was the place where some of the world's most important ideas and theories were born and developed, and most quintessentially, where the concept of democracy began. There was no citizen above the law and everyone had the right to vote. All laws were posted in the agora for everyone to see.

**HOW DOES THIS WORK CONNECT WITH THIS ARTIST'S OTHER WORKS?** At first, Abakanowicz worked with soft and pliable objects that were rough to the touch. First came the *Abakans* (1966-75), the title of which reflects her own name. These enormous three-dimensional hanging structures were woven from a variety of fibres. Michael Brenson has referred to *Abakans* as not only objects but also spaces. To enter the *Abakans* and to remain inside them is to allow the sensation of interiority to become a condition. Other soft works included *Embryology*—a sequence of some 800 stuffed potato-shaped forms of varying sizes, covered with sacking and occasionally spilling their innards. Gradually, Abakanowicz's works began to feature harder objects, but they were still made of fragile or perishable materials. These were the seated or standing figures, backs, hands, and heads. Permanent installations of groups of her sculptures can be found in many countries, and they stand in environments which she has chosen

**EACH FIGURE IS LARGER THAN LIFE—ABOUT 227 CM (7.5 FT) TALL AND WEIGHING 650 KG (1,433 LB)**

for them. In Europe, Japan, Korea, Australia and both Americas, it's as if she has carried and deposited her luggage, her vision, her philosophy and her metaphoric language without words. She has come to realize that her art translates emotions better than words ever could. These legacy works are a message not a decoration. Abakanowicz's work deals with her struggles around the notion of "the countless." She examines issues related to things that exist in vast, almost countless numbers, such as leaves, crowds of people, or birds, but which each retain an individual identity within the matrix of such large populations. Each of her forms, figurative or non-figurative, is rich in its own history. Abakanowicz, through her work, has changed the meaning of sculpture from an object to be observed into a space to experience. She creates ambiguous images with many meanings, some of which are concealed, some combined with others. These meanings are left for the viewer to find, experience, and interpret for him or herself.



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TO LEARN MORE:  
[www.abakanowicz.art.pl](http://www.abakanowicz.art.pl)

**WHO PUT THIS SCULPTURE ON DISPLAY IN VANCOUVER?** This sculpture is part of Vancouver Biennale 2009-2011 Exhibition. The Vancouver Biennale is a non-profit charitable organization that celebrates art in public space. Each exhibition transforms the urban landscape into an Open Air Museum, creating globally inspired cultural experiences where people live, work, play and transit. The Biennale features internationally renowned and emerging Contemporary artists that represent a diversity of cultural perspectives and artistic disciplines including sculpture, new media, performance works and film. The objective is to use great art as a catalyst to transformative learning and social action.

The Vancouver Biennale also creates supporting public programs, events and publications including the award-winning BIG IDEAS Education program, the International Artist Residency Program inspired by Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream", the CineFest LIVE documentary film festival and the Tour de Biennale and BIKennale arts & culture cycling events.

**TO LEARN MORE** you can search the terms **BIENNALE**, **PUBLIC ART** or **OUTDOOR SCULPTURE PARKS** on-line. Also Visit the Vancouver Biennale website at [www.vancouverbiennale.com](http://www.vancouverbiennale.com)

**IMAGE CREDITS:**

- 1 Artist portrait; Dan Fairchild
- 2 *Walking Figures*; Dan Fairchild
- 3 *Walking Figures* (installation at Queen Elizabeth Park, 2006); Dan Fairchild
- 4 *Dancing Figures*, 2005; Artist website
- 5 Industrial foundry; Artist website
- 6 *Agora*, 2005-06, Permanent at Grant Park, Chicago; Artist website

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