

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Alina Szapocznikow: To Exalt the Ephemeral, 1962-1972

Hauser & Wirth, New York City
October 29 – December 21, 2019

Laura Stowell



Installation view of Alina Szapocznikow: *To Exalt the Ephemeral, 1962-1972*. Hauser & Wirth, 69th St., New York (photograph courtesy of the author).

“My gesture is addressed to the human body, ‘that complete erogenous zone,’ to its most vague and ephemeral sensations. I want to exalt the ephemeral in the folds of our body, in the traces of our passage.” - Alina Szapocznikow, March 1972¹

So opens Hauser & Wirth’s first solo exhibition featuring Alina Szapocznikow (1926-1973) since beginning to represent her estate in May 2018. Concentrating on the last decade of her life, which was spent between Poland and Paris, and including works from the Ursula Hauser Collection, Szapocznikow’s estate, and private collections, the exhibition presents a rich glimpse into the work of an artist well known in her native Poland but only beginning to be appreciated by a broader international audience.

¹ Wall text, *Alina Szapocznikow: To Exalt the Ephemeral, 1962-1972*, Hauser & Wirth, New York, October 29-December 21, 2019. Quoted from an Untitled artist statement sent from Alina Szapocznikow to Pierre Restany, March 27, 2019, reproduced in *Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972* (New York: Brussels: Museum of Modern Art: Mercatorfonds, 2011), 28.



Figure 1. Alina Szapocznikow, *Noga (Leg)*, 1962, plaster, 7 7/8 in. x 19 11/16 in. x 19 11/16 in. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanislawski (photograph courtesy of the author).

Adjacent to the opening wall text, in a minimal white vitrine is *Noga (Leg)*, 1962, (Fig. 1) the artist's first foray into casting from her own body. This revelation resulting in casts of lips, breasts, and bellies, both hers and friends' – that appear in many of the works on view in seven rooms over the gallery's three floors. The use of her own body as a material, fragmented and eroticized, connects Szapocznikow to the "radical narcissism" of proto-feminist art of the early 1960s, and has also led to a biographical reading of her work.² As a Holocaust survivor who battled tuberculosis and eventually died of breast cancer, reception of her work outside of Poland has largely focused on her biography.³ Recent critical attention, including this exhibition, demonstrates that while her work is sometimes hauntingly evocative of mortality, it also poses questions on subjects ranging from sexuality to commodity culture in post-war Poland and France and offers more than an excavation of personal trauma.⁴

² For an analysis of this idea of "radical narcissism" see Amelia Jones, "The Rhetoric of the Pose: Hannah Wilke and the Radical Narcissism of Feminist Body Art" in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) and Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).

³ For a discussion of the critical reception of Alina Szapocznikow's work see Joanna Mytkowska, "From Sculptures to Awkward Objects: A Short History of the Changing Reception of the work of Alina Szapocznikow," in Elena Filipovic et al. *Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972* (New York: Brussels: Museum of Modern Art: Mercatorfonds, 2011), 122-135.

⁴ Recent exhibitions include: "Alina Szapocznikow. Human Landscapes," at The Hepworth Wakefield, United Kingdom in 2017; "Alina Szapocznikow: Awkward Objects" at the Museum of Modern Art Warsaw in 2011; "Alina Szapocznikow: Sculpture Undone: 1955-1972" which traveled from the Wiels Center in Brussels to the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 2011-2012, among others. All produced catalogues with new scholarship on the artist, as will this exhibition at Hauser & Wirth.



Figure 2. Alina Szapocznikow, *Lampe-bouche* (Illuminated Lips), 1966, colored polyester resin, light bulbs, electrical wiring, metal, four lamps ranging from 11 ¼ in. to 17 15/16 in. high. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanisławski (photograph courtesy of the author).

While the exhibition is elegantly installed, some works are difficult to see from behind, obstructing our access to their three-dimensionality. In the second of three rooms on the first floor, the small bronze *Autoportret II* (Self-portrait II), 1966, what seems like a solid support for cast lips and cleavage from the front reveals itself to be an unsettling partial cast of a foot from the back (Fig. 2). Surprising oscillations between humor and horror, tenderness and violence, beauty and abjection occur throughout the exhibition as sculptures appear to shift in form and affect as one moves around them.

The second room also features a row of functioning lamps made of colored polyester resin. Mouths and breasts suspended on delicate stems like mutant flowers, exemplifying resin's versatility: sometimes opaque as plastic, other times translucent as skin (Fig. 3). The serial display suggests traditional sculpture's fraught relationship with mass production, connecting Szapocznikow to the thematic concerns of European Pop art. Using the lamps and a series of bellies made into polyurethane cushions, one of which is on view on the third floor, utilitarian household items are transformed into uncanny examples of the grotesque objectification of the female body.



Figure 3. Alina Szapocznikow, *Autoportret II* (Self-portrait II), 1966, bronze, 8 in. x 10 ¼ in. x 4 ⅓ in. Private Collection (photograph courtesy of the author).

The four rooms of the two upper floors emphasize Szapocznikow's experimentation with media, ranging from a series of conceptual black and white photographs of masticated chewing gum; to Duchampian sculptural combinations of cement and car parts; to amalgamations of photographs and fibers embedded in resin. Lingerie makes an appearance (Fig. 4), as do cigarette butts, all are intimate parts of the artist's everyday life playfully suspended in resin and forever given the status of artistic objects.



Figure 4. Alina Szapocznikow, *Sculpture (Fétiche IV)* (Sculpture [Fetish IV]), 1971, polyester resin, stockings, wood, lingerie, 26 x 34 x 39.5 in. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Piotr Stanisławski (photograph courtesy of the author).

The exhibition eschews a consistent organizing principle in favor of pairing works related by an obvious formal concern with works that differ, and thus effectively demonstrates that Szapocznikow was rapidly developing a distinctive formal vocabulary during the last decade of her life. Forms are worked, reworked, repeated, and elements of older works are given radically new meaning in subsequent configurations.

The artist's drawings, some digitized and made available on an iPad in a small room of archival material, attest to her persistence in trying and failing to materially register the inherently ephemeral "traces of our passage."⁵ This powerful exhibition warrants an extended visit to experience Szapocznikow's remarkable body of work—a series of affectively complex and aesthetically challenging explorations—that, like so many artists left outside the Western, male-centric canon and only "rediscovered" in recent years, has been long overlooked.

⁵ Wall text, *Alina Szapocznikow: To Exalt the Ephemeral, 1962-1972*.