

ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW *My American Dream*

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When a gallerist tells an artist that her work is “in transition,” it is usually a euphemistic way of saying “Thanks, but no thanks.” This exchange presumes that the solo exhibition is a periodic bracketing that requires a certain level of cohesion and legibility (a body of work) despite the fact that the artist is alive and changing and ditto her work. When the artist is obscure, no longer living, or both, the one-person show instantly accrues all kinds of complications. More often than not, posthumous solo exhibitions take a studied, scholarly approach so as to “make sense” to the uninitiated. By contrast, *My American Dream*, the second exhibition of the Polish-French artist, Alina Szapocznikow, at Broadway 1602, is a refreshingly random selection of work that seems to come unedited from the studio.

Born in 1926, Szapocznikow was a Polish Jew who survived three concentration camps (Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and Theresienstadt) before the age of 20. She went on to train as a sculptor in Prague and Paris during the 1940s and was celebrated in her native Poland for her monumental public commissions of cultural and nationalist subjects such as Polish-Soviet friendship, Warsaw heroes and the victims of Auschwitz, as well as her smaller, stone and bronze pieces based on her own body parts. In 1962 Szapocznikow was honored with a solo show in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. A year later she moved to Paris, added polyester resins to her sculptural repertoire, and became part of the burgeoning European Pop Art movement. Szapocznikow died of cancer in 1973 at age 46.

Szapocznikow remained relatively unknown in the U.S. until 2007 when Broadway 1602 first presented her work in New York. Since then, her late polyester sculptures have appeared in a string of exhibitions, including *Lynda*

Benglis, Louise Bourgeois, Alina Szapocznikow: After Awkward Objects (Hauser & Wirth, London); *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists 1958-68* (Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts), and most recently, *Mind and Matter: Alternative Abstractions, 1940s to Now* (MoMA). The growing appreciation of Szapocznikow's oeuvre as well as her reclamation by the proto-feminist canon seems both appropriate and timely. From the delicate and eerie resin casts of her buttocks, lips, and limbs to her monumental marble bellies, each roll lovingly carved, her focus was on a kind of experiential or inside-out depiction of the female body that was almost completely absent from art before the 1970s.

My American Dream includes three unprecedented conceptual projects alongside a group of Szapocznikow's signature pieces. The introduction of these “dematerialized” works of art reveals marked responsiveness to radical ideological shifts. A small selection of late sculptures and drawings provides visual excitement and context for these new, text-based pieces. Among the highlights is “Tumeur” (1969), a grainy, wadded up photograph, coated in yellowish resin and hung just low enough so that one is forced to lock eyes with the artist. In “Sein en chiffon vert (Fetsyz II)” (1970-71), a scruffy, wrinkled jacket and shirt are dipped in polyester to form a strange, tabletop “wave.” Resting underneath the overhang is the floppy pancake of a single breast looking like a washed-up jellyfish. “Stele” (1968) is a theatrical work in which the artist's milky white limbs and face are embedded in a phallic halo made of black polyurethane foam. A drop of black blood lingers at the corner of her black lips, lending some refreshingly self-conscious camp.

Szapocznikow's three forays into conceptual art carry through a similar sense of lightness and humor. “My

American Dream” (1971), the most fully documented project, was an unrealized proposal to carve a Rolls Royce out of pink marble at twice its actual size. In a letter to curator Harold Szeeman, Szapocznikow proposes the monumental automobile for Documenta V (1972). Szeeman responds: “Find a sponsor, have the car produced, find a backer who will pay for the transport to Kassel, and then your work will be seen by 250,000 people. This is my conception of artistic work nowadays.” Through an extensive display of ephemera, including letters to Hugh Hefner and private collectors, glossy magazine advertisements, personal musings and sketches, *My American Dream* appears as a kind of bellwether for the art world's symbiotic relationship with consumerism, corporate sponsorship (a relic of another economy), and the market—political and ethical concerns that could not have been expressed in the sculptural objects she had made up until that point.

From studying the archival materials, it is hard to know exactly how Szapocznikow felt about these new “materials” (or “de-materials” as the case may be). Nonetheless there is no doubt we are watching a mature artist try out something new—the results are deeply considered but playful and absurdist in the manner of Fluxus and other multi-disciplinary makers. The fact that Szapocznikow was able to move with such agility—from monumental stone and bronze sculpture in the 1950s, to table-top, resin assemblages in the 60s, and then “anti-art” in the her last few years—makes one very curious as to where she would have gone had she been with us longer.

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