

Alina Szapocznikow

Alina Szapocznikow, Sculpture Undone, 1955-1972

10.09.2011-08.01.2012

WIELS

Even as she remained resolutely committed to sculpture as a medium, by the late 1960s, Szapocznikow was pushing ever further towards an idea of undoing traditional notions of sculpture. Her use of materials common at that time only in the building industries, development of more conceptual and ephemeral sculptures, and incorporation of photographs or other readymade elements into sculpture were some of the ways in which she did this.

The upper floor of the exhibition opens with an important group of sculptures made in 1968 from poured black polyurethane foam. For these experimental works the artist used the unusual molten material's expressive and unpredictable potential, embedding within it cast parts of the body, as in *Stele*, *Headless Torso*, and *Big Beach* or elements like live grass in *Pollution* (all 1968). Key pieces such as the haunting *Alina's Funeral* (1970) or *Souvenirs* series (1971) announce the role of memory, trauma and photography in the artist's late work. Embedded in the opaque, formless accumulations of polyester resin are photographs of the artist herself, friends, or cinema stars and, in the case of *Souvenir I, II*, and *III* (all 1971) even the disturbing visage of a concentration camp victim. Formally, they relate to numerous drawings depicting tumour-like growths or the deterioration of the body, as well as *Tumours Personified* (1971), multiple casts of the artist's head shown here as the artist herself exhibited it – on a layer of gravel. The process of body casting is central also to the artist's major photographic work *Photosculptures* (1971), in which ephemeral sculptures of chewing gum were pulled from her mouth and documented. Gathered in the last room of the exhibition are an almost complete panorama of the series known as *Fetishes* (ca. 1970), sculptures embedding personal elements – work aprons or lingerie and pantyhose – in polyester. In stark contrast are sculptures from roughly the same period that offer their own uncanny riposte to Pop art, including *Desserts* (ca. 1970–1971) with colourful casts of body parts (breasts, lips) placed in readymade glass bowls, or *Mad White Fiancée* (1971), with its mix of ecstasy, imbalance, and provocation. Connected to the sculptures bearing the name *Bachelor's Ashtray*, are two photographs (also referred to as *Ambiance Ashtray*) (all 1972), that offer themselves as a kind of model for an ephemeral sculpture that the artist wanted to have made of butter and cigarettes. The exhibition ends with the series titled *Herbarium* (1972) comprised of flattened casts of body parts stuck to wood boards as well as the eerie life-sized body cast of the artist's son titled *Piotr* (1972). These are met with a selection of drawings that make up the very last series of artworks on which the artist laboured before her death. An ensemble of archival material concerning the artist has been gathered on the 4th floor Panorama room.