

Press Release

Olga Balema / Geta Brătescu

September 11 – November 5, 2022
Opening: Sunday, September 11, 4–7pm

Gallery hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–6pm

Galerie Barbara Weiss is pleased to announce the exhibition *Olga Balema / Geta Brătescu*. Brought together for the first time, this exhibition shows intersecting interests in the body, the capacities of imagination, and the contrast between individual and collective experience. Despite the nearly 60 years between them, their shared formal sensibilities are not difficult to pick out. Both Balema and Brătescu make artworks that are—to borrow a term offhandedly used by Balema in an early artist statement—‘semiabstract’. Everyday objects are utilized in formal explorations that oscillate between permanence and ephemerality.

Occupying the floor in the first gallery, Balema’s nine, low-slung sculptures consist mostly of elastic bands that are normally sewn into clothes to prevent them from sagging. The bands, some of which are painted in crackled acrylic due to the overly pliant elastic, are variously tied, stapled, nailed, and tacked together to form nine interrelated compositions. Hovering a few inches above ground, held up by nails and screws driven into the floor, they also slope upwards to the walls that anchor them and feather out towards the floor.

When the artist first showed such sculptures in New York, she titled the exhibition *brain damage*. If they are describing unknown neural connections, the strings form networks that seem to be broken, exhausted and unreliable. Synapses no longer reach their counterparts. But the elastic bands are mostly arranged in grids, lending them a schematic quality or as if someone had marked their routes from strolls through a city. They are cartographic and at the same time they incorporate the sensual experience one might have on such a stroll: the thrown away, the flotsam of the street, the city grid, infrastructure.

On the back wall are eight collages from Brătescu’s series *Costumes for Ephemeral Celebrations* (1987). Collaged from tissue paper, tea bags and wrapping paper, each can be read as a garment. Incorporating inexpensive, everyday materials and a forwardly handmade approach evolved from Brătescu’s attitude towards her studio as a protected environment, allowing her to circumvent direct confrontation with the political system. Whether these costumes are celebrations of the ephemeral act of creation, some imagined gathering, or the simple, temporary joy of unwrapping a package or drinking a cup of tea is left happily unanswered by the artist.

Olga Balema’s sculpture *Biomorphic Attachment* (2014) likewise has an element of costume, as if it could be experienced—like the title suggests—from within. The organically curving silhouette of latex soaked foam has what seem to be a front and a back. But both are on display, as is a jutting length of underlying armature. The choice of the word *attachment*—an object that necessitates another to be truly useful—implicitly calls for participation from the viewer.

Included in both rooms of the exhibition are drawings from Brătescu’s series of drawings and collages based on Medea, a female figure who transgressed the rational. Brătescu was devoted to literature and would often draw inspiration from it. Alongside Medea, Aesop, Mother Courage and Faust all played starring roles in her work, functioning as alter-egos and conduits for self-expression and, frequently, an oblique form of political subversion. Language proves to be a crucial element for both artists, guiding viewers into the potential of their objects through words, entangling them with their artistic work in a conflation that affects the reading of both parts.

Balema and Brătescu treat the creation of an artwork as a personal action, evocatively making use of a liminal space of materiality. They both recognize the reality, as noted by Brătescu in a text from 1990, that, ‘Civilization and culture are ever changing artifices, they are open works.’ Nevertheless, their art, despite its formal refinement, persistently reminds one that it comes from a very personal place.

Olga Balema (b. 1984, Ukraine) is an artist living and working in New York City. She received an MFA from University of California, Los Angeles and subsequently completed further studies at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam as well as Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Maine. In 2017, she was the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. Balema has participated in national and international group exhibitions in venues including Haus der Kunst, Munich (2018); Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (2018); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2016); and in exhibitions including the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2019); Baltic Triennial 13, Vilnius (2018); and New Museum Triennial, New York (2015). Balema has had recent solo exhibitions at Camden Arts Center, London; Bridget Donahue, New York (2019); Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles (2017); Swiss Institute, New York (2016); and Kunstverein Nürnberg, Nürnberg (2015).

Geta Brătescu (b. 1926 – d. 2018) was born in inter-war Romania and moved at a young age to Bucharest, where she lived for the rest of her life. In 1945 she began to study of literature at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy at the University of Bucharest and at the same time was admitted to the Bucharest Academy of Fine Arts (today's National University of Arts, Bucharest). In 1949 she had to suspend her studies. The newly formalized Communist government considered Brătescu origins 'unsound' because of her parents' social position as pharmacists and denied her an academic education. Undaunted, Brătescu found her own path, beginning as a technical draughtsman and later a graphic illustrator. In the late 1960s she also won a position as artistic editor of the prestigious literary magazine Secolul 20 ('The Twentieth Century'), which at the turn of this century was renamed Secolul 21. In the 1950s, she achieved membership of the Romanian visual artists' association UAP, which gave her the opportunity to go on several study trips to both Eastern and Western European countries. In 1969, because of changes in the political climate, she was able to resume her studies after a 20-year absence. She was awarded her diploma in 1971.

In the last two decades of her life, Geta Brătescu work became more widely recognized outside of Romania. She took part in exhibitions such as Documenta 14, Athens and Kassel (2017), La Biennale di Venezia (2013), La Triennale, Paris, Palais de Tokyo (2012) and the 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011). In 2017, Geta Brătescu represented Romania at the Venice Biennale with "Apparitions", the first solo exhibition of a female artist in the Romanian Pavilion. Among her recent solo shows are retrospectives at Camden Arts Center, London and MSK Gent (2018), Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg (2016), Tate Liverpool (2015), as well as exhibitions at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Berlin (2018), Hauser & Wirth Los Angeles (2018) and New York (2017) and Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (2014).