

The second show of Polish-French artist Alina Szapocznikow (1926 – 1973) at BROADWAY 1602 presents for the first time a group of works, which could be termed the “conceptual” shift in the artist’s practice dating back to the beginning of the 1970s, when Szapocznikow extended her notion of sculpture into immaterial forms. While Szapocznikow radicalized the style and vocabulary of her pop-surrealist polyester based sculptures, exemplified in the show by a group of works dating from 1967-71, the new decade with its movements expanding the boundaries of art gave inspiration to widen her practice. Different paths of experimentation existed by then side by side in her oeuvre and in genuine aesthetic synthesis.

Central to the exhibition is the first presentation of the complete portfolio “My American Dream” (1970/1). In correspondence to conceptual art forms of the time, this portfolio consists of extended research material, letters and text work written by the artist, in preparation of a massive sculptural project - a double life size marble Rolls Royce - which was from the beginning on of such material dimension that it could not be realized, but remained to exist on the level of an idea documented in this multi-faceted archival art work. Part of the portfolio is a correspondence with Documenta ’72 director Harald Szeemann. Szapocznikow had proposed the marble Rolls Royce project to the curator, only to receive the regretting but sharp response that such a costly piece could only be realized with sponsors provided by the artist, while other responses of potential sponsors are pointing to the ‘difficult times’ overshadowed by the oil crisis. Altogether the documents of “My American Dream” keep up an ambiguity between playful concept and the artist’s determination to actually realize the gigantic marble car.

“My American Dream” was soon after shown simply in form of a text sheet/idea contribution, according to the instructions that curator Pierre Restany had given out to the participants of the show “Art Concepts from Europe” at Bonino Gallery in NYC. In this text Szapocznikow envisioned that if the precious marble Rolls Royce were to be bought by a collector - ‘if such a fantastic snob exists’ - who would have glamorous parties on his lawn in the car, then her American dream would be accomplished. With a conceptual reference to Pop Art’s playful affirmations of consumer culture Szapocznikow regarded the Roll Royce as an object being “completely useless, and a reflection of the god of supreme luxury. In other words a “complete work of art”.”

In 1972 Szapocznikow participated once more in a project curated by Pierre Restany who had initiated a competition for the design of a park on the top of the Vesuvius, the infamous still active volcano in Naples. The project titled “Operazione Vesuvio” manifested a tone of counter-cultural utopianism. Szapocznikow’s idea was to create a radio-equipped skating-rink inside of the crater. To the music of Russian waltzes such as “The Hills of Manchuria”...”some Peggy Fleming will dance

her program in a frozen crater and if, stunned by her pirouettes, we the spectators are suddenly trapped by a sudden eruption of lava which will turn us into stone likewise the Pompeian, then the triumph of the moment and transience of our existence will be complete.” (A. Szapocznikow)

The idea of the ice rink inside of the volcano’s crater extends her creative reach on to the dimension of Earth Art. It parallels interestingly the visions of Robert Smithson, both artists having had their artistic initiation through intense encounters with the dystopian epic landscapes of the quarries, - represented in the show are documents of Szapocznikow’s work in the quarries throughout the years, which were sites of stimulation for a new turn in her work in 1968 and times of greatest artistic satisfaction and freedom.

At the same time the idea is deeply imbedded in Szapocznikow’s thinking and pioneering practice as a sculptor, with the ice rink potentially making a cast of the inside of the crater like the casts Szapocznikow did of body parts for her polyester sculptures. The lava-like black polyurethane she started to experiment with in the late 1960s - in the show prominently represented with the life size sculpture “Stele” (1968) - introduced the aspect of an organically flowing chance operating material into her sculptural production while it at the same time symbolized the effect she was looking for in “Operazione Vesuvio” on a conceptual level: “...it is a challenge and a blasphemy at the same time. Yet, it is a challenge only in a certain sense: the surface of the ice at the bottom of the crater instantly brings to mind a symbolic connotation (like the overturned obelisk of Barnett Newman), but by opposing all transcendentalism through its elements of fun, this greatest challenge is at the same time a manifestation of a reverie and awe in the face of nature.” (A. Szapocznikow)

In the exhibition for “Operazione Vesuvio” in Naples and Milan in 1972 Szapocznikow’s seminal vision for a project was presented again as a modest text/sound display (a portable tape recorder was hanging next to her text presumably playing the music of the Russian Waltzes). In the same year Szapocznikow teamed up with her partner, the designer Roman Cieslewicz, for the utopian architecture symposium “Rencentre Internationale” on the island Vela Luka in former Yugoslavia. In collaboration with architects and designers (head of the team was Ricardo Porro) she contributed to the idea for a recreational center, a utopian village in the form of a human body: “The City becomes a Man”. For the center of the village Szapocznikow imagined a sculpture in the form of a heart, the idea based on an illuminated sculpture she had realized in 1970-71 “Le Coeur – Lampe (Serce – lampa). Again Szapocznikow’s engaged on a conceptual visionary level with landscape and nature, while her sensibility was deeply rooted in a genuine form of post-surrealism and in the constant re-formulation of the possibilities of sculpture.

The selections of sculptures on show reflect on this expansion of experiment in her work and parallel the conceptual project: There is a group of her “Souvenirs” (1967-70), in which she imbedded photos of prominent people like actors and models next to friends and lovers, and in “Le Monde” an entire issue of the French newspaper from June 24, 1970. A wall sculpture “Tumeur” shows photo fragments of the artist’s eyes and mouth in a distorted montage, belonging to a group of works relating literally to the artist’s diagnosis of cancer and allegorically to a certain introspection mirrored in a form of confrontational exhibition, the kind of opposing forces she exercised in “Operazione Vesuvio”. The ‘fetish sculptures’ from 1970-71 “Bouche en Marche (Fetysz III) and “Sein en chiffon vert (Fetysz II), predated by the terracotta work “Forma II (1964-5), are sublimely dreamlike to abject, untamed landscapes of animated female body parts - closed eyes, lips, breasts and bottoms. The landscapes, which are reminiscent of the static dynamic of impressionist sculpture, are based on fabric objects such as a jacket, a blouse, or a piece of lace soaked in polyester while the body parts were impressions made primarily from Szapocznikow’s own body.

In each of these sculptures we feel the allegorical impulse of sites beyond their physical existence. The same way as we see in the conceptual projects the artist’s deep engagement with the aesthetic impulses of sculpture.

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