

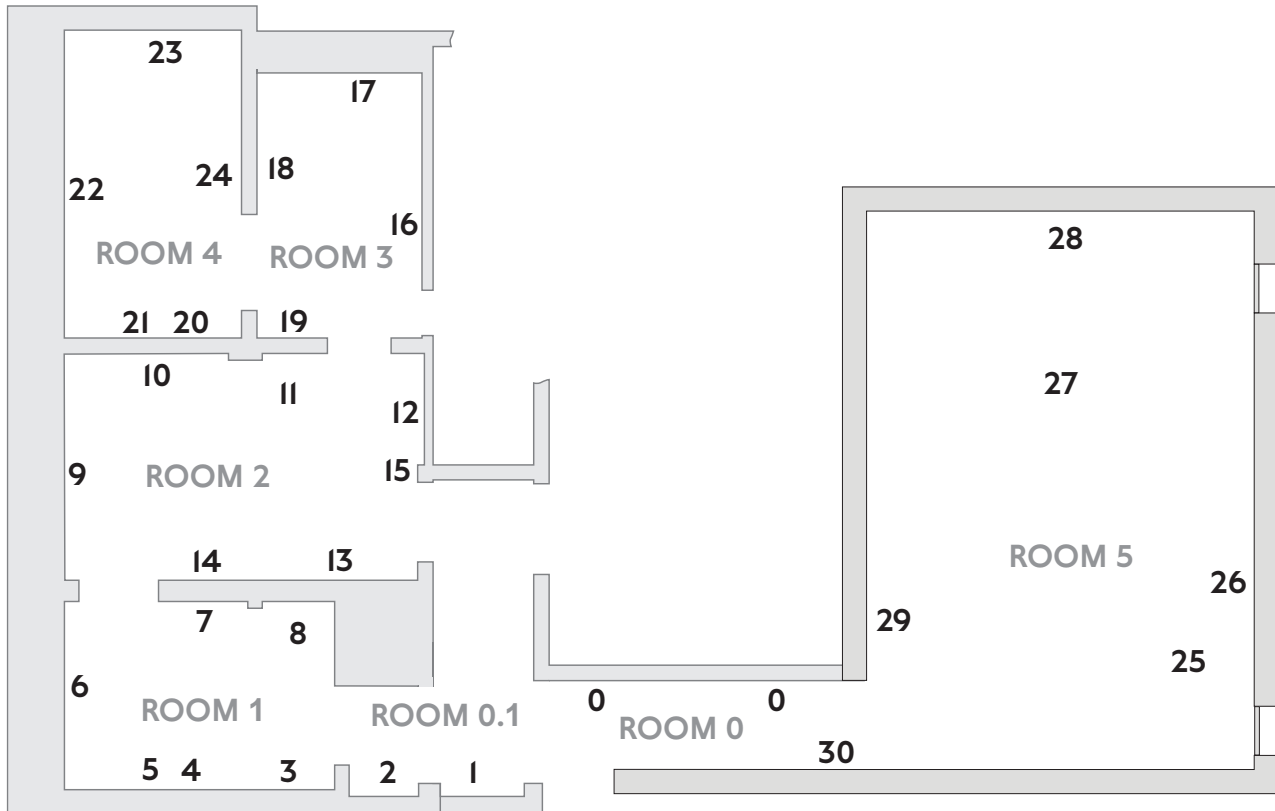
NATALIA SZOSTAK BAPTISM BY FIRE

26.09–9.11.2025

CURATOR: AGATA KIEDROWICZ



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0. *Phantom*, 2022, object
0. *Phantom*, 2020, video / sound
1. *The Curtain (after Lacan's The Function of the Veil)*, 2018, graphite / paper
2. *Shekhinah*, 2024, object
3. *The Figure of Somebody's Disappearance (1/3)*, 2019, Polaroid, ink / paper, volumetric flask, ink
4. *Daddy*, 1985, crayon / paper
5. *Blood Mother I*, 2025, oil / canvas
6. *The Curtain (after Courbet's The Origin of the World)*, 2018, vintage frame / fabric
The Curtain (after Baron Ferenc Hatvany), 2018 vintage frame / fabric
The Curtain (after Baron Mór Lipót Herzog), 2018 vintage frame / fabric
7. *Hearth*, 2022, oil / canvas
8. *Nun Moth*, 2023, object
9. *Forest Scene II*, 2016, video / sound
10. *Kin II*, 2025, oil / canvas
11. *Nest I*, 2024, object
12. *The Figure of Somebody's Disappearance (2/3)*, 2019, Polaroid, ink / paper, volumetric flask, moss
13. *Forest Scene II*, 2017, oil / canvas
14. *Script (detail)*, 2019, digital print / paper
15. *Common Beech*, 2019, hand embroidery, golden thread, fabric
16. *16.07*, 2014, hair / Petri dish
17. *Blood Mother II*, 2025, oil / canvas
18. *Medical History*, 2021, ink, dried plants, sketchbook
19. *Resin*, 2022, oil / canvas
20. *Molar*, 2021, X-ray film, LED panel
21. *Extraction*, 2022, artbook
22. *Irene's Garden*, 2022, colour pencil / paper
23. *Kin I*, 2025, oil / canvas
24. *Cocoon IV*, 2023, hand embroidery / raw silk
25. *Cocoon I, II, III*, 2022, guelder rose juice / raw silk
26. *Cocoon*, 2022, video
27. *Fruits of Fire*, 2025, peat ash sinters
28. *Cradle*, 2022, video / sound
29. *The Figure of Somebody's Disappearance (3/3)*, 2019 Polaroid, ink / paper, volumetric flask, sea water
30. *Schematic Diagram*, 2018, graphite / paper
31. *Eyes of the Painting*, 2025, book publication

I refuse to accept things

*becoming history*¹

Natalia Szostak

There is never a before nor after. There is always now. History is a vivid presence, triggered by the gesture of attention.

The solo exhibition of Natalia Szostak comprises the works from several series and creative periods: *Forest Scenes*, *Extraction*, *Heritage/Kin*. Visuals and objects are presented in an original, achronological order. The past exists through the present, (because) the present day carries codes of memory, embodied by the perceiving subject. Art becomes an instrument of understanding, examining oneself and one's biography, which transcends personal experience.

The artist relates to the concept of autofiction, which tends to exempt from the duty of factual reality. There is no single truth, there are multiple stories. *The obsessive gesture of creating, transcribing and archiving is a life-giving act of constructing one's own identity; taking over the narrative, attempting to self-determine the current of one's own life, the flow of lymph, blood and genes.*²

Szostak calls as witnesses her ancestors, organic matter, naturalia, medical artefacts. The artist's loved ones, including she-dog Kuna, by taking part in the daily creative work enter the painting's aura and actively constitute its content.

The work *Phantom* introduces the exhibition, planting the rhizome of meaning into the body of the display. A mirror stands before us, smashed into hundreds of pieces, which the artist has painstakingly collected and reassembled. It emerges as a symbol of history – always a part of a whole and in itself a sum of its parts. It is complete, and at the same time an impossible puzzle. Occurred and still happening. The act of reflecting (in oneself, in a painting, in a mirror) is composing oneself, always unfolding anew, here and now.

A story is therefore always a fragment, a piece of the rhizome. Non-hierarchical, organic, inter-species order of the present, which grows and fades, entwines and burgeons. A force which conditions life and the meanings woven into it.

The rhizome is tangled and ever expanding, combines opposites and elements, characters and events. The narrative axis of the exhibition is grounded in the multi-threaded, long-standing dialogue between the artist and the curator. The themes of the exhibition interlace with the content of the book *Eyes of the Painting*, premiering alongside the show. In the collection of essays, Kiedrowicz delves into Szostak's work, going beneath the surface of the image, flowing down the stream of rhizomes coiling around the subterranean bulbs, fleeting meanings.

The activity of the perceiving subject is the condition of experience. Water soothes and unites with supraspecies, bodily, eternal memory. Fire cleanses and births its own fruit.

Room 0. Corridor / Umbilical Cord

Two works titled *Phantom* open and close the exhibition space. The broken-reassembled mirror multiplies questions. Is a whole possible? Is the desire for a whole (self, image) an obsession or a life-giving creative force? Do we see or are we seen?

The film documenting the process reveals the behind-the-scenes, lets us into the artist's studio. We hear sounds of creative work, fragments of a radio programme, the barking of a dog. Szostak redirects the viewer's attention to the experience, not the object. The artist flips the perspective: I set the scene, you fill it with content. I create the artwork on display, but you compose them into your own piece.

Room 0.1. The Origin of the World

How to depict the extrasensory? Does sacred mean hidden, inaccessible? Which image is framed by attention – public, private – and who decides it?

The works opening the left-hand side, 'genetic' wing of the exhibition, *Shekhinah* and *The Curtain*, represent opposites: the sacred and the profane, presence and absence. In Hebrew tradition, the shekhinah is the goddess of flux and dia-

¹ Natalia Szostak, *San Francisco Bay Guardian* 41, no. 29 (2007), 38.

² Agata Kiedrowicz and Natalia Szostak, *Eyes of the Painting*, translated by Aleksandra Bilińska (Academy of Art in Szczecin, 2025), p.18.

logue, she signifies the presence of a divine, material element in the world. She manifests where there is movement, light, union, existence. Where there is mindfulness. She mediates between what happens and what will be. Other religions and mythologies have taken over the attributes of the shekhinah, worshipping goddesses, including the Christian Mary.

Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* has been surrounded by a long-standing myth. The painting, which depicts a naked woman's womb, came to light and into public view in 1988 in New York, having remained hidden for over one hundred years. Its last private owner was the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who never publicly displayed the precious property. Szostak evokes Lacan's 'The Function of the Veil' as a metaphor of the impossible. We do not have the sufficient tools to penetrate the tissue of reality, to fully know the nature of the world nor image.

Room 1. Father. Entering the Darkness

The works displayed in the first of the *Father* rooms lay bare the paradox of depiction: they expose lack or absence. The Curtain series is a reference to Courbet's aforementioned painting *The Origin of the World*, for years hidden behind a green curtain. The first work relates to the original, also in terms of its dimensions. The following two depict the painting's owners, art collectors Baron Ferenc Hatvany and Baron Mór Lipót Herzog.

Blood Mother I is the father's mother, portrayed in present-day Belarus. The drawing *Daddy*, created by the artist in her childhood, begins a dialogue with loss, continued by Szostak throughout the various stages of her work. *Hearth* is one of many attempts to write her own history. The artist recreates the stack of firewood built by her father, which caused an unfortunate accident – her body catching fire. The *Nun Moth* flew into the artist's studio while she was working on the *Extraction* series. The dried-up body of the insect, kept in a box made by the artist's father, like a relic, becomes the symbol of life and death. It is both the desire for light and the risk of self-immolation, the irreversible baptism by fire.

Room 2. Father. Nest

We enter the forest space, the cradle of events and tangled fate. In the oak shrubbery, the artist plays out *Forest Scene II*: near the place of her father's death, she scatters black pigment – symbolic ashes. She also disappears into the forest thicket in *The Figure of Somebody's Disappearance*. The for-

est becomes a witness to the reversal of history (*Common Beech*). And in the exhibition space – so does *Kin II*, relatives from her father's line, repatriates from the east, pictured together with their neighbours in a post-German yard in western Poland.

The object *Nest I* hails from the artist's current place of residence. Woven by migratory birds, which 'have the same religion as we do',³ from extant matter and circumstances. The nest manifests home. And the power of the circle – a figure which celebrates change and life process: birth and death, decomposition and renewal.

Room 3. Mother. Medical History

Szostak rewrites the history of her own illness, looking for her own subjectivity in handwritten letters. *Blood Mother II* portrays the artist's two closest relatives from her mother's line, the blood givers: her mother and her mother's mother. They build a nest in western lands, set new trajectories of their fate.

The artist exposes traces of the blood disease she suffered, the traces of recovery (*Resin*, 16.07).

*Did the stick have any influence on becoming a painting? Would it have preferred its past forest existence? How did it come to add to the ranks of the scrupulously archived artefacts? Perhaps its eyes met the artist's searching pupils and glued this act of reciprocal perception with invisible, sticky resin. The kind that plasters a wound, supraspecies. With its soft, amber body, it tightly fills the cavity in a plant, a human, an animal.*⁴

Room 4. Mother. Extraction

An illness is information – in the matter of the body and in the text layer. Does genetic code determine our fate?

We enter the room through the textile interior of the work *Cocoon IV*. We are brushed by the reverse of plant images embroidered onto raw silk. The streams of threads fall softly – fingerprint lines, veins, rhizomes? Plants are the principle of existence, they enable survival (*Kin I*) and storytelling (*Irene's Garden*). Thirty-one hand drawings – botanical representations are an extract from the unpublished memoirs of the artist's maternal grandmother Irena. Herbs and flowers from Lithuania, Belarus and Poland bear witness to exile and uprooting.

3 Waldemar Kuligowski, *Trzecia Płeć Świata* [The Third Sex of the World] (ALBUS, 2020), 7–8.

4 Kiedrowicz and Szostak, 17.

Extraction also means isolating the ingredients of a mixture. An invasive dental procedure provided the impulse for the artist to work on the project (*Molar*). The series culminates in the soft *Cocoon IV* – a canvas intended not for stretching and framing, but for comforting, wrapping the artist's body. The story returns to the body, the source.

The causative factor of change is light – it oxidises the traces of guelder-rose fruit juice on silk (*Cocoon I, II, III / Room 5*) and the red pigment on the book cover (*Extraction*), it reveals the embroidery on the fabric and the X-ray image. Light conditions photosynthesis, disperses darkness, creates life.

Room 5. Fruits of Fire

*The fire which had burnt the skin of the child, gave birth to a canvas for the artist. The burnt tissue created a space – a living, ever-becoming canvas, a magical wound that never heals.*⁵

In the final room, the forces of fire and water meet. Elements which give and take life.

Ash fertilises soil and stimulates the growth of plants, fire allows one to be reborn. *Fruits of Fire* are objects which have no right to exist, yet they do. Remains from burning peat in the furnace, initially brittle, harden over time, solidify in their shape. As does the artist's body rescued from an accident.

In the last work from the series *The Figure of Somebody's Disappearance*, the artist enters the waters of the Baltic Sea. She writes a letter about disappearing not with ink, but with the medium of nature. Though we do not see her body, Szostak leaves a tangible trace of her presence – photographs and physical artefacts (pigment, moss, sea water). The letter about disappearance is an oxymoron; a birth certificate issued on one's own terms.

Cradle was registered while crossing the Baltic Sea, during a pandemic passage from Poland to Lithuania, after a restless night on the stormy sea. The ship rocks on the amniotic waters of the pan-ocean, its monotonous, rhythmic motion softens the excess, soothes.

Written by Agata Kiedrowicz

Translated by Karolina Placzynta

Natalia Szostak – visual artist combining traditional and new techniques, action in space and text. In her work she examines relationships between memory, identity, perception and image. She graduated from the San Francisco State University in California (BA), Academy of Art in Szczecin (MA) and Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts in Poland (PhD). Assistant professor at the Faculty of Graphics at the Academy of Art in Szczecin, where since 2019 she heads her authorial Image Concepts Studio.

Agata Kiedrowicz – curator, art and design critic, educator and lecturer. Her main areas of focus are embodied cognition and sense-driven processes. Head of the Department of Design Theory and History and the Design for Living Systems master's programme at the Faculty of Design at the Academy of Art in Szczecin. She collaborates with designers, artists, and cultural and art institutions. Host of the Design Stories podcast.