

How do 'Big Bellies' by Alina Szpocznikow use classical heritage as a tool for examining female body?

Massive at first glance, a two meters high bulk of white marble forms a cascade of folds. It represents two abstracted bellies piled one on top of the other to create an hourglass-like shape. There is a subtle twist of angle between its two constitutive parts as the lower belly is more tilted, then the upper more vertical, so creating a curve around the standing viewer. This strange composition, entitled 'Big Bellies' was created in 1968 by Alina Szpocznikow (1926-1973), a Polish sculptress and death camp survivor, who having studied in the Academies of Fine Arts in Prague and Paris, enjoyed prominence in Polish art world of 1950s and 1960 and emigrated permanently to Paris in 1963.



Alina Szpocznikow, *Big Bellies*, 1968, Carrara marble, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo

Some features of the sculpture are typical of the artist's works. Her works focus on human, specifically female bodies. In her earlier creations, she often depicted women's body parts such as legs, breasts and lips individually, detached from the rest of the body. This time the sculptress decided to showcase the belly. While looking at the detached body part almost invites to envisage the rest of the torso, and the shape of the legs, the identical shapes of both bellies add certain feel of artificiality in the work. This reminds the viewer of reproduction strategies that complicate seeing the bellies as merely imitating nature.

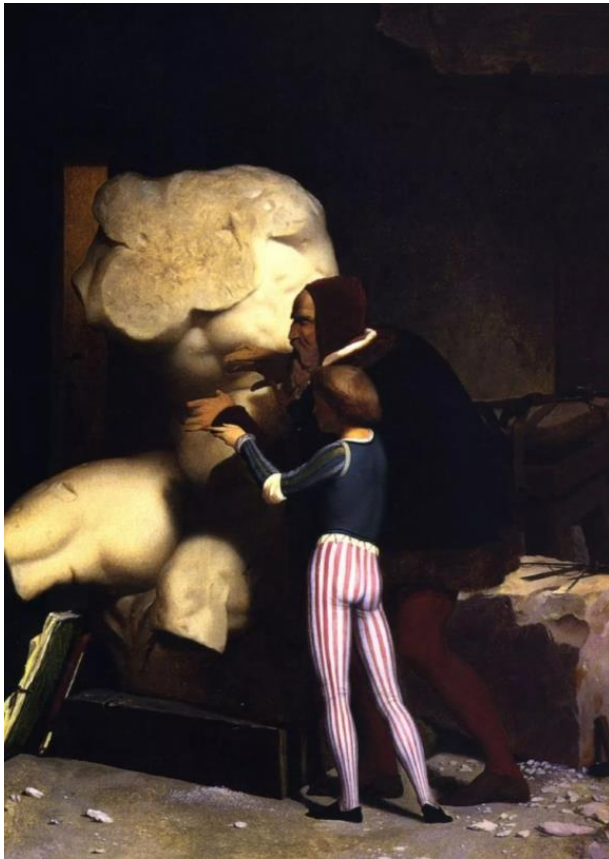
However, one needs to note that the sculpture considerably stands out from most of her oeuvre, both literally and figuratively. The massive size of two stomachs is exaggerated to a colossal scale that hardly finds a parallel. Also, it is the sculpture's material, namely marble

from Carrara, that is unusual Szapocznikow, predominantly working in the period in plaster and synthetic materials. Not only was the preciousness of material that made it special but also its canonical connotations, as it was acknowledged by her commentators. Roger Gain writing for *The Elle* magazine entitled her article devoted to Szapocznikow ‘Alina sculpte ses ventres dans le marbre de Michel-Ange.’¹ It portrayed Szapocznikow as a successor, if not competitor, of Michelangelo - the great master of the Renaissance, allegedly nursed in the childhood by a wife of a Carrara stonecutter².

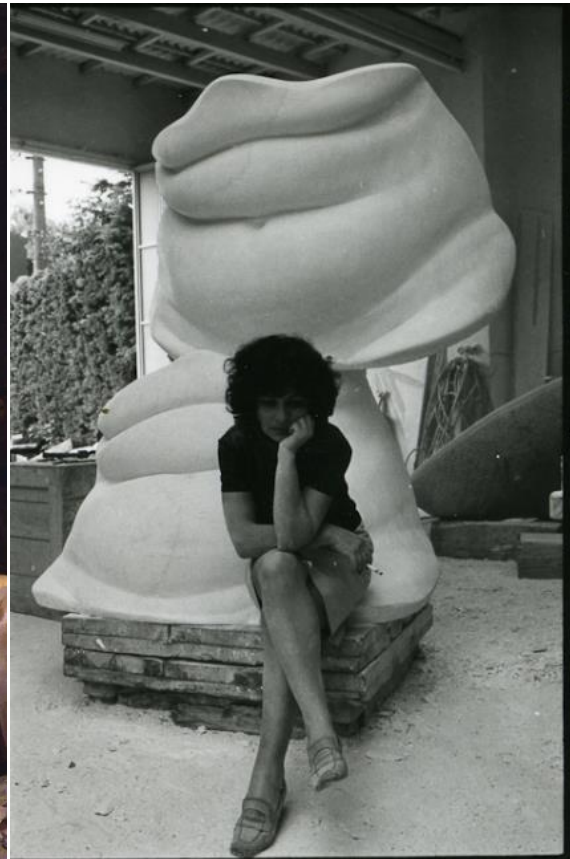
Behind the journalist’s enthusiastic statement, which might seem at odds with such contemporary feminist thinkers as Linda Nochlin, one can observe a much more complex relationship between Szapocznikow and the Italian virtuoso. This incomplete rendering of the body in combination with sculpture’s size brings to mind antique sculptures which often function in our collective memory as broken, incomplete or fragmentary. What may be even more interesting, the portraying of the belly is consistent with the heritage of the most famous classical portrait of a stomach, the Belvedere Torso. This fragmentary marble statue of a nude male was by many artists thought to be the greatest representation of the human body. Among the admirers of the sculpture there was also Michelangelo. His fascination with the work of art was so well known that to this day the Torso is also known as Michelangelo’s torso. There are many anecdotes describing Michelangelo’s fanatic adorations of the Belvedere Torso, depicting him kneeling or crying in front of the sculpture. In 1849 Jean-Léon Gérôme created a painting presenting blind Michelangelo being shown the Belvedere Torso by a young boy. Even though the composition is certainly the painter’s invention, as Michelangelo was never reported blind, it remains the case that the ancient sculpture strongly influenced great sculptor’s work, whose inspiration is highly visible in several figures of the Sistine Chapel.

¹ *Elle* magazine, vol.1191, 1968, p.137

² Vasari, 1568, p.415: ‘...and Michelangelo was given by Lodovico to a wet-nurse in the villa who was the wife of one of the stone-cutters. Thus, conversing with Vasari on one occasion, Michelangelo jokingly declared: “Giorgio, if I have any intelligence at all, it has come from being born in the pure air of your native Arezzo, and also because I took the hammer and chisels with which I carve my figures from my wet-nurse’s milk.”’



Jean-Léon Gérôme, Michelangelo being Shown the Belvedere Torso, 1849, Oil on canvas, Dahesh Museum of Art, New York



Roger Gain, Photo Shoot for Elle Magazine, 1968, contact print, private property of Piotr Stanisławski

Given this highly charged context, Szapocznikow's *Bellies* cannot be fully assessed as a stand-alone piece but rather as the artist's own intervention in an ongoing debate about the paradoxical relationship raised by the classical marble between the mutilated human body and the 'ideal'. By doing so one needs to look at an aspect of the artist's work that was surprisingly little talked about. For example, Pierre Restany, the main representative and theoretic of 'Nouveau Realisme' an artistic movement to which Szapocznikow was often included, in his essay on Szapocznikow's work failed to mention this artwork at all. In this essay, I would like to explore how and why Alina Szapocznikow consciously comes in dialogue with the classical heritage, in terms of material and composition, and what enriches her exploration of the female body as well as her position as an artist. For this purpose I will analyse the whole *Bellies* series and her other works as well as some of her own writings and letters and also contemporary artistic criticism responding to her oeuvre.

Section one: Moulding the series

To better understand what classical heritage serves for in Szpocznikow's *Big Bellies*, we need to take a closer look at the creative process that issued a much larger sculpture series they formed part of. Throughout her life, the sculptress explored the potentialities of different materials including clay, plaster, stone and synthetic materials such as polymer or polyurethane. The *Bellies* series was no exception. The artist started her work by making a plaster cast of the stomach of Arianne Raoul-Auval, who was at the time the fiancée of Roland Topor, a French illustrator and novelist of Polish-Jewish origin and Szpocznikow's friend. This first cast became a point of origin for the entire series of *Bellies*. In the first stage, the exploration of the body was very physical, as she created plaster cast, studies after which were an important part of her academic training. Given that the artist usually tended to take casts off her own body, it is surprising that in this case Szpocznikow worked with a model.



Alina Szpocznikow, *Belly*, 1968, plaster,
Modern Art Museum, Warsaw

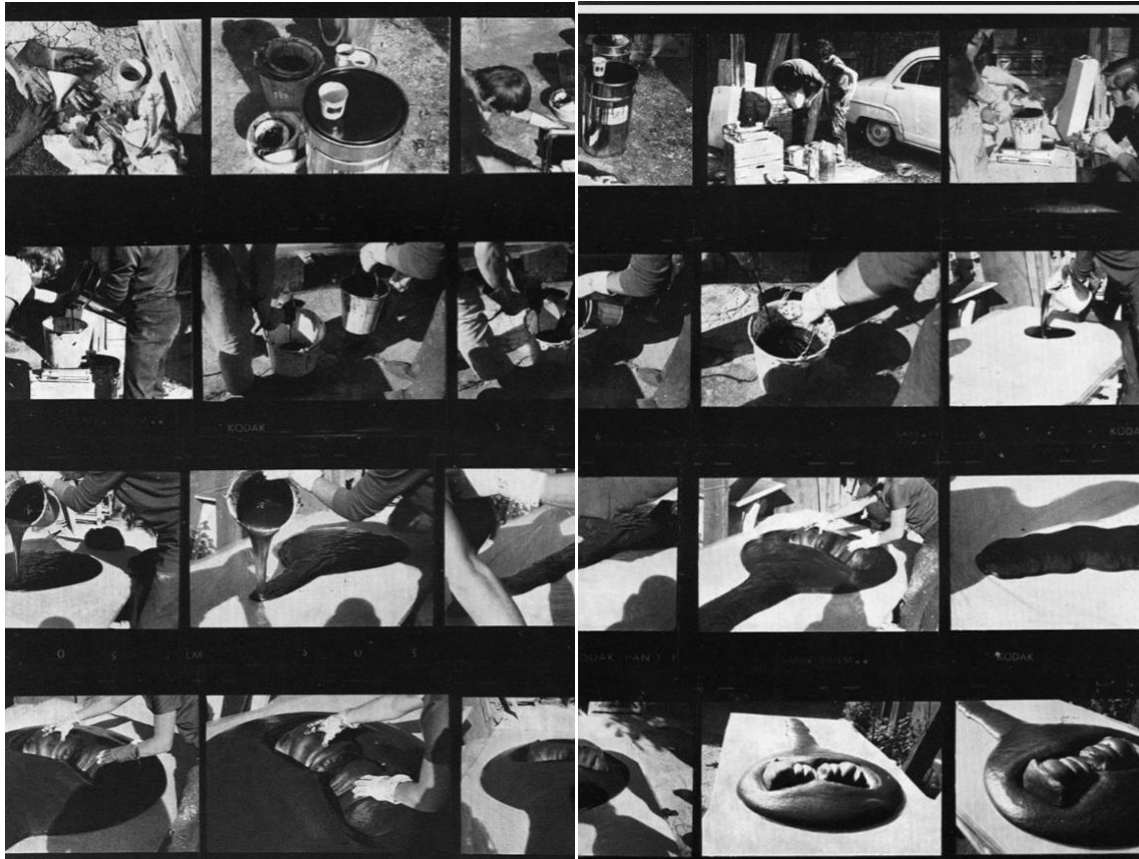


Alina Szpocznikow, *Bellies I*, 1968, colourful polyester,
Modern Art Museum, Warsaw

In a later stage, Szpocznikow reached for new synthetic materials. Polymers and artificial resins fascinated her as a symbol of modernity. In 1968 she wrote about them: 'through their repeatability, lightness, colours, transparency and cheapness they seem to me to be perfect for express and capture our age'³. She started by creating small works in polyester, followed by a series of '*Bellies-cushions*' emphasizing the soft shape of the bodily form. Szpocznikow planned a mass production of soft polyurethane, cushions to be available for the mass audience. The artist invaded the sphere between a sculpture and a product, exposed the blurry distinction

³ Beylin, 2015, p.165: (in orig.): '...przez swoją powtarzalność, lekkość, kolory, przezroczystość i taniość wydają mi się doskonałe, by wyrazić i ująć naszą epokę.'

between a body and a product inherent in the market itself. While in 1968 approximately 100 pieces of *Belly-Cushions* were made, they turned out to be an economic fiasco, probably because of the fact that the whole idea was a little bit too provocative for the public.



Roger Gain and Roman Cieślewicz, *Processus de la coulée de mousse polyuréthane avec la collaboration de M. Jean Tagli de 'JANUS'*, 1968, Catalogue 'Alina Szapocznikow 1968'

Synthetics materials were not the only trajectory of Szapocznikow's creative exploration. From her letter written to Ryszard Stanisławski in may of 1968 we can draw that at the same time when she decided to use synthetic materials, she made up her mind about creating a larger sculpture, this time in marble.⁴ This change of material may seem at first a little bit incomprehensible. Not only does she go beyond abandoning her new materials but also returns to traditional techniques. Roger Gain in the *Elle* magazine wrote that:

⁴ Szapocznikow, 1968, p.281 : 'You'll see the first in Opus, repeated for now, a model in plaster. There will be up to 50 of them made out of soft plastic, while two like in the model will be made in Querceta near Carrara in white marble, 240 cm tall.'

‘... carving was performed by means of a pneumatic hammer, but the method of dealing with [the sculpture] was the same as in antiquity: lines traced on the model, serving as points of reference, were transferred onto the block in groups of three.’⁵

The journalist’s emphasis on the traditional academic transfer method seems not accidental. Here we come back to the question of the material, and the baggage that marble from Carrara brings with itself. Given its legacy as one of the greatest and most famous quarries, in 1960s Carrara was a popular place for artistic events and sculpting symposiums. Szapocznikow visited this place a couple of times⁶ before 1968, when she was invited by a big marble company from Carrara to come and chose a block of marble in which she would sculpt her work of art.⁷ Her decision to do so didn’t fit the narrative of a new artistic language achieved by using synthetic, mouldable materials, that was built around Szapocznikow by artistic criticism. The implications of Szapocznikow’s decision to translate its work in marble clearly change the expression of the artwork and provoke reflection about the artist’s self-conscious introspection into the female body and her position as sculptress within this process.

This reading is especially relevant when we take a closer look at the remark that she has written in 1968 during her stay in Carrara:

„Fatigue with iron results in a new interest in noble materials. A few years ago sculpting symposiums in quarries began taking place, individual sculptors start to come to Carrara.

However, are they right? – And here’s the controversy. – Today’s world, its political violations, production races, rampant, breathless events, cannot be reflected in the nobility of marbles. Noble materials and colours in art are now only a repose and longing. Creative individualities cannot only satisfy themselves with that. How articulate “Today”? Where? In what form? In what material?”⁸.

⁵ Gain, 1968, p.137 : (in orig.): ‘...la taille est effectuée au marteau pneumatique mais la méthode d’attaque est la même que dans l’antiquité: les points de repère, traces sur la maquette, sont reportés par groupe de trios sur le bloc.’

⁶ Szapocznikow participated in Biennale internationale de Carrara in 1962, IV Biennale de Carrara in 1965 and V Biennale de Carrara in 1967. In 1966 she worked in a marble workshop in Carrara.

⁷ *Elle* magazine, vol.1191, 1968, p.137

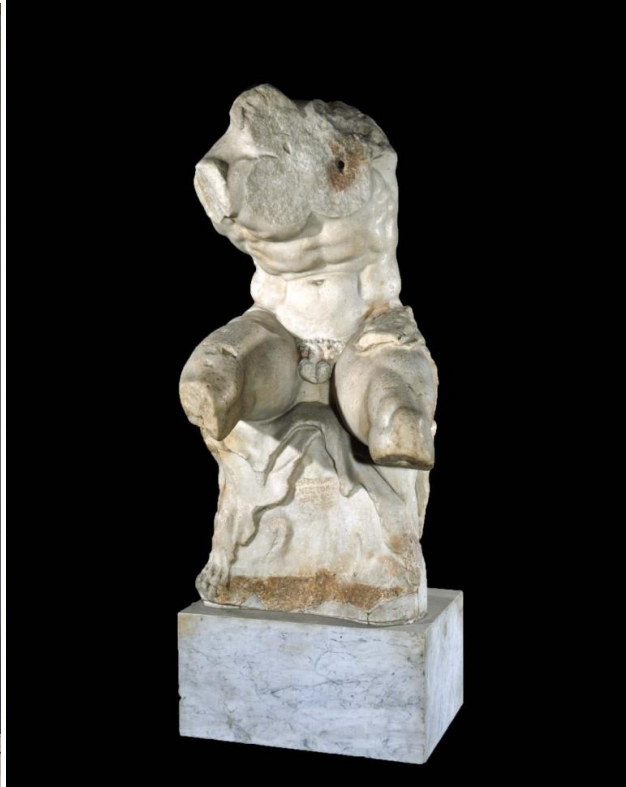
⁸ Beylin, 2015, p.220-221: (in orig.): ‘Znużenie żelastwami powoduje nowe zainteresowanie szlachetnymi materiałami. Zaczęły się parę lat temu sympozjony rzeźbiarskie w kamieniołomach, zaczynają pojedynczo przyjeżdżać rzeźbiarze do Carrary. Czy jednak mają rację? – I tu kontrowersja. – Świat dzisiaj jego gwałty polityczne, wyścigi produkcji, gwałtowne, zdyszane wydarzenia, nie mogą znaleźć swojego odbicia w szlachetności marmurów. Szlachetne materiały i kolory w sztuce to tylko wytchnienie i tęsknota. Indywidualności twórcze nie mogą tym jedynie się zaspokoić. Wyrazić „DZIS” jak? Gdzie? Jaką formą? W jakim materiale?’

Szapocznikow meditation raises a crucial dilemma towards modern uses of the classical: how can one come in dialogue with its great legacy and still remain critical and relevant to the challenges of modernity? The fact that this note was written in the time of radical protests of 1968 makes this question even more acute. On the one hand she stresses out that to express “today” an artist has to explore different media and new, synthetic, mixed materials. Simultaneously she notices fatigue that some of these materials already provoked and is writing this reflection in the heavily charged site of Carrara. Even though she states that the contemporary use of noble materials expresses only or as much as respite and longing, yet, she, a modern sculptress, reaches for marble as a material most suitable for some reason for the most colossal specimen in her Belly series. This paradox suggests at least two points. First, if noble materials are not suitable for capturing the everyday, then the objectives of her “Big Bellies” may go beyond that. Secondly, by using marble Alina Szapocznikow self-consciously inscribes herself into the discourse of longing she acknowledges in her meditation. These conclusions invite the question what is the subject of her longing and how she reconciles that approach with her determination to express through sculpture the today of 1968.

Section two: Flaws of the Ideal



Attributed to Doidalses of Bithynia, Lely Venus, Roman, 2nd century AD, copy of lost Greek original in marble or bronze, perhaps late 3rd or 2nd century BC, British Museum, London (lent by Her Majesty The Queen)



Apollonios, son of Nestor, Belvedere Torso, 1st century BC or AD, marble, Museo Pio-Clementino Vatican Museums, Vatican

To now trace the subject of the longing we have to take a closer look at the subject of the sculpture. A woman's belly invites comparison with several classical antecedents, especially the 'Crouching Venus' type. A model of Venus surprised at her bath in a very intimate, not-to-be-looked-at moment. The goddess in her pose tries to hide her nakedness, with her body being transformed in a site of shame. Instead, Szapocznikow's work echoes such an attitude of the belly but exhibited shamelessly to the viewer with all the limbs that could cover it being removed from the composition. Furthermore even when we look at a sculpture of a crouching Venus, her stomach looks slimmer, more ideal and the bellies portrayed by Szapocznikow still seem very nonideal. The artist creates a huge sculpture in marble, the material traditionally reserved for great heroes and exhibits a somewhat mundane belly. Szapocznikow's artistic search of classical legacy unfolds itself by negating culturally proclaimed norms.

In this context Szpocznikow's direct dialogue with the Belvedere Torso is particularly illuminating. The power depicted in tighten muscles, one of the most important features of its curved pose is echoed compositionally by Szpocznikow through a twist of adding on stomach on top of an other. Such an additive approach towards the Torso has a long pedigree. According to Gain Paolo Lomazzo, a 16th-century Milanese painter and Neoplatonic art theorist, The Torso was interpreted as a paradigm for the limits of Michelangelo's ability to surpass the ancients:

“Michelangelo...was never able to add anything to the beauty of the Torso of Hercules by Apollonios of Athens, which is located in the Belvedere in Rome, and which he unceasingly pursued. In the same way, Daniele da Volterra, Perino del Vaga and others who pursued the maniera of the same Michelangelo, could never equal him”.

Lomazzo challenges the classical theory of imitation as a creative model. Even Michelangelo followed the Torso but he could not add anything to its beauty. By the nature of following he could never reach the ideal of the torso instead he stayed one step behind it, as did followers of the great sculptor in relation to him. In *Big Bellies* Szpocznikow extracts herself from this hierarchy: working with the Torso she adds to it the corpulence that where not present in the original,. Her approach towards the classical is based not on imitating the model but adding a visual erratum to the pre-existing framework. She exhibits a real woman's belly, with all its beauties and flaws.



François-André Vincent, *Zeuxis Choosing his Models for the Image of Helen from among the Girls of Croton*, 1789, Oil painting, Louvre, Paris

Yet simultaneously she also depicts the woman's body within the cultural framework the canonized ideal body. Ironically, there has been a lot of anecdotes about artists, such as Zeuxis trying to portray the perfect woman's body, yet the visual representation of the ideal human body they portrayed men. Szpocznikow calls goes beyond this tradition to magnify a real stomach of a model. By doing so not only does she transform pre-existing models to accommodate female subjectness but also amplifies a larger transformation one can observe in her own works across time.

Section three: Capturing desire

In this section I will explore several ways of manipulating with the body present in Szpocznikow's works and how that can serve manufacturing and critically analyzing the feeling of longing. To look into this subject we need to take a closer look into the relationship between Szpocznikow's exploration of classical forms and the representations the body that she pursues throughout media and series.

To better understand the inventiveness of Szpocznikow's choices while creating the Big Bellies one needs to compare them with her early works. The most literal use of classical heritage can be found in her socialist realism works. Working in Poland in 1950s the artist needed to obey the official, imposed style of socialist realism style, antique heritage became in this way a notion of oppression. A great example of her earlier sculpture is the monument to polish-soviet friendship which was created in 1953, that was displayed in the prestigious setting of the main atrium in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. This building is one of the most recognisable symbols of Poland though its history is not laudable. The Palace was built in 1955 and was a 'gift from the people of the Soviet Union for Polish nation, 'originally it was known as the Joseph Stalin's Palace of Culture and Science. Designed by Lev Rudnev it is a great example of socialist realism in architecture. Szpocznikow's sculpture thus was a very important piece of the message of soviet power represented by this building. Her composition responds to an iconic *The Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* by Vera Mukhina. A sculpture created for the 1937 World's Fair in Paris and became a symbol of socialist realism as well as soviet power. Both sculptures respond to the common model, namely the ancient statuary group of the *Tyrannicides* made by Kritios and Nesiotes. The inspiration from particularly motive of tyrannicide carries with it a revolutionary aspect. The first copy of this sculpture was commissioned after the establishment of Athenian democracy and survived as a symbol of power. In all three sculptures the faces of figures are still, serious, determination is visible in

every muscle, while the figures firm stature creates an illusion of forward-movement. Classical monumentalism and idealism inscribed into presumably socialist realist flagship work of Szapocznikow is used to emphasize the strong bond connecting both personifications. In this sculpture Szapocznikow uses antiquity to show a defined humane body and this definition is something that she will play with in her latter works.



Alina Szapocznikow, *Monument for Polish-Soviet Friendship*, 1953-1954, clay, private property.

Vera Mukhina, *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*, 1937, stainless steel, Russian Exhibition Centre, Moscow.

Kritios and Nesiotes, *Statuary group of the Tyrannicides*, Roman copy of the 2nd century CE, marble, National Archaeological Museum, Naples.

The artistic expression is extremely different than in her later work. After her experiments with different materials Szapocznikow creating „Big Bellies” comes back to antiquity as a form of expression but this time she uses it in a changed way. Her reflection about antiquity goes beyond the monumental and heroic dimension of classical heritage and instead seeks to find a personal, humane aspects of sculptural idealisation.

After her socialist realism period (1949-1957) Szapocznikow experimented with displaying detached parts of her own body, starting with a leg, then mouths and breasts always female, detached, displayed. Szapocznikow separated a bodily parts and transposed it into an artwork on display, turning them into a kind of decorative pieces. Later in her works she continued to explore the idea of objectification. In 1970 Szapocznikow started working on a series entitled *Fetishes*. *Fetish IX*, entitled *Lamp III*, is an actual electrically-powered lamp formed from a polyester cast of a breast on a lacy material. It is meant to be looked at but at the same time the viewer looking at it feels uncomfortable, like he's seeing something he shouldn't be seeing. At the same time the fetish speaks to deep, hidden humane desires. This works of art underlined the

problem of objectification and fetishization of woman's bodies through combining their artistic representations with decorative and applied objects. Body parts turned into objects of everyday use, objects that were meant to be looked at and to serve the owner.

The disturbing look of the works from the Fetishes series also bring to mind Szapocznikow's other series-Tumeurs. The sculptures similar visual effects bring up the tension between two most powerful forces: *Eros* and *Thanatos*, so different. This series was a product of the artist's personal experiences with an illness. In January 1969 Szapocznikow was diagnosed with breast cancer that would cause her death in 1973. She suspected that she had a tumour a couple of months before, while she was working on the *Bellies* series. While no explicit statement in Szapocznikow's archives confirms explicitly that her suspicion about cancer impacted the work, the choice of taking the mould off a model, rather than off herself as she did in the predominant part of her works, might suggest another kind of estrangement from one's own body. In 1951 Szapocznikow afflicted peritoneal tuberculosis, from which she recovered yet became permanently infertile. [przypis] *Big Bellies*'s emphasis on incompleteness raises the tension between the ideal form and the problem of the body's natural decay. Showing an opulent belly of a young bride becomes a surrogate of fertility and a way of envisaging the body's role in envisaging



Alina Szapocznikow, *Lamp III (Fetish IX)*, 1973,
Assemblage: breast cast, polyester, plastic net, electric light,
Modern Art Museum, Warsaw



Alina Szapocznikow, *Belly-Cushions*, 1968,
plaster, polyurethane,

While Szapocznikow's polyurethane depictions of the body may seem aesthetically lot different from that of the classical sculptures, their marble equivalent shares a crucial feature with ancient

models . Here the Belvedere Torso provides a crucial connection. If we compare these two artworks the first opposition that comes to mind is the difference between the soft, pillow-belly sculpture of a woman's body and the strong, tense, manly muscular torso. However upon further investigation, we can find a lot deeper connection between these two apparently opposed works of art. Compare Johann Joachim Winckelmann's description of what he calls Michelangelo's torso:

‘The action and reaction of its muscles has been wonderfully weighed out with wise measure of alternating motion and quick force, and the body must have been made capable by the same means for all that it was intended to accomplish. As in a rising motion of the sea the previously still surface swells into a lovely tumult with playful waves, where one is swallowed by the other and is again rolled out from the very same wave, here, just as softly swollen and drawn in suspension, one muscle flows into the other, and a third which raises itself between them and seems to strengthen their motion, loses itself in the matter, and our glance is, as it were, likewise swallowed.’⁹

The German scholar compares the tension trapped in the curved surfaces of the sculpture to a waving sea. The same description could have been applied to Szpocznikow's work, as she uses of this analogy to create a body that resembles peaceful rhythm of waves. In both cases the sculpture evokes in the viewer the sensation of movement, the stone softens and subordinates to the form of the sculpture. The similarities don't end here, both of these sculptures though they are incomplete representations of the body create their own completeness. The Torso is in a way ideal just as it is, without the arms, legs, and the head perhaps because that way it is more universal. Bodily fetishism plays a central role in Johann Joachim Winckelmann's description of the Belvedere Torso. The author emphasized the importance of the absolute unity of the sculpture and the abstract flow of contour and surface. In his mind the ideal contour was fetishistic and captivated with its flowing loosening of the artwork's hardness.

Alina Szpocznikow in Michelangelo's shoes takes a step further exploring Winckelmann's ideal by improving the Torso. Her work follows the venerated model to overthrow the opposition between hardness and softness in finding the ideal balancing on the border of sculpture itself. Szapocznikow does not combine the perfect body in the mind's eye, as Zeuxis would, but instead finds the ideal in the very bodily organicity of her model herself. The

⁹ Winckelmann 1759, p.XV

stomach is not flat and tight but it flows down in a peaceful, natural motion of gradually folded skin. Szapocznikow so finds a way to reinvent the Torso by translating it into an essay on the fluctuating softness of generative matter. This problem comes back to the attempt of capturing everydayness. Szapocznikow in her marble sculpture offers an answer to the question on how to capture today so it can last at the same time go beyond it to place her work of art between today and timeless.

Conclusion

Antiquity becomes for Alina Szpocznikow a tool for dealing with difficult issues of the body, objectification and fetishisation as well as the body's limitations and natural decay. Showcasing the problem of the sexualisation of female body parts and their detachment through comparison to classical artworks she emphasized the difference between the real human body and an object. Working in Carrara's marble she initiates a dialogue with the classical tradition of ancient and Michelangelo's masterpieces to find her ideal by reinventing the Torso. Her inventive approach to the Torso enables her to valorize its quality of softness, which also fascinated Winckelmann. In this way she separates herself from the more rigid classicizing tradition she worked in during her communist period, to emphasize this apparently 'unideal' feature that she elevates to a new ideal. After recognising the problems with other cultural "ideals" she tries to "fix them" by creating her versions, she finds an alternative by rediscovering marginalized potentialities of ancient remains themselves. This creates a work of art presenting the organicity of the female body locked in stone, a work of art flowing with the power of life.

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