228. Androgyne III

Magdalena Abakanowicz. 1985 C.E. Burlap, Resin, wood, nails, and string

- Article at Khan Academy
  - “Becoming: Between myself and the material with which I create, no tool intervenes. I select it with my hands. I shape it with my hands. My hands transmit energy to it. In translating idea into form, they always pass on to it something that eludes conceptualization. They reveal the unconscious.”
    - Magdalena Abakanowicz

- Context: Post-war Poland was part of the Soviet bloc and had a Communist government. Social Realism was the style taught in art schools during this era and initially Abakanowicz experimented with textiles and weaving in order to avoid it. Social Realism demanded images of smiling workers and a perfected society and although Abakanowicz disliked the style, she was ultimately required to adopt it in order to obtain a degree and enter the Polish Artists Union—a step required of all professional sculptors
- In 1967 Abakanowicz began creating forms made with fabric and tapestry. She became well known for work she called Abakans, a series of monumental fiber sculptures that created the framework for her later work. The Abakan sculptures refer to clothing but are not functional. They hang from the ceiling and although they allude to human figures, they also reference the natural world
  - In the 1970s, Abakanowicz began to experiment with other materials including burlap, string, and cotton gauze. In 1974, she began to form figures by dipping burlap and string into resin, which she then pressed into a plaster mold. Sometimes she took a cast from the body of a friend for these forms. The figures are hollow and repetitious
  - Androgyne III uses the same molded-torso shell that Abakanowicz employed in her sculpture series Backs (1976-1980)
  - Abakanowicz’s figures are mostly androgynous, with their sexual characteristics de-emphasized. The artist wants the viewer to focus on the humanity of the figures rather than their gender. At the same time, the fragmentary nature of the figures is important, perhaps a reflection of the time she spent helping in the hospital during World War II and her memories of the attack on her mother. A distinguishing feature of all of the burlap casts is the wrinkled skin and the implication of backbones, musculature and veins. The bodies, or body parts, more accurately, are intended to be seen in the round as the hollow interior is as much a part of the piece as the molded exterior. Space is as significant as mass in these works (she studied cadavers to understand the structure)

- Abakanowicz draws on her personal history, but her sculptures possess an ambiguity that encourages multiple interpretations that speak broadly to human experience. Androgyne III alludes to the brutality of war and the totalitarian state. The body is a husk without arms, legs or a head. It is an expression of suffering, both mournful and disturbing