

HAUSER & WIRTH



**ALINA  
SZAPOCZNIKOW**

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FRAGMENTS



Alina Szapocznikow posing with various body casts in her Malakoff studio, France, 1967. Photo: Antoni Miralda

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Alina Szapocznikow's work radically challenges the tropes of traditional sculpture and figurative depictions of the human body as a unified and integrated entity. Trained in the classical tradition in Prague and Paris during the second half of the 1940s, she had, by the 1960s, profoundly reconceptualized the language of sculpture. Her use of casting and repetition, evoking assembly-line production, defies hierarchical notions of the sculptural object as a singular and unique form.

While she identified primarily as a sculptor, drawing remained a vital and continuous part of her artistic practice, encompassing more than six hundred drawings and monotypes. Rather than functioning merely as preparatory studies, these works often evolved alongside her sculptures, sharing similar forms, textures, and compositional rhythms.

The following timeline traces the evolution of Szapocznikow's artistic practice over the course of her career, bringing together works from the exhibition alongside key examples from her wider body of work.

1945 – 1953

“MY WORK HAS ITS ROOTS IN SCULPTURE”



Bez tytułu (Untitled),  
1948 – 1951, graphite on paper



Autoportret (Self-portrait), 1948, plaster

Classically trained in Prague and Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts, Alina Szapocznikow was deeply grounded in traditional sculptural techniques. As she wrote in 1972, in what is now regarded as her artistic manifesto, “My work has its roots in sculpture. For years I threw myself into studying problems of balance, volume, space, shadow, and light.” Her earliest works belong to the realm of classical representations of the human figure, rendered in static and naturalistic poses. Sculpted in plaster and clay, these early sculptures reveal a close attention to anatomical proportion and bodily volume—an approach that would later evolve into the fragmented and distorted corporeal forms that came to define her mature practice.



Alina Szapocznikow with her work ‘Self-Portrait’ at the  
École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris, 1948. Photo: Ryszard Stanisławski

1953 – 1961

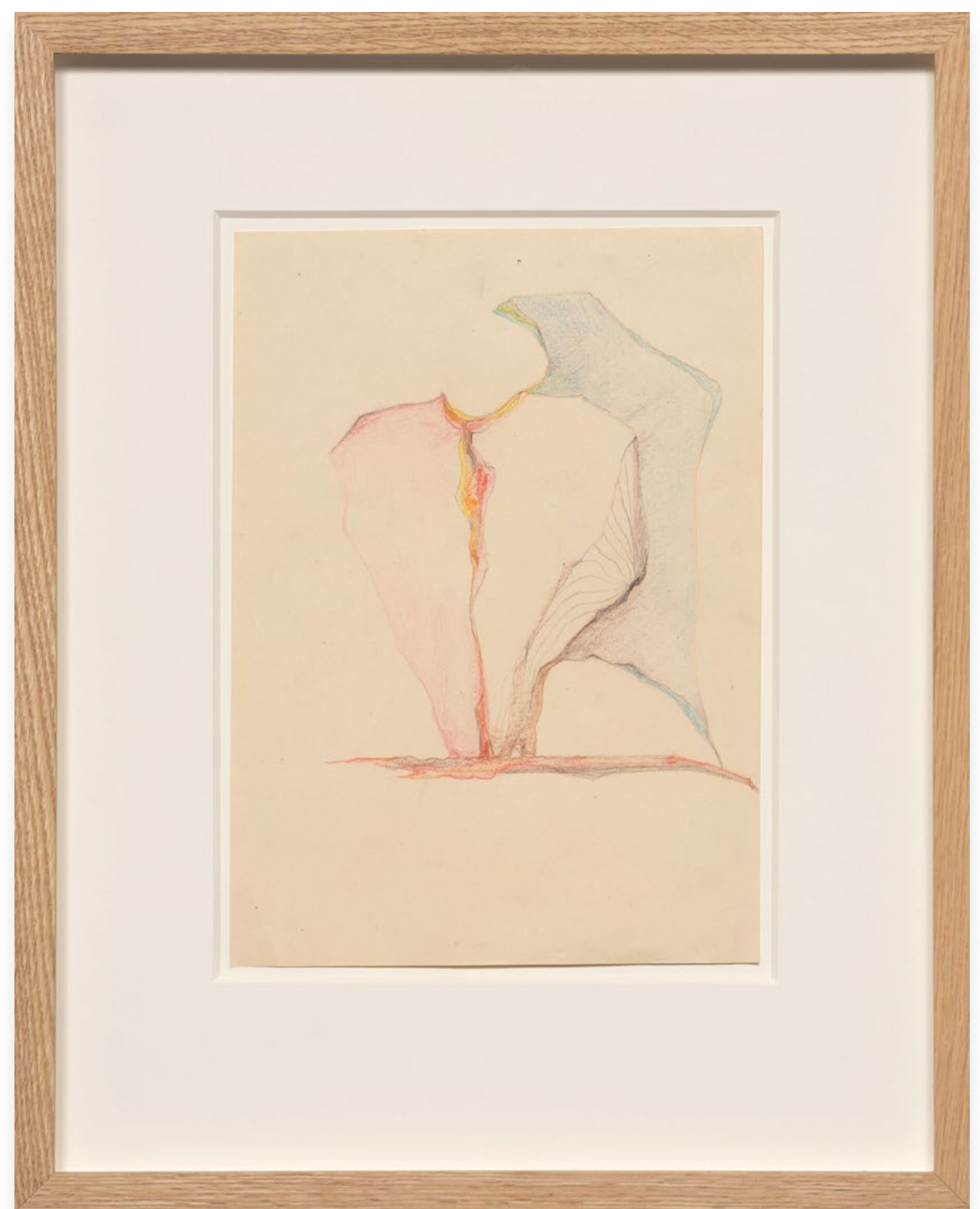
## FIGURATIVE ABSTRACTION

Following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and the subsequent loosening of restrictions on artistic expression in Poland, Szapocznikow's practice underwent a profound transformation. While the human figure remained central to her work, she increasingly moved away from mimetic representation toward a more experimental form of figurative abstraction. Over the following years, distortions and fragmentations began to emerge, ranging from absent limbs to increasingly abstract corporeal forms.

During this period, Szapocznikow developed a more direct and experimental approach to sculpture, casting small-scale works independently and without the use of a traditional foundry. Employing the lost-wax casting technique, she manipulated materials with greater immediacy, often incorporating stone or ceramics into the final works. In the early 1960s, this exploration culminated in the series 'Heads', composed of rounded, amorphous sculptures in bronze and lead.



Forma II (Form II), 1959, patinated bronze



Szkic 2 (Sketch 2), 1959 – 1960, oil pastel on paper



Muszla (Shell) 1960, lead, stone



Głowa V, (Head V), 1961, lost-wax bronze cast

1962 – 1972

## THE FRAGMENTED BODY



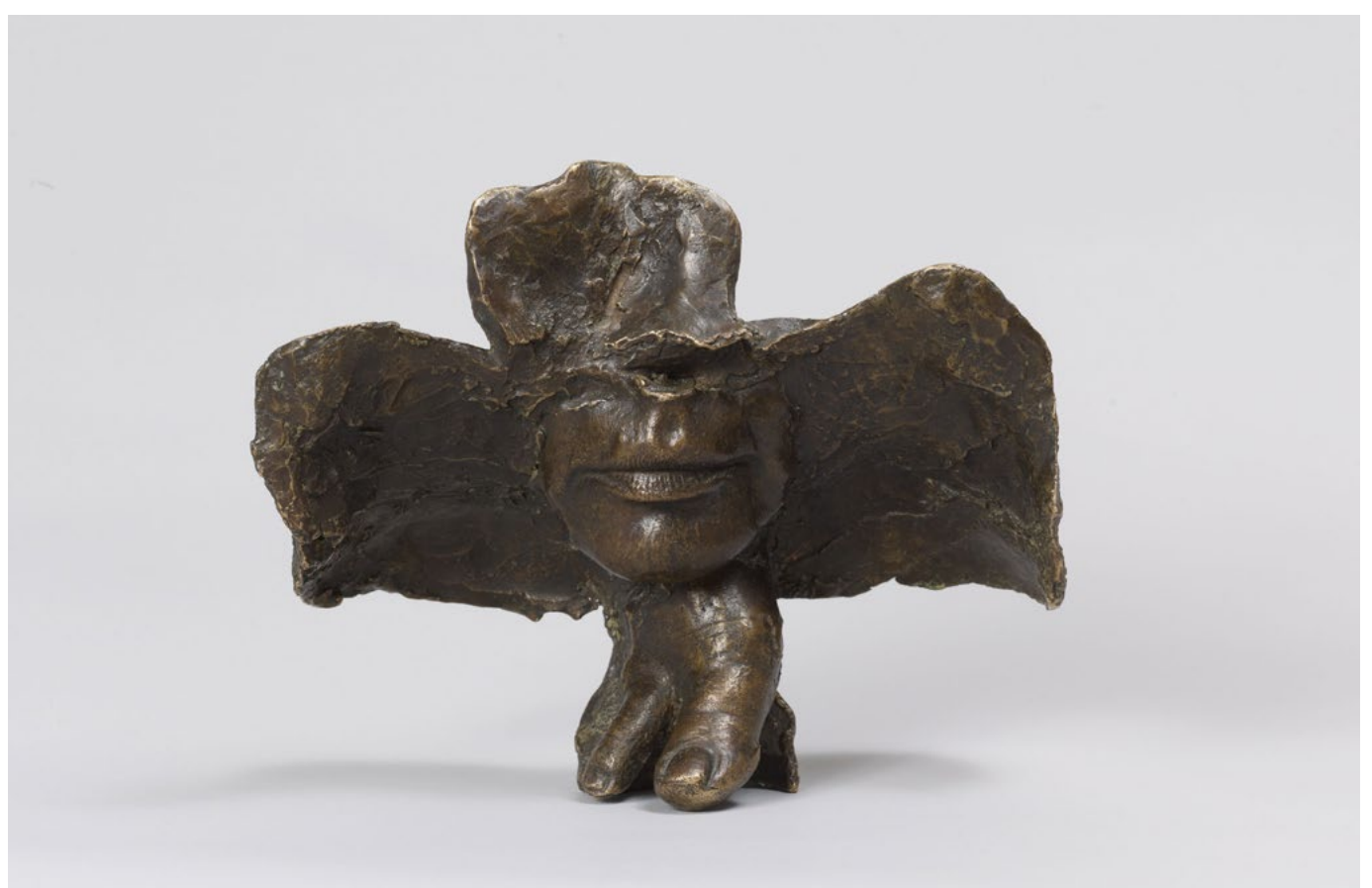
Alina Szapocznikow with her work 'Noga (Leg)' in her Brzozowa Street studio, Warsaw, 1965

In 1962, Alina Szapocznikow created 'Noga' by casting her own leg in plaster. It marked the first time the artist used an imprint of her own body in her work, a process she would continue throughout the remainder of her career. Over the following decade, she cast lips, faces, breasts, bellies, and legs, culminating in a full-body cast of her son Piotr produced during the final year of her life.

Szapocznikow's presentation of the body as fragmented, detached from its source, and reassembled imbues her work with a striking internal tension. Through the suggestion of dismembered body parts, she transforms the body into an object that is at once eroticized and unsettling.



Petits ventres (Small Bellies),  
1968, Carrara marble



Autoportret II (Self-portrait II), 1966/2012, bronze

1966 – 1971

## ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW

By the mid-1960s, Szapocznikow was actively experimenting with new materials such as polyester resin, whose fragile, flesh-like surface differed radically from traditional sculptural media. As the artist explained, “Plastic materials seem perfect to me for attempts to express and capture our age because of their repetitive possibilities, their lightness, their colors, their transparency, their inexpensiveness.”

In 1966, she created a series of functional sculptures in polyester resin: illuminated female lips extending from elongated, stem-like bases and wired as lamps. Suspended between domestic object and bodily form, these works combine utility with corporeality in a way that is both seductive and disquieting. Illumination would become a recurring element in Szapocznikow’s practice, and she produced multiple versions of the ‘Illuminated Lips’, using casts taken from different female friends.



Lampe-bouche (Illuminated Lips),  
1966, colored polyester resin, electrical  
wiring and metal



Alina Szapocznikow, Lampe-bouche (Illuminated Lips) series,  
c. 1966 – 1967

1967, 1970 – 1971

## THE SOUVENIR SERIES

Beginning in 1967, Szapocznikow started embedding photographic images within semi-translucent layers of polyester resin. In the series ‘Souvenirs’, skin-like resin envelops images of celebrities, friends, and self-portraits, creating works that retain a direct relationship to their subjects. As with the plaster cast, photography here functions as an indexical trace, simultaneously evoking presence and absence.



Left: Pamiątki, Christian Boltanski (Souvenirs, Christian Boltanski); right: Pamiątki, Twiggy (Souvenirs, Twiggy), 1967, polyester resin and photograph



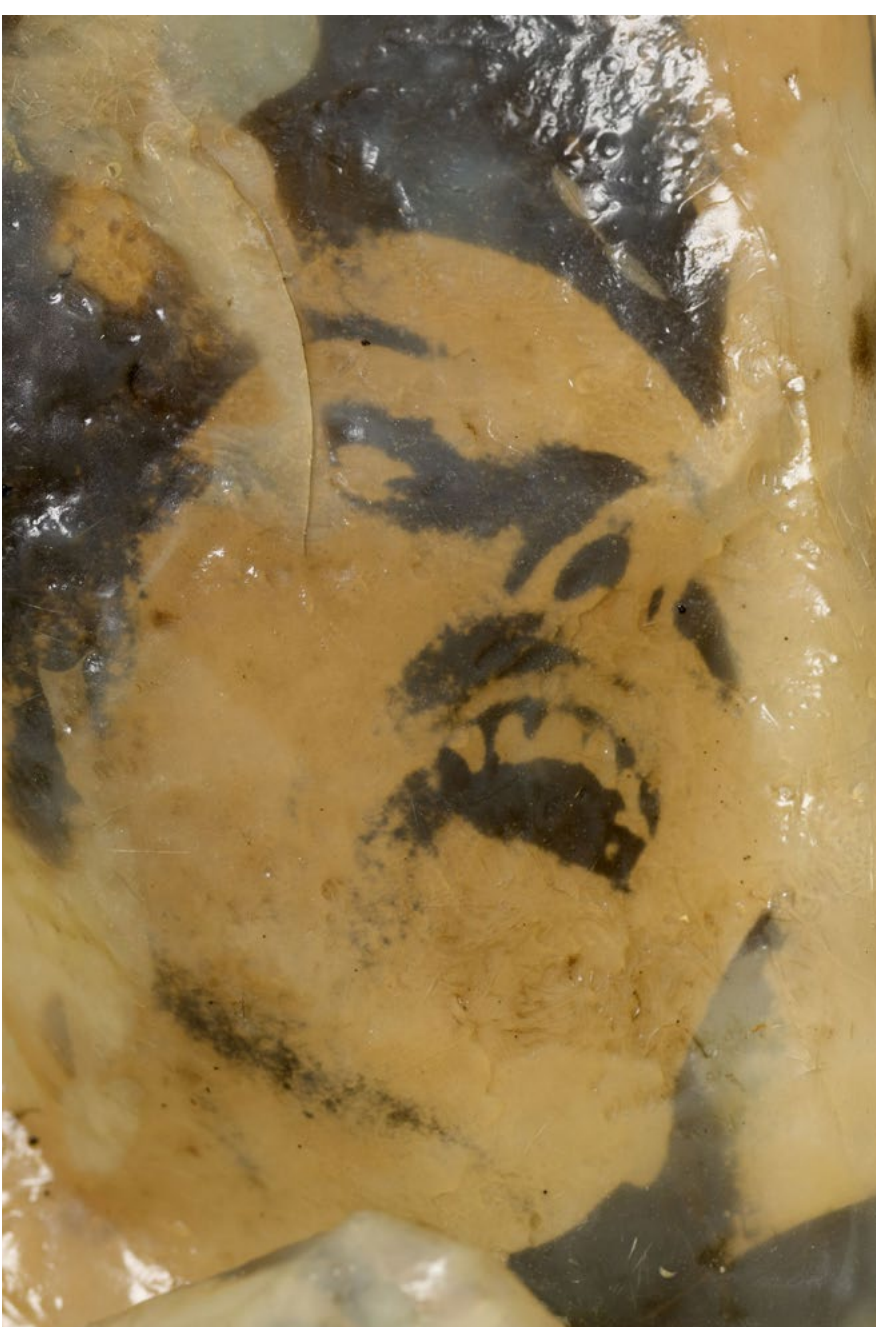
Sans titre (de la série ‘Paysage humain’) (Untitled [from the series ‘Human Landscape’]) 1971–1972, ballpoint pen on ‘Extra Strong’ watermarked copy paper

In the early 1970s, she returned to the ‘Souvenirs’ series, incorporating childhood photographs and images of Holocaust victims into her work. ‘Souvenir I’ (1971) includes a photograph of the artist as a child sitting on her uncle’s shoulders at the seaside, juxtaposed with the face of a concentration camp victim—the image of this corpse recurs in several works from this period. Bringing together personal memory and collective history, this object integrates multiple temporalities: a time before, during, and after the war, with the last of these represented by the moment of the work’s creation.

The fleshlike quality of polyester resin also situates Szapocznikow within a generation of artists working around the same time and mostly in New York, such as Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Lynda Benglis, and Hannah Wilke—women connected by an engagement with unexpected industrial materials, subject to visible age, to evoke the human body and its relationship to time in sculptural form.



Pamiętka I (Souvenir I), 1971, polyester resin, fiberglass and photographs



Pamiętka I (Souvenir I), detail

1968 – 1972

## TUMORS, HERBARIUM, AND ‘SELF-PORTRAIT’

In 1969, following a diagnosis of breast cancer, Szapocznikow began making ‘Tumors’. These small, irregular forms, molded in resin and incorporating crumpled photographs, newspaper, and gauze, introduced themes of illness and mortality that would become increasingly present in her work from the late 1960s onward.



Pejzaż ludzki III (Human Landscape III), 1971,  
ink, watercolour and felt-tip pen on paper



Herbier bleu I (Blue Herbarium I), 1972,  
polyester and polychromatic cardboard

Among the artist’s final bodies of work is the ‘Herbarium’ series (1972), composed of sculptures and reliefs made from flattened casts of the bodies of Szapocznikow and her son, Piotr. Preserving distinct facial features and bodily details, these works appear pressed and preserved like botanical specimens. The sensual volume of her earlier forms gives way to thin, fragile surfaces resembling flayed skin, emphasizing the vulnerability and impermanence of the body.

Two Self-portrait works from 1971, made in plaster and resin, evoke death masks. Szapocznikow died from cancer in early 1973, and these final works recall an earlier moment in 1954, when she created the death mask of her friend, the artist Tadeusz Trepkowski. Reflecting on her work toward the end of her life, Szapocznikow wrote: “Despite everything, I persist in trying to fix in resin the traces of our body: I am convinced that of all the manifestations of the ephemeral, the human body is the most vulnerable, the only source of all joy, all suffering, and all truth.”



Autoportrait (Self-portrait), 1971, polyester resin and gauze



Tumeur (Tumor), 1970, colored polyester resin and gauze

