

Art Magazine Odra  
Poland's leading monthly art and culture magazine  
Wroclaw, Poland  
January issue 2013

Book review: Monika Osiecka's *Mirror Fragments*  
(Published by: slowo/obraz terytoria, Gdansk 2011, 272 pages)  
Article by: Jacek Dobrowolski

### **A Sculptress a Poet?**

Many people think that sculpting is not an occupation for women, especially sculpting in stone or bronze. Even though Xawery Dunikowski was a weakling, generally it is as if sculpting in marble should only be for athletes such as August Zamojski. Each year in Poland many women graduate from fine art academies, but it's rare that they decide to sculpt in stone or bronze. Perhaps they take warning from the fate of Alina Slesinska, a laureate of the III Sculpture Biennale de Paris in 1963, who became successful in the West by breaking down the barriers between sculpture and architecture. After seven years abroad, she returned to Poland in 1970, eventually dying in Warsaw in 1994, forgotten and in poverty.

Monika Osiecka, passionately sculpting in stone and bronze, surprises us in that she follows classical sculpting with its canons of beauty and avoidance of deformation, something which is extremely rare these days. The postmodernism era of noisiness doesn't believe in the principle of kalokagathia and basically despises marble sculpting. Today's art must shock and provoke scandals, express protest and be committed,

simultaneously breaking all canons with the more unusual materials used by the artist the better.

Born in Milan and living in Tehran until she was fourteen, the sculptress studied first Oriental, then Italian philology at the University of Warsaw. Only afterwards did she turn to sculpture, attending the Academy of Fine Arts where classical art was the most important study for her. Her inspiration was drawn from the quarries of Carrara where she had worked, from the ruins of Persepolis in the Persian desert, from the monuments of ancient Egypt and Babylon, the Acropolis and the modern works of Brancusi and Dunikowski. She is not an imitator of neoclassicism, because of the intimacy of her work and search for the simplest forms that materialize the perennial archetypes, she pursues the new synthesis. Her bronze sculptures of pregnant women made of leaves seem to follow the line of search of Dunikowski. However, looking at her *Nude from Leaves*, made of patinated bronze, she uncovers a totally new world, reflecting the fertility archetype of the Green Man, which manifests itself in European art from Gothic times up until art nouveau, making itself visible in faces with plant ornamentation growing from the mouth, ears and eyes.

Another extraordinary work was *Mirror Woman* – a nude of a standing woman fully covered in mirrors. *Mirror Woman* is the answer to the demands of a male world for women to adapt to it, but here comes the surprise: *I reflect your world back, but who I am, you will not find out*. A similar situation happened with a sculpture called *Empty* (the marble *Biala Marianna*), a shell which is empty inside and cannot be used for anything except to astonish by its shape. *Ola*, a bronze nude of a sitting woman, inspired by Edward Weston's photograph, is an example of classical form and only from close up can you see the texture

which gives an impression that the sculpture was made from millions of overlapping petals and leaves, the result of pasting countless balls of clay. Though the word itself is never used in the book, there is an impression that sculpting is an act of meditation for Osiecka.

Set between solid sculptures of marble, alabaster, dolomite, sandstone and granite, the most striking is the *Cardinal* – a ghostlike figure made of damp paper erected upon a scaffolding of branches. The sculpture, *Black Full Moon*, made of dark brown alabaster and bronze is very powerful and exudes a mysterious power. On the other hand, the *Chinese Wheel* surprises with its pure form – a cosmic mill wheel made of alabaster shaped like a Chinese coin. The album is completed by sketches of models, exquisite drawings, subtle gouaches and great photographs of landscapes that inspired the artist as well as photos of architectonic details of similar textures.

The diary includes a superb description of working in stone in the artist's own words:

*I am fascinated by the moment when the wedged stone cracks open. It gives off a splitting sound. Before it cracks, when you're striking the wedge with regular blows, beating it millimetre by millimetre, the stone gives out high, clear sounds, sounds growing higher and higher, it sings. Until you hear several impossibly high tones, like the sound of a breaking string, like a little bird's trill.*

*And suddenly the singing becomes dumb.*

*It falls into the depths, into the abyss, it suffocates.*

*Through the inside of the block comes a splitting sound, with a rising murmur, a lightning zigzag, loud, growing dry.*

*And slowly it falls quiet, giving up to silence, and that's the end.*

The book's editor, Stanislaw Rosiek, correctly called Monika Osiecka an “intimist”. Her diary, though divided into chapters like a treatise, is a collection of moments written down spontaneously, on pieces of paper that were often times found years after they were written. It is an honest register of confessions about creativity, poetry, philosophy and love and a description of dramatic turns her life took such as: sicknesses, child delivery, goodbyes, hardships working with material in a cold ruined workshop near Warsaw, and gypsy travels to open air sculpting workshops in Italy, Switzerland, Portugal and France. The impressive thing is her courage to admit her emotional moments, which in our cynical times is rare, unless someone wants to dazzle by being an exhibitionist. These are confessions of a person that has a very subtle range of emotions and deep intuition, a person that can only create in solitude, always pursuing to become one with that which is beautiful - a traveller, that has a soft eye and heart, searching after the truth, love and freedom.

Such a beautiful woman that has a classical beauty and many talents moves us with many reflections about loneliness - about difficult relationships. Only when one realizes her idealism can it be understood how difficult it is for her to accept what Wyspianski called the “squeaking of the mundane”, and that we live in a culture of kitsch, not only material kitsch. Her descriptions of being treated brutally at the hospital during delivery and while being operated on, and her stay in ICU are quite moving as well as the description of her battle to salvage her sculpture that was falling apart from freezing temperatures in her workshop garage.

Monika Osiecka has a gift of lyrical expression not only in sculpture and prose - in the book there are excellent poems to be

found which was a big surprise to her family and friends. It turns out that she has always been writing, but never attempted to publish her works. A poetic sculptress! Polish culture has not seen anyone like this before. Her lyrical expression is refined, deep and accurate. The author admits only being influenced by Japanese poetry and the poetry of Edward Stachura, however one can see some of Norwid in the following poem:

*My bright blue ribbon*

*you do not hear  
the beating of my heart  
you do not see scattering from under the wheels  
the moon's light*

*you know nothing of my  
dark streets  
that I'm leaving behind  
to enter your brightness*

*I turn the music up and step on the gas*

*a ribbon of blacktop shining with rain  
I tie round the Babka Rotary  
circling it twice  
from joy, from distraction  
from love*

*I leave its beginning at S. Street  
the end I arrange by your gate*

*at K. Street  
and I slam the gate  
so the wind doesn't flow away -  
my bright blue ribbon*

translation by Dorota&Alex Solsbery