

MARIA BARTUSZOVA REVIEW — THIS TATE RETROSPECTIVE IS INSPIRING

Tate Modern

Laura Freeman, *The Times*, 20 September 2022



Maria Bartuszova in her studio, 1987

There's a scene in every dinosaur film when the hero finds a nest of broken eggs. Something — some infant pterodactyl or toddling velociraptor; perhaps a whole brood of them — is on the loose. I thought of such egg escapees at Tate Modern's retrospective of the sculptor Maria Bartuszova ("Bar-too-zhoh-va"), who was born in Prague in 1936 and worked for most of her life in the city of Kosice, near the border of Hungary and Ukraine.

Plaster is often art's also-ran, a staging post on the way to noble bronze or a cheap stand-in for marble. Here, though, it is the star of the show. The subjects of Bartuszova's *Endless Egg* series, in all their iterations, are brittle and beautiful — papery as a chrysalis; fragile as quail eggs. You know that heart-sinking sound when you step on a snail? If one of these plasters were stomped on, I imagine they'd sound just like that. Some shattered shapes are held together, only barely, by string.

There's a lovely line in one of the wall texts about how Bartuszova found her method: "Maybe because I had so little time besides working on commissions and childcare . . . I had the idea, while playing with inflatable balls, to blow liquid plaster into a balloon." She used rubber balloons and condoms to cast her plaster sculptures. She called her two chosen techniques "gravistimulated shaping" and "pneumatic casting". You need, really, a video of Bartuszova in action because it's hard to understand how she did it.



'Untitled', 1986, The Archive of Maria Bartuszová, Košice. Courtesy of Alison Jacques

Perhaps that's part of the magic. Her seed-head forms, Jurassic eggs and empty hornet's nests seem natural. There's a wonderful photograph of a plum tree in Bartuszova's garden in Kosice, heaving with piñata-like nests — if every one were to be smashed at once, what a flock and a swarm there would be.

Like Rachel Whiteread, Bartuszova makes you think about the space between, behind and round about; the empty bits and breakages matter as much as the form. The photographs of the touch workshops that Bartuszova arranged for blind children are affecting — what would it be like to gain an understanding of how something looks using only one's fingers?

Less successful are some of the smaller, tubular sculptures. Some are off-puttingly intestinal ("Poo emoji", I've written in my notebook). Some look like the sort of models you might see in the offices of plastic surgeons — would madam like the modest teardrop or the *Love Island* beach ball?

Splats aside, this is a beguiling, unusual show: wintry white and serene.