

MARIA BARTUSZOVÁ SHONE ON THE WORLD STAGE; NOW SHE IS BEING SHOWN AT HOME

Bratislava City Gallery has opened an exhibition of Maria Bartuszoá's work. Her practice reminds us of everything we overlook around us when we merely look, but do not truly see. Her story also offers a historical lesson in the reprehensible undervaluing of women — not only in art.



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In 1983, Maria Bartuszoá had her first solo exhibition in Trenčín. From today's perspective, this is almost impossible to comprehend.

At the time, she was already 47, and it certainly cannot be said that she was only just beginning as an artist.

The year before, she had completed a monumental sculpture for the crematorium in Košice, as well as a large-scale aluminium relief for the East Slovak Ironworks, not to mention the many smaller-scale works she had in her studio in Košice. Artistically, she was moving towards the height of her practice; it was simply that, in the inertia of socialism, galleries somehow failed to notice.

Today, fortunately, things are different. In recent years, her work has truly begun to shine. Following exhibitions in London, Venice and Salzburg, the work of Maria Bartuszoá is now also being shown at the Bratislava City Gallery. Seeing it in person is always a special occasion. This one will last until 21 January 2027.

Perhaps, in time, Slovakia will also see a major retrospective and the announced permanent exhibition in Košice. In a sense, Maria Bartuszová no longer needs them: thirty years after her death, she has received the recognition she deserved internationally. But we need them far more.

How Maria Bartuszová may have felt when she opened her first gallery exhibition is something we can now only imagine. Did she feel vindicated when the exhibition curator compared her works to the sculptures of modernists such as Constantin Brâncuși or Hans Arp? Did she feel proud to have an exhibition in a gallery? Disappointed that it had not happened sooner?

No interview from that time has survived. In the end, the Trenčín exhibition was only one of three that she managed to prepare. After one of them, she even destroyed some of the works, because critics had reproached her for all manner of things. She died at the age of sixty in 1996.

In the house with a studio where, after her divorce from the artist Juraj Bartusz, she lived with their daughters, piles of diary notes remained, shedding at least some light on her inner life. More importantly, there were dozens of works, models, sketchbooks and drawings. A great deal of work that needed to be done.

When, in 2007, the German curator Ruth Noack brought several of her works into the prestigious Documenta XII exhibition in Kassel, it was as if a stopper had been pulled. Something happened.

Maria Bartuszová's daughters understood that, unless they tried to put their mother's archive in order, they might deprive her forever of the chance to receive the recognition she deserved. They could hardly have anticipated just how great that recognition would eventually be when they approached the art historian Gabriela Garlatyová.

After years of work, Maria Bartuszová's works were seen at prestigious venues and exhibitions across Europe — the kind she could probably not even have dreamed of in 1983 at the M. A. Bazovský Regional Gallery in Trenčín.

The current exhibition at the Bratislava City Gallery, prepared by Gabriela Garlatyová in collaboration with the gallery's director, Katarína Trnovská, symbolically refers precisely to Bartuszová's first exhibition.



IT IS NOT A RETROSPECTIVE, BUT...

First of all, it should be said that this exhibition is not a traditional retrospective, although one would be more than welcome in Bratislava — or anywhere else in Slovakia. Bartuszová last had a larger solo exhibition at the Slovak National Gallery in 2005.

BCG originally considered a retrospective. One such “ready-made” exhibition is, in fact, currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art in Olomouc, Czech Republic. This is an exhibition that premiered last year at the Aleš South Bohemian Gallery in Hluboká nad Vltavou. It was also curated by Gabriela Garlatyová, together with Gina Renotière.

At the Bratislava City Gallery, they initially worked with the possibility of transferring this exhibition to Bratislava, but due to several production-related and scheduling reasons, this ultimately proved unrealistic. It is also true that the spaces of the Mirbach Palace are not generous enough to give Maria Bartuszová’s large-scale works as much “breathing space” as they would need.

However, this does not mean that visitors in Bratislava have been deprived. The exhibition’s concept is based precisely on what forms the essence of Maria Bartuszová’s work: it shows where she began and how far she was able to go — both conceptually and spatially.

“We present her not as some ethereal being, but as a practical and highly skilled sculptor who, over the years, was able to develop several thematic lines in parallel, in varying proportions,” says curator Gabriela Garlatyová.

The exhibition focuses primarily on her haptic sculptures and assemblable works, in which she sought to achieve a “perfect form” — inspired by raindrops or the germination of seeds in nature. At the same time, it offers insight into how she was able to transform her ideas into monumental dimensions and into works in public space.



SHE HAD GUTS

“Maria Bartuszová decided that her everyday life and the relationships she experienced would become the subject of her work,” says Gabriela Garlatyová.

This does not, of course, mean that she was unaware of what was happening in art, or where it was moving. She was also interested in the natural sciences, mathematics, physics and chemistry. It was simply that her daily reality was somewhat more prosaic. After leaving Prague, where she was born and studied, she found herself with her husband and young child in the small Hungarian-speaking village of Kamenín, where she began to work with what she had available.

She loved plaster, which was light and inexpensive. Gradually, she developed her own original method of modelling sculptures using meteorological balloons and condoms. These allowed her to create the organic forms that fascinated her so deeply. It is said

that she only had them cast in bronze so that her male colleagues would take her at least somewhat seriously.

“We do not know of any other artist, male or female, who at that time was able to work with casting plaster into condoms in this way,” says Garlatyová. She still considers the way Bartuszová primarily connected this process to Western male modernist sculptural practice to be admirable.

“In some ways it was mischievous, perhaps even audacious. She did not do it with the conviction that she would equal them; she did it with the determination that she could do it differently, in her own way. And she had incredible endurance in that,” says Garlatyová.

FROM A GERMINATING SEED TO THE INFINITE UNIVERSE

From as early as the 1960s, Maria Bartuszová’s work revealed her interest in nature. Unlike many other artists, however, she did not perceive it merely as an observer. “She realised that humans are also part of nature, that she herself was part of it, and she lived accordingly. It was her fundamental attitude to life, which permeated her work,” says the exhibition curator.

She often worked with natural motifs and materials that she found directly in the forest or garden — stones, branches or leaves. “Her daughters recalled that they would become desperate during walks with their mother, because she would always load some stones she liked into their backpacks, wanting to continue working with them,” says Garlatyová. After all, her well-known fountain in front of the Dargov department store in Košice also works with raw stone, which Maria Bartuszová had brought from the High Tatras.





She was also fascinated by the process of melting snow and the rippling surface of water — motifs that today, in the age of the climate crisis, resonate in a new and unsettling way.

“For her, nature was truly not merely an aesthetic source of inspiration. From the notes we have, it is clear that there was also a conscious effort to draw attention to what we have — to life on Earth. In the context of the 1960s and 1970s, when people were conquering space, this was an important message,” the curator explains.

At the same time, Bartuszová did not remain only “earthbound”. The way she worked with the motif of infinity, and the way she wrote about the universe, suggests that she was trying to understand a space that exceeds us — and this naturally became one of the themes of her work.

“Faith in the traditional sense did not play a role for her, but her belief in life was almost sacred. She valued it enormously and approached it with humility. In this respect, she is a great inspiration to me as well,” says Garlatyová.

NOW ONE CAN ONLY TOUCH WITH THE EYES

The exhibition at GMB pays particular attention to the haptic assemblages and sculptures that Maria Bartuszová began making in the first half of the 1960s.

Sculptures are usually intended to be looked at. Maria Bartuszová, however, deliberately made sculptures to be touched. She transformed serious art — something one is meant to admire reverently or critically from a clearly defined distance — into something that could be directly felt by hand.

“Her haptic assemblages remind us what she was really concerned with. She was aware that art can reach people, open up new horizons of perception, and that through art people can also learn something new about themselves,” the curator explains.

The form of the assemblage is based on the principles of play, which naturally draws a person into the process, calms them and slows them down. “She herself liked to live



peacefully, practised yoga and meditation, and realised that her works had the potential to bring people a certain sense of calm,” adds Garlatyová.

She also exhibited the haptic sculptures at her first exhibition in Trenčín, which encouraged her. Her desire for them to actually reach people’s hands was fulfilled mainly thanks to her collaboration with Gabriel Kladek. He had the idea that they could approach the school for blind children in Levoča, where, over the following years, they organised two workshops.

Kladek captured the children’s authentic reactions in a series of photographs, which were first exhibited at Tate Modern in London. The immediate joy of children who, for the first time, “see” a drop of water or an enlarged seed with their hands is disarming.

Touching Maria Bartuszová’s original sculptures is, of course, now strictly forbidden.

However, the gallery team has set aside one of the rooms in order to mediate this experience at least in part. The workshop table is full of copies of Bartuszová’s assemblages, which are specifically intended to be touched and put together. They are complemented by various organic materials in small bags, through which visitors can train their sense of touch.

Whether or not you try it, encountering Bartuszová’s work is an experience, and it is wonderful that we finally have this opportunity “at home” as well. Touching with the eyes is allowed — and even that is more than enough.

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