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She was interested in dandelion seeds and raindrops. Maria Bartuszová elevated natural processes into the miracle of art

An exhibition of her works is being held at the Bratislava City Gallery.

Zuzana Bartošová



Maria Bartuszová beside one of her large-scale works. Source: Maria Bartuszová Archive

She was interested in rain, snow, germination, the layering of scales on ripening fruit, their bursting open, the growth of stalks. These are phenomena that few would dare to express through sculpture. But Maria Bartuszová (1936, Prague – 1996, Košice), working far from the centres of artistic activity, dared to do so.

She did not model clay or carve stone. She poured plaster into rubber balloons and allowed it to harden into rounded forms, tying them while still soft in order to point to the material's malleability. With great mastery, she multiplied the casting process, creating layers of fragile shells in compositions of ovoid forms.

She renounced the touch of the hand and colour. The white compositions she created seem not to belong to her, but to form part of nature — that segment of it which we perceive as a given. She directed her attention to places where others saw nothing of interest. We know that rain falls, what shape a drop of water has, that a grain germinates, that an eggshell cracks when life hatches from it, that clay or plaster changes shape when pressed by stones... She was able to capture these processes sculpturally. And she elevated them into the miracle of art.

Compositions of biomorphic forms found recognition and admiration among specialists as well as viewers who seek harmony and beauty in visual art.

She studied ceramics, but felt herself to be a sculptor

Maria Bartuszová, née Vnoučková, came from Prague, where she studied at the Academy of Applied Arts, in the ceramics department. After her marriage to the sculptor Juraj Bartusz in 1961, she spent a short time in his native Kamenín before the family moved to Košice.

Despite studying ceramics, she felt herself to be a sculptor. Already in her early period, she created works in which she expressed the transience of an unstable state of matter at the limits of statics. In the composition *Untitled* (1964–65) — placed at the centre of the exhibition entrance — she expressed the motif of rain in the language of Art Informel, which was current in this region during her studies. Her later works, on an enlarged scale, paraphrased various forms of living nature: plant leaves, flower buds, seeds, as well as ephemeral phenomena such as drops. At the entrance to the exhibition, this desire is represented by a collection of compositions of grains, germination and related forms.

In the mid-1960s, she inclined towards Neo-Constructivism. She was a member of the Club of Concretists, which represented both Czech and Slovak artists and organised exhibitions at home and abroad. At that time she created monochrome works from silvery-grey aluminium sheet. Even geometric forms did not prevent her from devoting herself to natural motifs. She expressed them harmoniously in works such as *Dandelion Seeds* (1970–72). Several of her monumental compositions for new buildings are also Constructivist in character. In the exhibition, these are represented by large-scale photographs and studies that preceded the final realisations. She did not remain faithful to Neo-Constructivism for long.



Maria Bartuszová: Untitled, 1964–65. Source: Collection of the First Slovak Investment Group, Bratislava

From the mid-1960s until the Velvet Revolution, she regularly participated in members' and thematic exhibitions organised by the East Slovak branch of the Union of Slovak Visual Artists. In her independent work, however, she remained free. She observed nature, which was close to her in an existential sense. She approached it empathetically: she was interested in the shape of petals and budding flowers at the moment when they unfold into space and, through their fullness, take possession of it. The gradual nature of her approach does not contradict the uniqueness of her choice of themes.



Maria Bartuszová: Dandelion Seeds, 1970–72. Source: Collection of the First Slovak Investment Group, Bratislava

A new chapter in her work

The beginning of the 1980s marked a turning point in Maria Bartuszová's work. The photographer, art critic and family friend Gabriel Kladek suggested that she create works for an exhibition for blind children, to whom he had long devoted his attention. Maria Bartuszová accepted this unique challenge with complete seriousness. The result was a collection of works that are unique within the

context of Slovak visual art. The small cast metal objects can be taken apart and their components manipulated. They are visual aids for those who must replace sight with touch and hearing. They have inner forms that communicate with the touch of the fingers. The use of touch gave blind children an artistic experience. The exhibition includes a substantial selection of these works. At the end of the exhibition there is an area with copies that visitors may handle.

At this time, the artist opened another chapter in her work. She did not continue working on foldable sculptures. She dared to go further. The same technological process she had used before — casting — began to serve a new purpose. She made visible the interiors of compositions, their layered cavities with irregularly broken, sharp edges, bearing the traces of injuries caused during the casting process from balloons filled to bursting with plaster mass, first liquid and then rapidly hardening.

The resulting works fascinate through the purity of their snow-white rounded forms and their visible fragility. They belong to the world of nature: they are wounded shells of multiple layers, still retaining their ovoid shape. Egg or universe? — we might ask. One possible answer is that what we are seeing is nascent life. Maria Bartuszová presented works of this character in a solo exhibition in Košice in 1988. Once again, Kladek was the initiator of the project and the photographer of the compositions.

In addition to layering and perforating her compositions, in the mid-1980s Maria Bartuszová also focused on the softness of plaster, with which she worked as a final material. In order to draw attention to this quickly disappearing state, she tied ovoid forms with string, which visibly cut into the rounded surfaces of the objects after they hardened, or she pressed them against the sharp edges of glass, mirror or plexiglass plates. The exhibition presents a substantial collection of works of this kind.

Maria Bartuszová's mature works are white. In seeking a key to this absence of colour, one might recall parallels in modern and avant-garde art. Yet it can also be found in the work of artists from the unofficial Slovak art scene. The conceptual work *White Space in White Space* (1973) by Stanislav Filko, Miloš Laky and Ján Zavarský was well known in the Slovak art environment. Michal Kern devoted an entire line of his action-based and conceptual work to the phenomenon of absolute whiteness in nature — snow — after Peter Bartoš had previously drawn attention to it in *Announcement on the Activity of Nature* (1969) and carried out several events in which he used it. At the same time, he devoted serious attention to matter itself and its transformations, as in *Activity in Sand and Mud* (1969). He understood processuality as a significant impulse for the birth of an idea, gesture, art and life itself, applying it across almost the full breadth of his work. This also spoke to Maria Bartuszová: she dedicated to him layered ovoid forms of cracking white shells. In relation to possible sources of inspiration, Jana Želibská's object *Silkworm*, exhibited at *Sculpture of Piešťany Parks* in 1970, should also be mentioned.



View of the exhibition Being Nature at GMB. Source: Nora Sapárová

A turn towards the realm of feeling

Maria Bartuszová's work becomes easier to read when we understand the context in which she worked. She did not take part in the activities of artists from the unofficial Slovak art scene. But she knew about them and resonated with their aims. The fact that she remained free in her artistic expression signals a personality convinced of the meaningfulness of her own artistic path. The parallels between her interests and the phenomena present in the work of certain Slovak artists testify to her rootedness in an environment that provided inspiration, but which she was able to transcend through the empathy and difference of her vision. She concentrated on the realm of feeling, which was distant from most of her male colleagues. It was, however, close to a number of women artists in the Central European context.

The principle of casting used by Maria Bartuszová is a given in sculpture. However, it

was the artists of the Parisian Nouveau Réalisme group who, at the beginning of the 1960s, began casting real objects and enlarging them enormously. Among them was the Polish sculptor Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973), who also took part in the sculpture symposium at Vyšné Ružbachy in 1967. A decade later, Maria Bartuszová created the monumental Grain (1977) in travertine there. The original small sculpture (1965–67) appears on the poster for the current exhibition. Its original cast, as well as an evocative photograph of the sculptor from Ružbachy, forms part of the entrance to the exhibition.

Several of Bartuszová's mature works are characterised by the vulnerability of layered, fragile forms. We also know these phenomena from the compositions of prominent Czech women artists of the liberal 1960s, later pushed into obscurity during the so-called Normalisation period: Eva Kmentová (1928–1980) and Adriena Šimotová (1926–2014). The resonance with the work of well-known figures from the European and domestic art scenes does not diminish the significance of Maria Bartuszová's artistic contribution to both Slovak and global art. It proves that the free creativity of other artists could have encouraged her in her singular endeavour.



Maria Bartuszová: Untitled, 1968. Source: Collection of the First Slovak Investment Group, Bratislava

Gallery's good decision

In recent years, the Bratislava City Gallery has presented convincing exhibitions. They are prepared by curators to whom the chosen subject and the work of the artists presented are deeply close, and who are able to communicate them clearly to viewers. Some exhibitions are prepared by equally relevant external curators, which is also the case with Maria Bartuszová's exhibition and its curator Gabriela Garlátyová. The bold selection of exhibits — in which small studies stand alongside photographs of monumental architectural realisations, to which Maria Bartuszová devoted herself systematically — was resolved into a harmonious whole by Matej Gavula, the author of the exhibition's architectural design. He composed plinths

from natural material in irregular, unobtrusive forms, allowing them to resonate with the shapes of the groups of works placed upon them.

In addition to knowledge of the artist's work, the exhibited collection required an overview of the owners of the works, which Gabriela Garlátyová possesses. She



Maria Bartuszová: Klíčenie, 1966. (zdroj: Zbierka Prvej slovenskej investičnej skupiny, Bratislava)

probably had to relinquish several desired loans. The exhibition lacks fragile layered plaster originals, which are considered collector's rarities within Bartuszová's work. This is, however, understandable. Their insurance values would have multiplied the exhibition's financial costs, not to mention the institution's responsibility in the event of their possible damage.

In the current situation of financially undernourished culture, it is valuable that the Bratislava City Gallery has not lowered the ambition of its programme. After Maria Bartuszová's solo exhibition at Tate Modern in London (2022–23) and its reprise in Salzburg, she now has an exhibition in Slovakia. Since curator Ruth Noack included a selection of her work in the international exhibition Documenta in Kassel in 2007, this previously little-known sculptor has become a star of the Euro-American art scene.