

On the Cover: Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Untitled*, 1973-75. From the series "Schizoid Heads." Burlap and hemp rope, series dimensions 84-110 x 51-76 x 66-71 cm. Photo: Jan Nordahl.

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Norma Minkowitz: Writing around Space

by Kathleen Whitney

Norma Minkowitz's work is unique and iconoclastic: there is no one who works like her. She has never toed any line, never walked in the lock-step conformity so typical of the last 20 years of art world activity. She has been on her own with her use of materials and deeply psychological and emotional points of view since the beginning of her career as an artist. Her work is neither traditional sculpture nor traditional craft, neither realistic nor abstract, but a mixture of all these elements. Minkowitz has taken her ideas and techniques from a profusion of cultural options, fusing the arts of Asia and Africa with a highly individual American sensibility. This cultural fusion can be seen in her constant play with the ideas of "primitive" and "sophisticated" and her swing between the poles of abstract and figurative imagery.

One of the most notable aspects of Minkowitz's work is its originality and invention. Her sculptures present

intense metaphors for containment, shelter, and confinement using forms analogous to human beings, animals, and plants. Although her work evokes the body and landscape, it has wider implications, seeming to refer, through titles and images, to the origins of culture itself. Minkowitz's imagery is involved with communication in its most primal visual and symbolic aspects, operating through the languages of silence, expression, and gesture.

Minkowitz's method of fabrication is repetitive, compulsive, and painstaking. Throughout her career, she has used the crochet technique she learned as a child. As an art student, Minkowitz was preoccupied with elaborate, painstaking line drawings. Her intense attraction to fiber was based on correspondences she saw between fiber's linearity and the drawn line: the combination of crochet technique and line drawing represents an imaginative cross-breeding. For the past 30 years,

Minkowitz has been using crochet as if it were drawing or handwriting; in the process of creating the planes of crochet, she uses it as if she were writing around an entire space, surrounding it in a permeable web. The cross-hatching, thickness and thinness, opacity and transparency of her materials are all related to drawing techniques but are executed in physical space. The thread and light wire form delicate tracings that mimic the hesitations and irregularities of drawing: changes in pressure and direction, erasures, missed areas.

Minkowitz begins by crocheting a circular shape and molding it around an object that interests her. She has used mannequins, sculpted heads, branches, and anonymous abstract forms. The pieces seem fragile but are less delicate than they look; the materials are stiffened and protected through the application of a variety of strengthening and damage-resistant coatings including resin, shellac, and epoxy. The crochet itself is quite strong: its web-like grip defines exterior space and gives shape to the inner structure. She also uses twigs and roots to form a lattice-like framework for the circling of fiber.

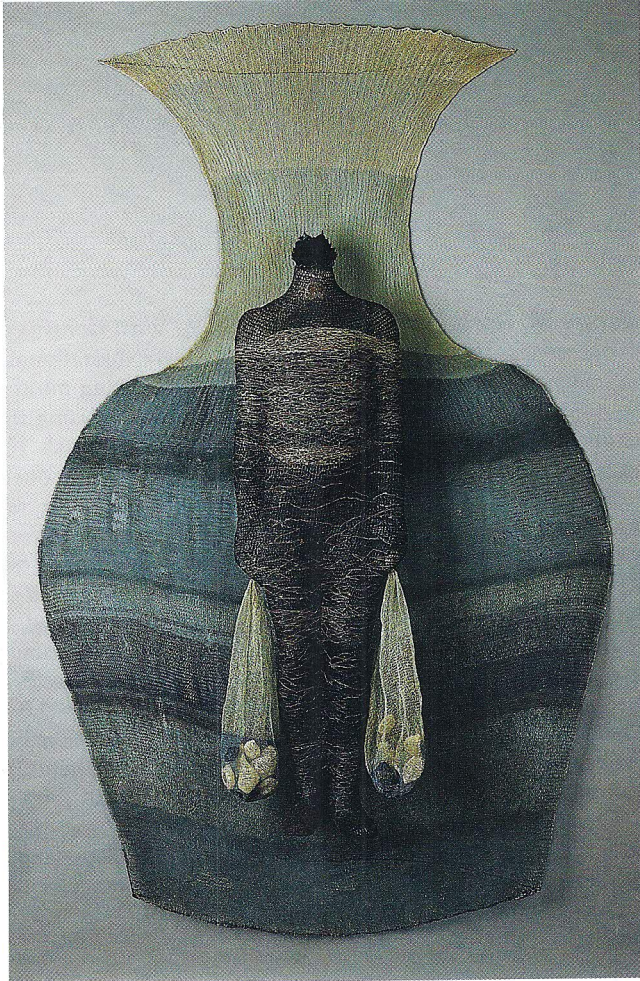
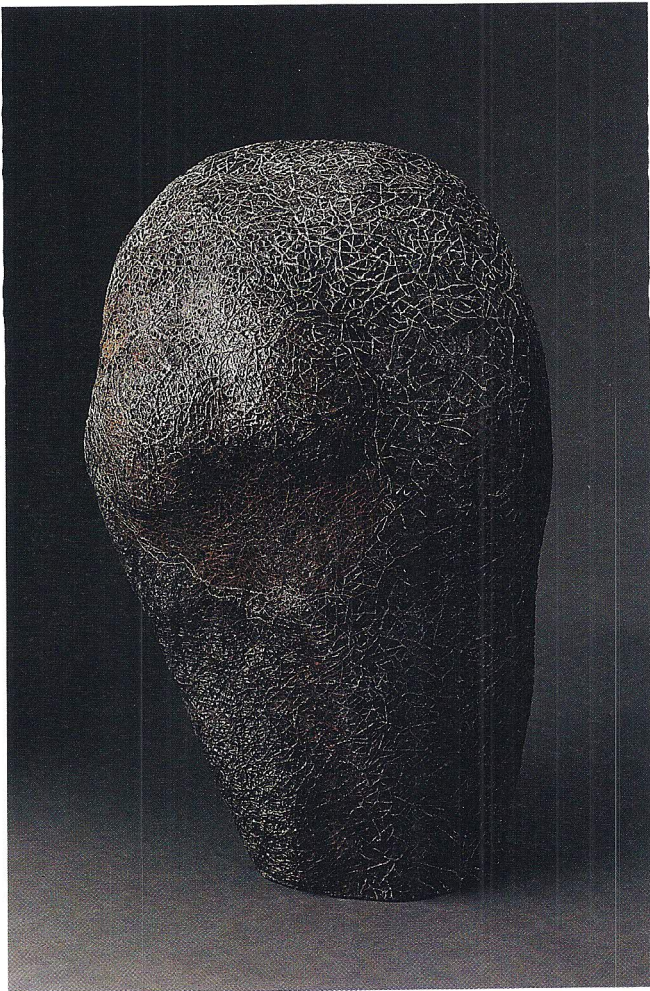
Minkowitz's use of negative space creates a constant change in focus, playing between presence and absence and shifting identity between the inside and outside face of a surface. What is absent is often as important as what is present and is integral to the making of her objects. Because of their complex and shifting surfaces, Minkowitz's sculptures are not easy to see all at once: lighting and viewpoint can radically change the way they are perceived. Because they are concerned with skin and surface and never with mass, these works give little sense of solidity.

Inhale/Exhale (2004) displays many characteristics that typify her work. The head and shoulders are about the size of a child's, but the features seem smeared, out of focus, smothered. The



Inside, 2002. Mirror and fiber, 17.5 x 15.5 x 15.5 in.

JOSEPH KUGELSKY



mouth is plugged with an odd shape resembling a shuttlecock or the stub of a loudhailer. The clear plug of resin that attaches this delicate, lacy form to the mouth makes the metaphor of silencing completely unambiguous. At the same time, the proud angle of the head reads as a sign of resistance. Like all of Minkowitz's figurative work, this piece is about body language derived from a body in which form and emotion are indistinguishable from one another. Her imagery and materials mesh perfectly without dissonance.

While the wood used to make a chair or a sculpture is known to be a natural element, it is generally so transformed from its origins that it has only the most tenuous association with a tree. Most sculptors don't make conceptual use of this transformation, but Minkowitz underscores the source, never losing the reference. As a consequence of her sophisticated and carefully crafted process, she creates hybrids that are simultaneously natural and artificial.

Inside (2002) uses these paired dualities to an extreme. The sphere of cotton fiber is formed by a repeated spiral of crochet, overlaid with stitching. Concealed in its interior is a small

mirror. When viewers peer into the transparent mesh, they see their own eyes looking back at them. The sphere is wobbly, imperfect, and as much ovoid as circular. The only thing that possesses a perfect geometry, the mirror, is manmade, and it marks an enormous contrast to the manmade imperfection of the sphere itself.

Every portion of Minkowitz's work bears the visual evidence of her hand. Her technique uniquely preserves a record of the amount of time it took to make the work. It calls attention to her repeated touch on the surfaces and shares that sense of touch with the viewer. This residue of time and touch surrounds her work like a perfume. It is the rare artist who can control the mix of image, technique, and reference necessary to making decent work. It is Minkowitz's skillful and seemingly effortless ability to perform this feat that makes her work so magnetic, memorable, and emotionally charged.

Kathleen Whitney is a contributing editor to Sculpture. She is the author of the monograph Norma Minkowitz, the Portfolio Collection, published by Telos Art Publishing, Brighton, England.

Clockwise from above left: *Red River*, 2004. Fiber, paint, and resin, 21 x 13.5 in. *Collected*, 2005. Fiber, resin, wire, and paint, 79 x 50 x 11 in. *Wounded*, 1999. Fiber, wood, resin, and wire, 20 x 98 x 21 in.

