

ARTIST IN FOCUS: MARTA JAKOBOVITS

Marta Jakobovits studied at the famed Cluj Academy of Fine Arts in Romania and is a Member of the Hungarian Academy of Arts and a Doctor of Liberal Arts at the University of Budapest. She received the Hungarian Knight's Cross of Merit which was accorded by the President of the Republic of Hungary. She has become one of the most renowned ceramic artists of her generation in Romania and Hungary and her international reputation is rising.

The artist has extreme technical expertise and knowledge of materiality fashioned over her lifetime. A deep chemical and physical understanding of materials and processes and how they relate to creation. Through artistic experimentation the artist constantly questions the formative potential of materials, texture and colour; what vital pulse and energies do they have inside them? Not just materials fashioned by the artist's hands but natural elements too, which she inserts into her arrangements evoking a sense of harmony. These have been found and collected over her lifetime and are inserted into an artwork when she and the world is ready. Her works connote feelings towards the future, present and past but also a deep past evoking ancient times.

It is significant to note from the outset that Marta Jakobovits lived under one of the most brutal and repressive dictators, the Romanian Nicolae Ceaușescu ('The King of Communism'), in history. The Jakobovits family were Hungarian Magyars living on the border between Hungary and Romania, the town of Santau. The land switched sides under their feet at the demands of the dictator and they were placed in old Jewish quarters by the regime. This displacement and new surroundings no doubt influenced the artist's making, which at the time became a form of release and a way to channel her energies. In 1982, Ceaușescu ordered the export of much of Romania's agricultural and industrial production in order to pay off the country's enormous foreign debt. The Jakobovits family watched on as their farms were stripped to raise industrial crops. Along with her husband, the renowned painter Miklós Jakobovits (they married in 1967), she became part of the inner circle of the important Transylvanian artists making and resisting against the dictator and the regime which sought to take away such freedoms. They were careful to cover their tracks and had to remain ever vigilant. Art became their "vehicle to survive" (The Curtain Rises, 2004).

"Our outside world was limited...we knew nothing, but we searched inside ourselves"

Key artworks which the artist created during the Ceaușescu regime were 'Harvest Platter' 1982 and 'Plate with Fruits' 1983. The porcelain fruits and harvest produce are placed within a closed system created via the edges of the plate, bound in time and space. The works have discernable references to the aforementioned export orders from the dictator; uneatable produce for the people, now cold and apparently useless. 'Harvest Platter' evokes this sentiment the most, seeming like a bare and barren landscape, whereas 'Plate with Fruits' is more alive with colour in the form of burnt orange. The surfaces of both works are rich with cracks, wrinkles and marks which contrast with the darker tones evoking the feeling that they have been created over a vast time period through natural forces. These works are by no means imitations of nature but are covered in stratified matter as if thousands of years have passed, yet express the power of lasting life throughout the ages. They are like fruitage from the depths of the Earth; protected and ever-lasting perennial forms. These works are key

examples of the artist's creative catharsis under the period. At once perhaps an apparent sorrowful work yet bursting with resistance and hope. The artist summarised defiantly, "we opposed the Ceaușescu government and the tyranny of the regime, but we did not allow anyone to shape our inner lives. We lived as artists and Hungarian Magyars".



'Harvest Platter' 1982 Unglazed porcelain and low-fire clay with stones



'Plate with Fruits' 1983 Cast porcelain

After Ceaușescu was executed in 1989, Romania experienced a time of great artistic awakening and freedom. The people were now exposed to other cultures and artistic disciplines which allowed for greater artistic expression.

“Our lives were isolated for some decades because of the particular historical situation and so it was hard for us to get informed on matters regarding our preoccupations, that is why we turned towards the inside in search of our own ways”



‘The Big Circle’ 2000 Installation with ceramic and porcelain objects, paper, iron plates, wood, plants, stones and natural materials

‘The Big Circle’ 2000 is a key example of the artist arranging and relating her creations with natural forms. It is often difficult to judge which is which but in a sense all of the objects are natural or from the earth originally. The artist’s touch and vision brings all of the forms back to a base level zero whereby they are in harmony with one another where one can observe their forms and similitude. One form passing to another via the circular and interconnected arrangement which creates a totality. Through her intense study, she questions why we have always been drawn to such natural forms – why do we look, draw and enjoy?

The making process is cultivated by the timeless language inherent in materials. Through her approach creation is a constant process yet it is begun afresh through different forms and interpretations, which she adds to her groupings. She considers past shapes and meanings yet continuously moves forward through experimenting and learning. The artist feels a deep connection to ancient times through the timeless yet historic materials and making process, such as clay and the addition of heat respectively. As well as nature the works are heavily influenced by the artist’s journeys to the museums around the world and observing ancient forms, “besides the ancient Egyptian statues, I came to know the Anatolian and the Cycladic art as well as the 3-4000 years old, even older, Asiro-Babylonian statues and my great discovery was that this secret is so universal and common to all that a few thousand years did not really matter”. The artist is leaving her offerings to this universal conversation.

“Ceramics is such a special language. I am convinced that even the most primitive methods, the most rudimentary techniques have still so many things to discover, to give shape to, which cannot be formulated by any other media”

“To me ceramics is a special guide of my existence, an amazing magic that bounds time’s layers, that is able to combine the messages of ancient times with the sensations of the present”

“[I feel] very close to nature...I keep collecting little things, pebbles, stones, bark, shells and all sorts of little pieces from nature, believing that they are telling me something I have to decipher”

The technique is similar to a teaching exercise the artist explores with her students whereby students collect natural materials and create a relational system between them. The artist remarks powerfully, “from what you found and how you arrange them I can tell who you are”.

“These ceramic pieces represent the imprint of my soul and hands as well as the spiritual relation with segments of visual arts of the groups of objects, installations and spiritual islands created through different senses, experiments and material associations”

“Every material has a special character. For a professional these offer the technical possibilities given by the social character of the material. I am very interested in porcelain; I like its elegant delicacy, but I can appreciate even the rustic beauty of rough materials. It is refreshing to exchange a material with another”

“The world of ceramics is a world richly spiced with secrets. The more you find out about it, the more attached you are to it – colour, shape, the unique spirit of materiality, the deep sophistication of meanings in it”



‘Relics of Antecedents’ (2016 arrangement) Shelving with unglazed terracotta, stoneware and porcelain pieces 1981-2015

'Relics of Antecedents' (2016 arrangement) is a display of small initial experiments and forms for many of her larger and finished works throughout her artistic career from 1981 until 2015. The harmonious shapes embody the artist's intuitive touch and her almost tactile memories. The artist often describes her work as dealing with plastic problems, plastic in this respect refers to substances or materials which are shaped or moulded.

"Antecedents are means through which I could gather particular and very particular impressions, feelings and knowledge during my life. They were and they are part of me. They are my destiny"

It is fascinating to consider that one light fold on the clay which is then fired into porcelain could be the initial idea and start of a canonical work by the artist. One score of the knife on the terracotta clay could be an intriguing entry point into a new-fangled way of thinking.

"The joy of discovery is important for me, and I wanted to convey this to my audience. Sensuous experience creates forms, forms create meanings, while meanings carry those secrets that span over the centuries or even thousands of years"



'Pellegrinaggio (Pilgrimage)' 2015 Ceramic objects, stones, dry leaves, dried clay and iron plates



'Pilgrimage to my Childhood' 2016 40 ceramic pieces from 2000-2011, different firings: oxidation firing at 1220°C, salt reduction firing at 1240°C, gas reduction at 1260°C, Raku and oil reduction firing at 1000°C

The notion of pilgrimage is a most powerful notion for the artist; spiritually and morally, a journey in line with one's faith and beliefs manifested physically or metaphorically. In a similar fashion to *'The Big Circle'*, *'Pellegrinaggio (Pilgrimage)'* incorporates ceramic objects and found natural forms, found but very much personal objects, which work in harmony feeding off the energy of each other. One could describe the work as a spiritual diary translated into material. A pilgrimage of experience with a deep connection to the earth and the natural world. *'Pilgrimage to my Childhood'* is a pilgrimage more specifically relating back to the artist's childhood and experiences; childhood memories of seeing objects, the feeling of the earth, observing shapes and textures, and potent lasting images of church spires for example. Making itself is a pilgrimage and the works are steps in this pilgrimage, her artistic journey; her personal history of childhood experiences and her profound connection to nature translated and condensed into forms, simple but powerful abstract shapes. An essence that perhaps cannot be expressed in any other way. The material records the hands which produced them memorising the interaction between artist and matter, their communal formation and history. Every created piece is a capsule and in a sense a life moulding experience, physically and metaphorically yet placed with new born delicacy upon the surface or 'earthed' on sand.

"I have this sort of perception of the matter since childhood and the time I was living in a small village in Santai...I used to take long walks on the wet roads and I remember the harsh touch of the earth moulded into strange shapes discovering old pieces of ceramic vases which used to mesmerise me"

'Pilgrimage to my Childhood' is made from forty ceramic pieces created between 2000 and 2011 using the ancient Japanese Raku technique, which the artist discovered in Hungary. The

technique fires at extremely high temperatures inside the kiln, in this case up to 1240°C and uses a range of techniques including the usage of salt, gas and oil with predictable and sometimes stimulating unpredictable outcomes. This relationship has been mastered through her prior experiments and recordings. The colour is created through chemical processes in the kiln, namely oxidising, and the artist has a high degree of control over this technique. She can enhance, limit or halt the process and this translates into various degrees of vivid powerful turquoise (see *'Turquoise Shelving'* below). The turquoise gemstone has been esteemed for thousands of years as a prized and holy stone and bringer of good fortune.



'Turquoise Shelving' 2001/2 Wood shelving 16 ceramic objects

"I prowl with the excitement of the alchemists to see what results from the four ancient elements – earth, water, air and fire combination"

"Raku is a technique that allows one to obtain very special and organic effects, both surprising and discreet. The expressive potential of the surface is greatly enhanced and can vary according to time and to different types of materials used in the burning...Because of the strange appearance obtained through the ulterior reductions, the objects that are born through Raku seem to me to be part of an ancient world, they appear timeless"

"The Raku method is still full of inexhaustible possibilities. It is a truly unique and unrepeatable experiment to dominate the heated material at 1100 or 1200 degrees, to shape and colour it, or to diversify its surfaces with oil, metal salts, air dosage, sometimes literally burying it underground for different periods of time"



'Pilgrim's Footsteps' 2016 Ceramic pieces, personal glazes, Raku-fired at 1000°C

'Pilgrim's Footsteps' are elegantly arranged yet are clear examples of the artist's deep penchant for experimentation. She has mastered this abstract shape with degrees of delicate difference. This work is another example of the artist's usage of the Japanese Raku technique fired at extremely high temperatures culminating in an internal negotiation between the unpredictable results of the firing inside the kiln and that which she can control. This relationship is fostered through glazing. Glazes are coatings of substances (engobes) that are fused to a ceramic body through the firing process. She is thus able to create rich and undulating layered surfaces. The artist is working with the chemical and physical characteristics of the material stimulating the internal transformation process inherent inside of it. Metal oxides and stains add colour and texture as well as beautiful networks of cracks during the burning and complex reductive process. These works have an aggressive creative past but the final forms and arrangement are delicate. One work or footstep after the other.

"The process of preparing the clay for the object that will be Raku fired is special and equally important to me, because this offers just as many possibilities. The preparation involving different salts, oxides, engobes or glazes, in diverse combinations gives the final piece a special and unique visual individuality"

"These methods are able to take us into other dimensions, rich in secrets of our existence, beyond the limits of the logical and conceptual thinking...as artists we strive to understand these hidden relationships, but we have to admit that before the great wonders we are often confused, vulnerable and fragile"

"There are so many undiscovered territories of the expressive possibilities and transmission of the sense of the matter, of the tactile experiences that are able to refresh and renew contemporary visual art that seem to be moving swiftly towards the virtual"

"You realise, with a beam of sadness, that a ceramist needs more than one life"

Amongst Marta Jakobovits's acclaim she has won the Ferenczy Noémi Award (from the Ministry of the Cultural Heritage and Human Resources) in Hungary and The Award of the Hungarian Culture. She has exhibited extensively in Romania and Hungary and has had solo exhibitions in Italy, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands. She has exhibited in international group exhibitions such as at the National Gallery in Hungary, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Croatia, England, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland and in Japan. She has taken part in the Biennial of Ceramics Glowing Metaphors in 2016 in Romania, the International Ceramics Biennale (Museum of Art Cluj-Napoca Romania), the International Triennial of the Decorative Arts in Romania, the International Biennial of Ceramic Art in France and the International Triennial of Applied Arts in Poland. Her artworks are in collections across Romania, such as the Contemporary Arts Collection Bucharest, Public Art Collection Covasna and the Contemporary Art Collection of the Peter Jecza Foundation. Her artworks are also in collections outside of Romania, such as the Collection of the International Ceramic Studio in Hungary and the Contemporary Art Collection of the Romanian Academy in Rome. The artist's artworks have been published in editions of the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Romanian Artists*, *Time Capsule: A Concise Encyclopedia of Women Artists* and *World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Artists* publications.

Artist quotes are from the publications '*Marta Jakobovits*' (Maria Zintz, 2012) and '*Marta Jakobovits*' (Dorel, 2001) as well as from '*Ceramics Now: Interview with Marta Jakobovits*' (Ileana Surducan and Alexandra Muresan, 2012) and Elizabeth Xi Bauer's article '*Art and Discourse in Romania*' (Giulia Damiani, 2016).

Marta Jakobovits exhibited in Elizabeth Xi Bauer's group exhibition *Coated in Pre-existence* in September 2016.