

Artist Goshka Macuga Resists Branding

With her New York exhibit, the artist explores tapestries, but her next projects include opera, dance and particle physics



Goshka Macuga, at the New Museum in New York City in May, has gained fame for 'Lost Forty' and other tapestries, which assemble real and fictitious characters. Photo: Peter Ross for The Wall Street Journal

By
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Goshka Macuga is an artist without a brand.

Ms. Macuga, who just opened a show at the New Museum in New York, goes from sculptures to drawings to installations to tapestries, never lingering long enough to be identified with a single medium. Her research-intensive works, often carrying heavy production costs, defy quick explanation. She may take up to a year to finish a work, and even when a piece wins raves she doesn't make more similar to it.

Ms. Macuga's first New York museum exhibit, "Goshka Macuga: Time as Fabric," which opened last week and runs through June 26, features five monumental tapestries—a body

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of work that brought her new popularity but one she has already put behind her. She's now co-directing an opera, choreographing two dance pieces and collaborating on a possible project with physicists in Switzerland.

"I see branding very much in the art market, and I find this very limiting," Ms. Macuga said in a recent interview. "The art market shouldn't be dictating how people work. It's an impoverishing concept to produce a certain type of painting because it is recognized by the collectors as something that's easier to invest in than a unique work that's not going to repeat itself again."

The tapestries are as close as the 48-year-old London artist has come to a calling card. Over the last five years, the Polish-born Ms. Macuga has produced a total of 10 tapestries, many created during museum residencies or for international exhibitions. Only two or three collectors have purchased the large-scale works for their homes. The rest are in larger institutions. Collections attached to Eli and Edythe Broad, François Pinault and Miuccia Prada all include her textile pieces.



Ms. Macuga's 'Lost Forty,' 2011 Photo: Goshka Macuga/Gene Pittman for Walker Art Center

"She doesn't want to be pigeonholed," said one of her dealers, Liz Mulholland, partner at New York's Andrew Kreps Gallery. Her large-scale tapestries, now priced at more than \$200,000, are mostly sold out, Ms. Mulholland said. In September, Ms. Macuga will have her first New York gallery show in three years. It will feature her sculptures.

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Ms. Macuga's challenges with self-promotion came into view during a recent encounter with Chicago executive Martin Nesbitt, a close friend of President Obama's and an art collector. Mr. Nesbitt and his wife began raving about a tapestry they'd seen at an art event abroad. Ms. Macuga realized they were talking about her work without knowing it. She informed them, to their surprise, but she couldn't quite turn the conversation into a sale.

"They were like, 'My God, we would love to have a tapestry,' and we kind of started talking about it, but then it was difficult to say, 'Oh yeah, I should do it,'" she said, wary of pushing herself on them. Mr. Nesbitt confirmed the details of this encounter through a spokesman.



Ms. Macuga's 'Of what is, that is; of what is not that is not 1,' 2012 Photo: Goshka Macuga/Collection Fondazione Prada, Milan

Margot Norton, curator of the New Museum show, said Ms. Macuga was fascinated by the history of tapestries, commissioned for centuries by wealthy patrons seeking to amplify their permanence and power. "To produce something that has that lasting quality, while remaining intimate and tactile, Goshka is drawn to that idea," said Ms. Norton.

More than tapestries, the New Museum pieces are perhaps better described as feats of research and technology. To create them, Ms. Macuga spends months in the archives of the organizations sponsoring her work. Then she creates a narrative inspired by what she discovers in those documents, which can include hate mail from museum visitors, suicide notes from artists, even love letters. Ms. Macuga assembles photographs of real and fictitious characters from history, politics and art and then collages them together. She sends the resulting digital image to Flanders, Belgium, where it is machine-woven, usually in fine gradations of black and white.

A high point of the New Museum show is "Lost Forty," a 2011 tour-de-force that Ms. Macuga created during a residency at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Among its images are Uncle Sam, the museum's lumber-baron founder Thomas Barlow Walker, a champagne-swilling Marcel Duchamp and the vast woods of northern Minnesota. For this intricate work, Ms. Macuga was inspired by a Polish adage that fits her sensibility: "The further you go into the forest, the more trees you find."



Ms. Macuga's 'The Letter,' 2011 Photo: Goshka Macuga/Collection Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

Ms. Macuga grew up in Warsaw, the child of somewhat unconventional parents. Her mother, an economist, was 30 years younger than her father, who made art accessories. As a kid, she loved gymnastics and dreamed of a career in music, dance or theater. Instead, her father sent her to learn sculpture and painting from his eccentric artist friends.

At the time she was attending an art-focused high school, the communist-bloc country was in crisis. "There was not even a kind of horizon that would promise any changes—we had no clothing, very little food, no passport," she said. "Being an artist or working in the art context was an escape from this because you could create your own world."

Around the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, Ms. Macuga left Poland, heading to London in her early 20s. "Some of the people like myself, being impatient and wanting to move on really fast, the more logical way was to live somewhere else," she said. A London outsider who didn't speak English, she ran smack into the Young British Artists movement of the 1990s led by the likes of Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, known not just for their art but for their personalities. Ms. Macuga, who'd spent her childhood cut off from commercial pop culture, pursued a master's degree in fine arts and focused on her own art.



Ms. Macuga's 'On the Nature of the Beast,' 2009 Photo: Goshka Macuga/Collection Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea

She found contemporaries who, like her, saw themselves as solitary artists rather than as leaders of a movement. “There was another generation who were much more into the idea of this romantic artist who is in the studio practicing something impossible rather than somebody who is selling to Saatchi and trying to orchestrate the whole scenario as a group,” she said. Early in her career, a prospective dealer shared his reservations about her work: “The problem with your stuff is when I call people on the phone, my U.S. collectors, I have to be able to describe your work in one sentence—it’s not easy for me to sell it,” she recalled the dealer saying. The pair didn't do business together.

Around 2005, when a friend offered her free housing, Ms. Macuga finally quit her day job as a window dresser at bookstores and other small shops. In the intervening years, she had several solo exhibitions and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2008. The artist who continually changes shape is now in the grip of a new obsession, investigating a possible project at the world’s most powerful particle collider outside Geneva, Switzerland. Ms. Macuga is vague on the details of her study at the facility, where scientists are attempting to re-create the early conditions of the universe. She said her research may not result in an actual artwork, but so far she is intrigued. “I think that there is some sort of connection between what artists do and what scientists do,” she said. “You come up with an idea which you believe in and then you try to prove this idea to be true.”