

*Excerpted from:*

## **Facing Sculpture: A Portfolio of Portraits, Sculpture and Related Ideas**

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### [ P R E F A C E ]

Do not be fooled by this book. It is partly about sculpture, although people who are experts in the field may be surprised by my approach to this subject. It is also a book partly about photography. I display my images as singular works, yet many collectors are drawn to them independent of any sculptural reference and need to know little about whom I've portrayed. But the whole of this book is not bounded by the perimeters of these two categories. The realms of sculpture and of photography are shallows in an ocean of expressive media; this book passes through their territory like a net through water.

This is a book about responding to Art. It is a book about empowerment of the individual spirit. It is about expression of identity as well as unexpected adventure. It is about people who dare to be themselves. And here is something that this book is not: It is not a conventional anthology. Familiarity with sculpture or with these particular artists is not a prerequisite to appreciating this book.

The sculptors on the following pages are interesting people who do interesting work. I met most of them for the first time on the day of their portrait. I made my photograph in response to our personal interaction, to their work, and to the coincidences of that particular day.

My initial reaction to these photographs was one of surprise – the portraits had an unintended quirkiness – and the sessions that brought out this quality were so enjoyable that it was easy for me to nurture the process. I was surprised again when my portraits were displayed in public. Not only did viewers respond to images of ‘strangers,’ but many also wanted to know more information about each individual. While it was my imagery that sparked viewers to comment, it was their insight that revealed to me how much I still had to learn from the experience. This book is an outgrowth of my response to their questions...

#### [ W H Y S C U L P T O R S ]

This is the question I’m most frequently asked about this body of work. The short answer is that I photograph sculpture professionally. While this answer satisfies many people, I know that circumstance and opportunity do not explain motivation. The longer answer is necessarily more complex. It involves my interest in art and my respect for the individual spirit. What I came to appreciate is that the portrait-making process fused my interests and became a vehicle not only for the expression of identity but also for an extended inquiry into the creative process itself.

When I made my very first sculptor portrait, in 1995, I hadn’t any notion that my involvement would extend beyond a few hours’ effort. Caroline Gibson stopped by one evening with work for me to photograph. It was the first time we met, and I had agreed to help her promote an upcoming exhibit. Somewhat casually we created a makeshift studio in my living room. As we began



Caroline Gibson

to photograph an unexpected momentum built. She continuously brought out new pieces, and I kept pace by unpacking more equipment. Soon, we had cluttered all of our space with both art and camera gear. I shot more film than we had intended and in ways that she didn't need. My compositions began to include more of Caroline and only much later did I realize we had a portrait. I remember feeling oddly successful when we finished that evening. I had thought I was photographing for Caroline, but I had produced images that were for me, too.

[...In the winter of 1997,] Magdalena Abakanowicz visited Grounds For Sculpture for the first time. She was there to site one of her pieces, and I was hired to document her visit. I followed her entourage and photographed discreetly as she walked through the park. It was not appropriate for me to interact directly with the group, and especially not with Magdalena, so I had modest expectations of the pictures I was making. When I printed the contact sheets from that day, my first reaction was disappointment. It took nearly two years for me to reconcile the images I had with my response to Magdalena's work. This reconciliation required that I reintroduce myself into the photographic experience...

I spoke only twice to her as she toured the sculpture park. One time I asked her to pause so I could photograph her on a hilltop where her sculpture would be installed. She agreed, then raised her arms to suggest the height of the bronze piece. When she did this the bottom of her jacket flared out, creating a triangle with her head at the apex, and this shape lent unexpected interest to the composition. I included this image in my Grounds For Sculpture exhibit the following year. The second time I spoke was at the end of her visit, just before she left. I asked permission to photograph her from a closer distance. She smiled, held her glasses in her hand and leaned her head back to catch more of the sunlight. A gentle breeze lifted her hair just as I clicked the shutter. I knew then that I had made a second significant photograph.



Magdalena Abakanowicz on hilltop

Two years after I photographed her, I reexamined this close-up in my darkroom. I found it to present a strong, self-assured and composed, elegant woman. She basked in the warm rays of an autumn day's light with a beatific smile. Her central position within the image and the shallow focus of the background emphasized her importance. It was a flattering photograph. Because of her celebrity status, it would undoubtedly be well received in the media. For me, however, this image was a frustrating burden. It was too good to set aside, yet I could not reconcile such a celebrity portrait with the visceral force she invests in her work.

[Magdalena Abakanowicz' sculpture addresses the inexplicable tolerance with which society has accepted a repression of the individual spirit.]

I tried printing this negative yet another time. I made a print and studied it still wet in the water bath. I suspected that different enlarger settings might afford an improvement but, rather than expose an entire sheet of paper, I elected to use only a small test strip and find out. I exposed and processed the test strip. When I got to the water bath, I laid the still wet test strip over the first print for a direct comparison. At this point I could closely examine the two prints in room light.

I was searching for very specific, tonal distinctions when something unexpected caught my eye. The image of the test strip was aligned with that of the print beneath – both the left and right shoulder lines matched, her face seemed appropriately placed and her hair blended in – yet somehow something was offset. It took only a moment for me to realize the blessing bestowed by this chance event.

I fully processed both the test strip and the large print, then dry mounted the two exactly as I had first seen them when wet. This composite image still shows Magdalena Abakanowicz to be a strong and gracious woman. For me, though, with her personal features surviving an intrusive displacement, this photograph tapped into visceral forces and became a much more relevant portrait.

*Ricardo Barros*



Magdalena Abakanowicz