

The approach

Maria Pinińska-Bereś *Living Pink*

10 September – 20 October 2019

Opening preview: Monday 9th September, 6-9pm

The Approach is both excited and honoured to present *Living Pink*, the first major solo exhibition of works by Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931-1999) outside of her home country of Poland.

Living Pink takes its name from a 1981 performance that Pinińska enacted at the Bunkier Sztuki contemporary art gallery in Krakow during the 9th International Krakow Meetings, where she planted a pink rose bush outside the gallery and asked, in three languages, “whether roses are going to bloom pink in Poland next spring?”¹ – a hopeful sentiment amongst imminent darkness. Many of the works featured in this exhibition were produced during the 1980s – a politically oppressive time for Poland. A month after Pinińska asked her question, Martial Law was introduced by the governing communist regime on 13th December 1981 (and where it was enforced until July 1983, although many political prisoners were not freed until 1986). Nothing bloomed in the spring.

Pinińska’s practice was the antithesis of this authoritarian environment: the colour pink simultaneously and concisely encapsulated Pinińska’s defiance of an undemocratic and patriarchal political system whilst being a joyful symbol of freedom that also celebrated the feminine and the erotic. The idea of ‘Living Pink’ applies to an attitude, a spirit, and a way of producing art that was intrinsic to Pinińska’s practice. The pink flag proudly hanging outside The Approach is an homage to what Pinińska called her ‘author’s standard’, at once her distinctive signature as well as a symbol for her concern with feminist issues.

The End of the Feast, 1983, and *Smudged with the Sky*, 1985, were both made during this period of extreme surveillance and oppression within Poland. Pinińska describes how she felt that “the work of the Martial Law was for me torture, struggle, strife [...] The ‘80s left a mark on my works... What we were experiencing influenced my art, making it sad, with less sex and less pink. Pink seemed to me an inappropriate colour [to the situation], sex as well.”² *End of the Feast* represents this more melancholic moment for Pinińska, the pink folded protrusions suggest red-wine-soaked napkins, scrunched up and discarded at the end of a meal to which the artist wasn’t invited (an allusion to her exclusion from art exhibitions during this period). *Smudged with the Sky*, however, is more hopeful. It possesses a strong sense of freedom; its construction mimicking a pink bird or butterfly opening its wings, preparing to fly away.

The original Polish title for *Smudged with the Sky* is *Pomazany niebem*. The word ‘niebo’ means both ‘sky’ and ‘heaven’; whilst ‘pomazany’ means ‘smudged’, but also ‘anointed’. Although the title *Smudged with the Sky* implies becoming connected or assimilated with the sky above, like a creature flying up, up and away; Pinińska is also consecrating this work, declaring it as sacred, where earth meets heaven.

Window in Spring, 1976, hails from a much earlier period for Pinińska, when she was making her *Psycho Furniture* series. A happy moment where she had found her artistic identity, reclaiming surrealism to create hyper-feminine sculptures through both her repeated use of the colour pink alongside the adoption of lightweight materials such as plywood, cotton wool and polyurethane foam. *Window in Spring* represents the freedom and lightness that Pinińska felt in making these erotic and feminine sculptures. The window itself is also a symbol for breaking free from traditional patriarchal conventions and with it, liberating oneself from the existential burdens of being a woman and instead celebrating all the virtues of womanhood.

The later window works, *Window with Small Clouds*, 1990, and *Window with Demons II*, 1996, created in the ‘90s also emanate a sense of freedom and, although the windows are closed, their perspective is always looking outwards. The *Window* works from this period are all constructed from found wooden window frames, which Pinińska then decorated with paint and various soft materials. When referring to this series, she states that

¹ Maria Pinińska-Bereś, *Living Pink*, performed at the BWA Kraków, November 1981

² Maria Pinińska-Bereś from The Estate archives

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when one usually thinks of a window, they are imagining looking through it, to “the world outside the glass, but these *Windows* are the projections of our inner life. Shapes are often ambiguous and leave space for the viewer's imagination. In *Windows*, we touch the external-internal relationship. How the external is subjective, and perceived through the prism of our self, our experiences, desires and fears.”³ In *Window with Small Clouds*, conjuring a landscape scene of sky and clouds, Pinińska invites us to contemplate this existential state. *Window with Demons II* also evokes a landscape, but here we see a sun setting over a horizon line. The deep reds and oranges not only suggest a specific time of day, but also the erotic, particularly in light of the disembodied serpent-like tongues wriggling their way onto the scene. The salacious tongues proudly protrude almost as mountains breaking through earth and sky. Perhaps *Window with Demons II* is a more direct reference to Pinińska's idea that the windows show us projections of our innermost fears, desires and emotions.

In *Passage Beyond the Quilt*, we see the remains of a performance originally enacted by Pinińska in 1979. The black and white vintage photographs displayed on the wall visually describe her performance; stepping on stones laid out across a white quilt, armed with soft pink and white stuffed cotton tubes and, most importantly, her ‘author's standard’: the pink flag. *Passage Beyond the Quilt* was part of an enquiry by Pinińska, where she was questioning her practice as a whole, its relationship to feminist issues, and what it means to have one's work perceived as ‘women's art’. The performance enabled Pinińska to lay bare the softness and pinkness that has continued to mark her practice, being both proudly feminine as well as being distinctive to her. Maria Hussakowska describes the piece as Pinińska's internal battle, “a battle between her ideals of universal – neutrally white – art and the ever more strongly pressing pink of female carnality”.⁴

To celebrate the exhibition, and to coincide with the Frieze East End Afternoon, Pinińska's daughter, Bettina, will be re-enacting one of her incredible performances at the gallery on Sunday 29 September at 2.30pm.

Maria Pinińska-Bereś (b. 1931, Poznań, d. 1999, Kraków) has shown in major solo and group exhibitions, including *Shapeshifters: Sascha Braunig, Sandra Mujinga and Maria Pinińska-Bereś*, The Approach, London (2019); *The Power of Nature: Henry Moore in Poland*, Centre of Polish Sculpture, Orońsko (2018); *A-geometry. Hans Arp and Poland*, National Museum, Poznań; *Trace of a woman*, BWA Gallery, Olsztyn; *The Performer*, Galeria Monopol, Warsaw (2017); *The World Goes Pop*, Tate Modern, London (2016); *Three Women – Maria Pinińska-Bereś Natalia Lach-Lachowicz, Ewa Partum, Zacheęta*, National Gallery of Art, Warsaw (2011); *Gender Check*, MUMOK Museum of Modern Art, Vienna (2009); *Maria Pinińska-Bereś* Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Bunkier Sztuki w Krakowie, Krakow, touring to Galeria Bielska BWA w Bielsku-Białej, Bielsko-Biało and Galeria Miejska Arsenał w Poznaniu, Poznań (1999-2000). Pinińska-Bereś's works are in the following collections: National Museum, Wrocław; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art, Krakow; National Gallery of Art, Warsaw; Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, Zürich; Museum Jerke, Recklinghausen; Kunstmuseum Bochum; Silesian Museum Katowice; Centre of Polish Sculpture, Orońsko.

For further information or images please contact Jędrzej Nyka at jedrzej@theapproach.co.uk

³ Maria Pinińska-Bereś from The Estate archives

⁴ Maria Hussakowska, *Thing Pink*, in *Maria Pinińska-Bereś 1931-1999*, Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej Bunkier Sztuki w Krakowie, p 14-15

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Maria Pinińska-Berés
Passage Beyond the Quilt, 1979-now
Performance, mixed media
documentation

Maria Pinińska-Berés
No Title [Collage made of studies for 'Window. De-construction of the Leaning Tower II'], 1992
Drawing on paper, collage
32 x 22.3 cm
12 1/2 x 8 3/4 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
End of the Feast, 1983
Plywood, canvas and acrylic
56 x 115 x 28 cm
22 x 45 1/4 x 11 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
No Title [Collage, stencil prepared for 'Window with Continuum'], 1991
Drawing on paper, collage
32.5 x 22.7 cm
12 3/4 x 8 7/8 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
No Title [Studies for 'Two Graces Commenting on the Departure of the Third'], 1993
Drawing on paper, collage
23 x 32.5 cm
9 x 12 3/4 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
Window and Demons II, 1996
Window frame, plywood, foam
canvas, glass pane, acrylic
82 x 44 x 11 cm
32 1/4 x 17 1/4 x 4 1/4 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
Smudged With the Sky, 1985
Plywood, cotton, sponge-padded canvas
135 x 192 x 110 cm
53 1/8 x 75 1/2 x 43 1/4 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
Window with Small Clouds, 1990
Window frame, plywood
canvas-wrapped foam, glass, acrylic
85 x 45 x 10 cm
33 3/8 x 17 5/8 x 3 7/8 in.

Maria Pinińska-Berés
Window in Spring, 1976
Plywood, canvas stuffed
with cotton, acrylic
145 x 206 x 53 cm
57 x 81 x 20 3/4 in.