

Barbara Kasten
Figure/Chair, 1972-73
8 Sep–28 Oct 2023
55 Walker

Bortolami is pleased to present Barbara Kasten's *Figure/Chair, 1972-73*, an exhibition based on a historical solo presentation of diazotype prints and mixed-media sculptures, first staged at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) in Oakland in 1973. On view will be a series of twenty-four digital archival pigment facsimiles of the original *Figure/Chair* diazotypes, alongside three of Kasten's *Seated Form* fiber chair sculptures, created during her mentorship with renowned sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) in Poland in 1971-72.

Kasten traveled to Poland in 1971 on a Fulbright-Hays fellowship to study with the esteemed Abakanowicz at the behest of Bauhaus-trained Trude Guermonprez, Kasten's mentor and teacher at CCAC. There, she experimented with sisal, a heavy rope that she and Abakanowicz would dredge from the harbor in Gdańsk. Hand-dyed in bright colors, Kasten unwound and manipulated this material to create sculptural forms suggesting bodily presences; garment-like warp threads pulled in to pinch a waist, darting sewn to form a bulging bust or buttocks.¹ The resultant *Seated Form* fiberworks, mounted on Thonet bentwood chairs, were first shown at Galeria Rzeźby in Warsaw in May 1972.

Back in California in 1973, Kasten presented the sculptures at CCAC. She fashioned a patch of synthetic grass upon which the chairs sat, on view in the center of the gallery, recreating a scene from her memory in a park near her apartment in Poznań the year prior. This idyll was visually extended around the perimeter of the gallery by a new series of experimental diazotypes entitled *Figure/Chair*.

Kasten's *Figure/Chair* prints represent some of her earliest forays into photographic practices. Originally conceived as a pendant series to *Seated Form*, the 1973 works were printed using the diazotype method akin to that used for an architectural blueprint. The images of a female model in various poses atop a bentwood chair, when juxtaposed with the sculptural installation, play with the question of abstraction as it relates to the slippage between the real and the represented, what would become a central theme throughout Kasten's oeuvre.²

In a 2015 interview with Kasten on the occasion of her retrospective *STAGES* that traveled from the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia to the

1 Jenni Sorkin, "Tactile Beginnings," in *STAGES* (Zürich & Philadelphia: JRP | Ringier & Institute of Contemporary Art, 2015), 152.

2 Alex Klein, "Embodied Images: Barbara Kasten's Plastic Arts," in *Works* (Wolfsburg & London: Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg & Koenig Books, 2020), 27.

Graham Foundation in Chicago and MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles, curator Alex Klein proposed the diazotypes function as a “missing link” between the artist’s fiber work and the studio constructions for which she has become best known.³ In a simultaneous acknowledgement of her formal and political concerns, Kasten suggested in the same interview that there “is a synergy between the figure and the chair, which can be seen as symbolic of the manipulations that are imposed on women to fit into conforming roles in society.”⁴ Seen through Kasten’s budding lens and posed at her direction, the faceless feminine body obediently offers form to these constraints, while also colluding as a cipher for burgeoning feminist dialogues. For the present exhibition, Kasten has produced a set of digital archival pigment facsimiles of the original diazotypes, as they appear today, fifty years after their creation.

Barbara Kasten (b. 1936 in Chicago, Illinois) lives and works in Chicago. She received her BFA from the University of Arizona in 1959 and MFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1970. Her work has been exhibited across the United States and Europe. Most recently, Kasten was the subject of a major survey exhibition at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany, which traveled to Sammlung Goetz, Germany.

Other recent exhibitions include *Barbara Kasten: Scenarios*, Aspen Art Museum (2020-21); *Women in Abstraction*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, and Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain (2021); the 2020 Busan Biennale, *Words at an Exhibition: an exhibition in ten chapters and five poems*, South Korea; *Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art*, Tate Modern, London (2018); *Sharjah Biennial 14: Leaving the Echo Chamber*, Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE; and *STAGES*, a retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia that traveled to the Graham Foundation in Chicago and the MOCA Pacific Design Center, Los Angeles (2015-16).

Her work is featured in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York; Tate Modern, London; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., among many others.

3 Klein, interview with Barbara Kasten in *Barbara Kasten: The Diazotypes* (Chicago & New York: Graham Foundation & D.A.P., 2015), unpaginated.

4 Ibid.