



1 Antoni Zdebiak, *Woman Digging Potatoes*, 1973, fragment of a photo essay. Courtesy of the Foundation for the Archaeology of Photography

2 *Miss Worker*, from the *Sashes-Chainmails* series, 2023, chainmail, steel, 12 x 192 cm

3 *Laurel*

4 *Sew It Yourselfes*, 2022, apron-chainmail, steel, 80 x 26.5 x 40 cm

5 *Shields*, 2023, straw marquetry, series of 5 objects, 64 x 48 cm, 70 x 59 cm, 64 x 52 cm, 64 x 55 cm, 70 x 52 cm

6 *Runner-up Maria Kępska from WSS „Społem” Śródmieście During Make-up*, 1967, photo: Filip Kwiatek. Competition organised by the “Practical Woman” centres under the title “Woman at home and at work,” Grażyna Rutkowska’s archive / National Digital Archive

7 *Miss Home Worker*, from the *Sashes-Chainmails* series, 2023, chainmail, steel, 12.5 x 266 cm

8 *Miss Best Worker* from the *Sashes-Chainmails* series, 2023, chainmail, steel, 12.5 x 247 cm

Ala Savashevich

Arm and Protect

curator: Joanna Sokołowska
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Arm and Protect is an exhibition about the exploitation and reclaiming of the body by persons forced into women’s social roles. However, in Ala Savashevich’s series of new works, no bodies are directly visible. The artist confronts the traces of forces that seemingly operate “beyond the periphery of the skin”¹: in global and local markets, in offices and fields, at the assembly line, in services, families, schools, churches. Dispersed and omnipresent for generations, they break backs and bend necks. They suck out vital forces and take away life itself. They enforce repetitive gestures or unnatural stillness. They prohibit the expression of emotions and the pursuit of one’s needs, teaching instead how to conform to the needs of others. But up to a point.

The objects prepared for the exhibition have been inspired by the tools and materials used daily by women trained for hard work, serving and obedience – in exchange for social acceptance. Some of them hide echoes of the artist’s personal story, connected with her education in a Belarusian school. In the classes called Труд (toil) in Russian, schoolgirls were taught to do housework, including sewing, making handicraft ornaments and gifts. As in many other schools in authoritarian and patriarchal societies, they were taught a double lesson: the gender division of labour and gender as a role to be played. The decorative, floral costume worn for the women’s performance was meant to mask real hardship and make life more pleasant for others.

The artist worked through the memory of her school assignments in the object *Sew It Yourself*. Using hundreds of small metal rings, she “wove” a heavy form resembling an apron-cum-armour. She used the same method to make the chainmail sashes (*Miss Worker, Miss Best Worker, Miss Home Worker*), which touch on deeply rooted sexist patterns by alluding to female shock workers’ decoration in Soviet countries and the sashes worn by winners of beauty pageants. Created as a result of strenuous, long-lasting labour, the objects emphatically show the real burden carried by

the body in connection with fulfilling the role of a woman. On the other hand, as their form suggests, they can be transformed from tools of oppression into arms or armour.

A similar dynamic of associations is set in motion by a series of objects resembling shields, which the artist made using the decorative technique of straw marquetry. The “shields” combine military camouflage patterns with the floral imagery. This “feminine” symbol of many revolutions acquired a topical significance during the 2020 uprising in Belarus, when women took to the streets en masse with flowers, forming chains of solidarity and calling on the uniformed services to stop the violence. Although the revolution was suppressed, the women’s peaceful protest demonstrated the existence of a great collective force, hitherto ignored.

In the intergenerational memory of women’s capacity to confront the burden of patriarchy, exploitation and violence, Ala Savashevich brings out the mighty power and will to live. She experienced it through performative, embodied work, in which she transformed a traumatic story into a herstory of female solidarity, self-defence and struggle.

1. Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, PM Press/Kairos, 2020.

Ala Savashevich (b. 1989, lives in Wrocław) studied sculpture at the Belarusian State Academy of Arts in Minsk and at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław; she is currently a doctoral student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. She creates sculptures, installations and video works. Her work explores themes of collective memory and identity formation in societies with experience of authoritarianism and patriarchy. She is particularly interested in the mechanisms of socialisation into the role of women in family systems, education and through the gendered division of labour. By working through histories of exploitation and violence, she also visualises the prospects of reclaiming agency, solidarity and freedom.

Joanna Sokołowska is a curator, author and editor of publications on contemporary art. She worked as a curator at the Museum of Art in Łódź from 2010 to 2021; currently, she teaches at the Department of Art Mediation at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław and prepares the Konrad and Paweł Jarodzki Art Residency Programme at the Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe. In her exhibitions and texts, she has explored topics such as the future of work, sisterhood, the ecological imagination, and the contemporary potential of avant-garde utopias.

Sew It Yourself
2022, apron-chainmail, steel,
80 x 26.5 x 40 cm

The apron used to be the indispensable costume of life in the Soviet Union. At school, it symbolised cleanliness, obedience and discipline. Later in life, it protected, covered and collectivised the individual bodies and clothes of workers, labourers and housewives. In *Sew It Yourself*, Ala Savashevich works through her experience of socialisation into the role of a woman in a Belarusian school. During classes called Труд (“toil”), girls wearing aprons were trained to do household chores and service tasks, such as sewing or making ornaments. But at the same time, like in most schools in the patriarchal world, it was also preparation to carry the burden of social expectations and accept the gender division of labour. Ala Savashevich confronts this legacy by transforming the airy costume of enslavement into heavy armour. With her own hands, she made an apron-like chainmail out of hundreds of metal links. Its weight and structure are traces of the physically felt weight of the armour of her patriarchal upbringing – an uncomfortable “second skin.” At the same time, however, the symbolism of the armour signals the strength inherent in bodies that have survived and broken through oppression. It is a warning not to disregard their ability to defend or attack.

Miss Worker,
from the *Sashes-Chainmails* series
2023, chainmail, steel, 12 x 192 cm

Miss Home Worker,
from the *Sashes-Chainmails* series
2023, chainmail, steel, 12.5 x 266 cm

Miss Best Worker
from the *Sashes-Chainmails* series
2023, chainmail, steel, 12.5 x 247 cm

In her *Sashes-Chainmails* series of works, Ala Savashevich works through the multi-generational mechanisms of social reward and discipline aimed at producing a “model” woman. By using the sash motif, she alludes to the rituals of decorating the bodies of winners of beauty pageants as well as those awarded at official state ceremonies or school assemblies. In Soviet times, sashes were also used to decorate the bodies of model workers, and in Belarus they are still worn by kolkhoz employees celebrating the harvest festival. Seductive from afar with their glitter and gold, the inscriptions visible on the sashes turn out to be sexist stigmata. In condensed form, they reveal a pattern of logic forcing women to make simultaneous efforts in terms of appearance, domestic and professional work. To make the chainmails, several kilograms of iron rings were used, which had

to be patiently joined together. For the artists, this monotonous process of producing the objects was a form of working through the burden of social expectations in a performative way, but also a kind of struggle to reject internalised compulsions.

Shields
2023, straw marquetry, series of 5 objects,
64 x 48 cm, 70 x 59 cm, 64 x 52 cm, 64 x 55 cm, 70 x 52 cm

For her series of shield-shaped objects, the artist turned to the artisanal technique of straw marquetry. Her familiarity with it is a result of learning how to make domestic ornaments at school. The designs on the *Shields* combine motifs of military camouflage with images of flowers: roses, lilies, carnations, irises and tulips. The objects thus visually integrate two culturally opposed orders: the public, patriarchal sphere of war and the private spaces of feminised beauty and home. Through this juxtaposition, *Shields* signal women’s invisible struggles in many fields. They also remind us of the “feminine” flowers at peaceful protest.

Laurel

Historically, the laurel has typically functioned in the form of a wreath. As a symbol of victory in the patriarchal public sphere, it decorated the heads of successful military leaders as well as winners of scientific or poetic rivalries. A living laurel tree does not need any more heroes.

Photo wallpapers:

Antoni Zdebiak, *Woman Digging Potatoes*, 1973, fragment of a photo essay
Courtesy of the Foundation for the Archaeology of Photography

Runner-up Maria Kępska from WSS „Społem” Śródmieście During Make-up, 1967, photo: Filip Kwiatek.
Grażyna Rutkowska’s archive / National Digital Archive