

Virginia
Maksymowicz

Strong Supports

BY SARAH ARCHINO



REUSE: TONIA
Structure and Metaphor, 2008. 5 fiberglass casts of Corinthian capitals and approx. 60 Hydrostone casts of bread loaves, installation view.

From the first glance, Virginia Maksymowicz's "Bread" series clearly recalls antiquity. These works abound in motifs taken from Greco-Roman architecture—caryatids, Corinthian capitals, columns, and volutes—but as the viewer comes closer, the point of reference shifts. The Hydrostone and fiberglass/resin forms have less to do with Greek and Roman marbles than with plaster casts of the academic tradition. With this textural nuance, Maksymowicz brings imagery from the distant past into closer temporal proximity, bridging the gap between the ancient and the present, the precious and the prolific.

The "Bread" series was inspired by vessels held by the caryatids at Hadrian's Villa, copies of those at the Erechtheion on the Athenian Acropolis. These broad, flat saucers (phiale) resemble braided loaves of bread common around the Mediterranean. Bread is part of a broad group of symbols associated with caryatids—motifs of ritual, welcome, nourishment, and plenty that also include water vessels, libation bowls, baskets of grain, and offerings to the gods. The abundance of the forms and the sheer multiplicity of the bounty suggest fecundity. The connection to the caryatid figure is not visually asserted, yet it ties into the nurturing, supportive female form that has dominated Maksymowicz's work.

The female body has been a central motif in Maksymowicz's production since her graduate work at the University of California, San Diego. At UCSD, she studied early feminist art theory and began "searching for the women—not only women artists, but also images of women." She has explored various forms and means of representing the female body, drawing deeply on the history of art for source material, as in her cast torso work *History of Art*. She chooses elements that remain very much a part of our contemporary decorative language, and her loaves of bread, draped women, medallions, and putti add depth to the work by connecting us to a rich heritage. Rather than feeling like relics, these elements carry a sense of timelessness, weaving present experience back into its roots in the ancient world, the Renaissance, and the Neoclassical period.

We are drawn to this work by its simple beauty. Maksymowicz does not shy away



Above and detail: *History of Art*, 1983–ongoing. Handmade paper cast into body molds fitted back onto model, dimensions variable.

from creating attractive objects, but she does challenge viewers to appreciate the beautiful while recognizing that the work is steeped in political and social commentary. As she explains, "I am trying to nego-

ciate the language of the 'beautiful.'" She concedes that it is difficult to make beautiful sculpture—not because beautiful form is difficult to attain, but because the beautiful is easily dismissed. For a sculptor trained



Caryatid, 2011. Cast bread loaves, Corinthian capitals, columns, and sconces, pencil on paper, Hydrostone/Hydrocal FGR 95, and fiberglass resin, 96 x 60 x 30 in.

deeper metaphorical message of strength and sustenance." In making beautiful figures of female strength, Maksymowicz resists the critical edge that marked her earlier work, seeking a more celebratory path.

Within this matrix of female figures and beautiful forms, architecture plays an increasingly important role. While photographing bodies as architectural ornament during a 2006 residency at the American Academy in Rome, Maksymowicz noticed that women appeared more frequently than men. Since ancient times, the caryatid has remained a common motif in architectural decoration, and by the 19th century, "draped figures supporting an acanthus capital became a familiar cliché in decorative arts, often sustaining chimneypieces or serving as candlesticks and table supports."¹ While the popularity of the caryatid endures, her male counterpart, the atlantid, is less frequently found. For Maksymowicz, the proliferation of female architectural support figures, often carrying baskets, candles, and water vessels, suggests a deeper, more archetypal resonance based in a sustaining function. Within her work, the caryatid emerges as a vehicle

in the late 1970s, the object was suspect and the beautiful object nearly forbidden. (Maksymowicz recounts that, as a graduate student, she brought her work across campus in a shopping cart to be fired in a

nearly abandoned kiln.) Acknowledging that the notion of beauty is complicated and often problematic, especially within feminist discourse, she explains, "I'm trying to get past surface beauty into a

Caryatids in Five Books, 2012. Hydrostone, Lazertran, polystyrene, and MDF, 2 views of installation.



TOP: BLAISE TOBIA; BOTTOM: COURTESY THE ARTIST



Panis Angelicus, 2010. Hydrostone and fiberglass resin, 2 views of installation.

for a positive, feminist statement; as she describes, “Sometimes they are structural, but a little invisible.”

While the caryatid can be found in Egyptian and Persian architecture, it is most closely associated with the Greco-Roman tradition—and most famously with the figures on the south porch of the Erechtheion. The origins of this hybridized integration of female body and support column are unclear. Vitruvius mentions caryatids only once in his treatises, despite the fact that they mirror his general conception of the column as a body.

In his discussion, Vitruvius claimed that the caryatid was intended to be a “permanent picture of slavery,” an eternal punishment for the betrayal of the women of Caryae, who had supported the invading Persians: “The architects of those times designed images of them specially placed to uphold a load, so that a well-known punishment of the Caryates’ wrongdoing might be handed down to posterity.”² Historians have resisted this association. Hugh Plommer argues that the larger adoption of the female column form was not meant to represent shame, but was

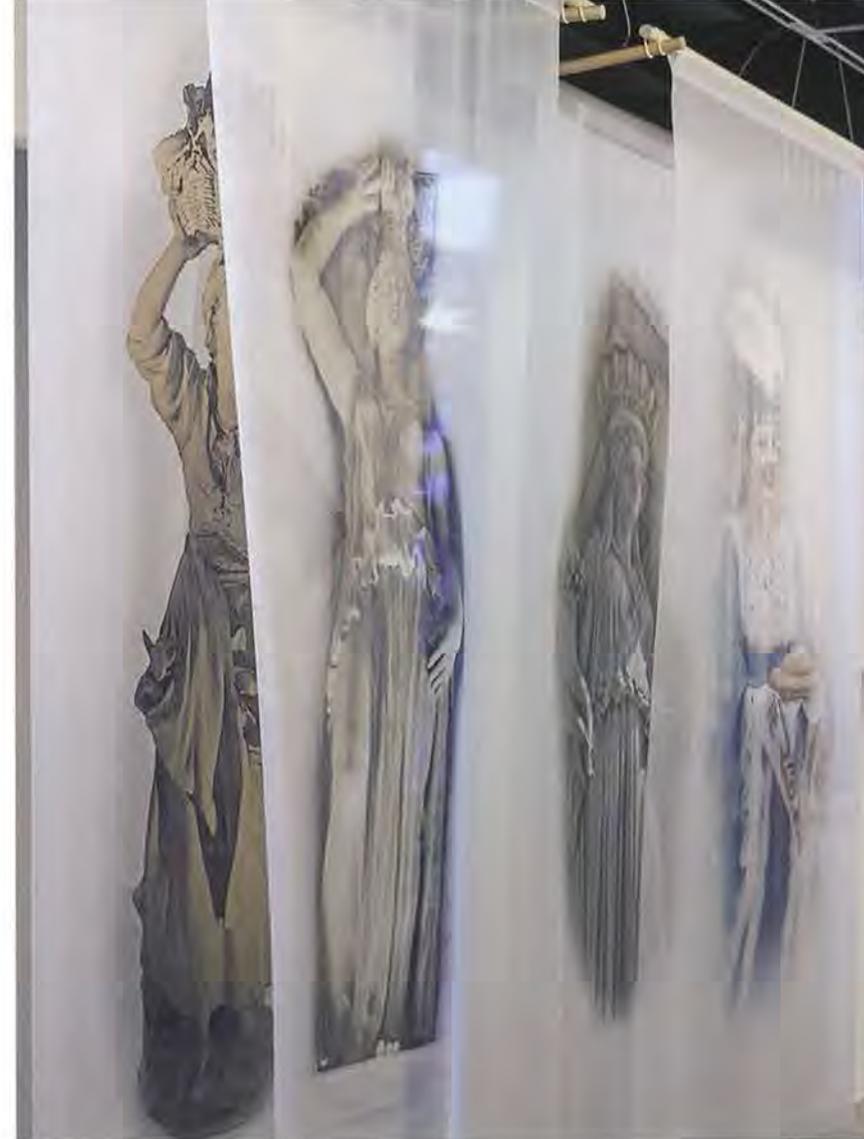
coincidental.³ Indeed, there is little about surviving caryatids to support this punitive reading. Despite their physical heft, they appear graceful and lithe, often with a gentle contrapposto or jauntiness that seems to diminish the architectural burden.⁴ This is, undoubtedly, the caryatid that feeds Maksymowicz’s imagery: a woman who bears great weight, but with a lightness. Maksymowicz recaptures their strength and resolve, their grace and beauty, casting them into our space.

The caryatid bears the weight of architecture. If we consider architecture as a symbol for culture, then she bears the weight of culture. At the same time, her libation bowls and food offerings nurture this culture. The caryatid is both vessel and support, strength and comfort. As Maksymowicz continued her research, she found this form repeated, across cultural boundaries and time periods, which suggests that the metaphor doesn’t need explicit explanation to be understood—it flourishes on its own.

Caryatids in Five Books, an installation from 2012, highlights some of her research photographs, printed on the surface of books cast in Hydrostone. These books,

reproduced at full size, sit atop brilliant red columns, inviting the viewer to approach them. While the pages bear the appearance of use, with ragged corners and cut edges, the books are frozen. They merge with the column capitals, becoming part of their structural support. The photographs capture a range of caryatid forms, from busts to full figures, curvaceous nudes to chastely draped maidens; they may look at us, beyond us, or away from us, but they are unified in their supportive function. Each image is paired with verses by the Romanian poet Cristina-Monica Moldoveanu, which speak to the co-existence of strength and fragility across time.

Comparisons, Maksymowicz’s most recent iteration of the caryatids, replaces frozen, arrested form with fluidity and flux. Printed on long silk panels, her photographs of women are installed on simple wooden rods and spaced to float freely, away from the wall. The delicacy of the fabric belies the strength of the thread, which mirrors the women who emerge from the soft weave. Ancient caryatids are matched with more contemporary interpretations of the form; as the silk flutters, a Roman canephora



Left: *Comparisons*, 2015. Inkjet print on silk and wooden dowels, 96 x 45 in. Right: *Comparisons*, 2016. Inkjet print mockups for in-progress silks.

combines with a folk figurine, and a caryatid reflects a participant in a Russian welcoming ceremony. In layered pairs, they move together and apart—revealing and obscuring their formal and metaphorical similarities. The visual and thematic parallels are emphasized by the physical pairing of the figures. The choice of folk or traditional figures locates the similarities in something fundamental—the modern-day examples are not just cultural parroting, but survivals, living elements of society.

The most recent work suggests an interesting direction for Maksymowicz’s engagement with architecture. Both *Caryatids in Five Books* and *Comparisons* use printed photographs as the central figurative component. The sculpted element becomes the support, the architecture within which the image rests. At the same time, both installations break from the common architec-

tural/sculptural form of the wall relief, moving into space to complicate the interplay of architecture and sculpture. As Maksymowicz focuses on the structural figure of the caryatid, the formal elements of her work invite the viewer to reconsider the nature of physical support.

In the caryatid, Maksymowicz has found a figure that allows her to graft her love of the beautiful object onto a timeless symbol of strength and support. This is a message of female strength and endurance, made without irony. As she explains, “I wanted

to take on the challenge of creating work that has sociopolitical implications, but that conveys a positive stance. It is relatively easy to make edgy work that is critical; it is a lot harder to be positive without being saccharine.” Indeed, the overt politics of Maksymowicz’s early work has shifted to a more nuanced and metaphorical approach, and her alluring forms lead the viewer to engage with a rich tradition of strong women.

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Notes

¹ See the entry for “Caryatids,” in Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, Salvatore Settis, eds., *The Classical Tradition*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 175.

² Translation in Hugh Plommer, “Vitruvius and the Origin of Caryatids,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 99 (1979): p. 97.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴ Camille Paglia has similarly described the Erechtheion caryatids in “Six Headstrong Women Confidently Raise Acropolis Roof,” *Bloomberg View*, October 7, 2012.



44

38



Departments

- 14 Itinerary
- 18 Commissions
- 80 ISC News

Reviews

- 72 Bonn, Germany: Isa Genzken
- 73 East Haddam, Connecticut: "Ephemeral Art in the Landscape"
- 74 Atlanta: Zipporah Camille Thompson
- 75 Boston: Christopher Frost
- 75 Saint Paul, Minnesota: Harriet Bart and Yu-Wen Wu
- 76 New York: John Crawford
- 77 New York: Donna Dennis
- 77 New York and Ghent, New York: Alain Kirili
- 78 Düsseldorf: Tomás Saraceno
- 79 Barcelona: Carlos Bunga

On the Cover: Richard Long, *Time and Space* (detail), 2015. Delabole slate, vertical arm: 355.9 x 54.3 in.; horizontal arm: 354.3 x 54.7 in. Photo: © Richard Long, Courtesy Arnolfini.

Features

- 20 Ideas Can Last Forever: A Conversation with Richard Long by Ino Cole
- 28 Michael Esbin: Actions in Stone by Jonathan Goodman
- 32 Corporeal Transitions: A Conversation with Doug Jeck by Suzanne B. Shaw
- 38 Daisy Youngblood: Shifts in Consciousness by Deborah Everett
- 44 Virginia Maksymowicz: Strong Supports by Sarah Archino
- 50 Pinaree Sanpitak: The Body is the Code by Kay Whitney
- 54 Robert Gober: Ordinary Ambiguity by Michael Amy



50

54



32

