

# Walking Lesson

Abakanowicz \ Markowski

Curator: Marek Bartelik

 **Green Point Projects**

2017

*If you board the wrong train,  
it is no use running  
along the corridor in  
the opposite direction.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup>

Marek Bartelik

A Walking Lesson:  
Abakanowicz / Markowski

Magdalena Abakanowicz (1930-2017) and Eugeniusz Markowski (1912-2007) –these two artists are not an obvious pairing. She was a world-renowned sculptor known for works that communicate foremost the angst and pain of living under the dark shadows of a totalitarian regime and the Cold War, as well as broader personal traumas experienced after World War II in Poland and elsewhere. He was a painter, little known outside of his native country, whose highly expressive compositions of naked people spoke about human life in a highly satirical, but also humorous way, exposing its *anarchical* madness put in—to use the words of the art critic and poet Mariusz Rosiak – “a corset of mental stereotypes of his time and place.”<sup>2</sup> What they shared artistically was their strong commitment to a figurative expressiveness with the uniquely Polish backlights on history.

Abakanowicz's life and art have been discussed in numerous books and exhibition catalogues, in which they are always closely linked and politicized.<sup>3</sup> She was still a child when World War II broke out, and studied at the State Higher School of Visual Arts in Gdańsk and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw during the Stalinist period, when artists were required to follow the doctrine of Socialist Realism. She distinguished herself with her giant weavings, called *Abakans*, made from dyed sisal fiber, which won her a Gold Medal at the São Paulo Biennale in 1965, the same year that she started to teach at the State Higher School of Visual Arts in Poznań, where she would work until 1990. In 1982, soon after the imposition of martial law in Poland, she was given permission to travel to the French capital to install her new show at the Musée d'Art de la Ville de Paris, which included her emblematic works called “Backs,” 1976-80. More major exhibitions followed, including numerous shows at the museums in the United States: the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C., and the PS1 Museum and Metropolitan Museum, both in New York, among others. For her audience in the West she became a prime example of an artist who struggled to overcome the obstacles of living and working behind the Iron Curtain. However, in Poland she was just an artist who had skillfully, and successfully, breached the walls of the Velvet Prison (to use Miklós Haraszti's expression<sup>4</sup>), and was given a stake in the official culture, while at the same time she enjoyed a major career abroad. After the Berlin Wall fell, marking the end of communism in Eastern Europe, a significant shift in Abakanowicz's art occurred. She distanced herself from political readings of her works, and shifted her focus to the growing concerns with ecological and environmental dangers posed to the natural world. Interestingly enough, with her new “organic structures” she returned to a preoccupation with nature similar to her interest in that subject at the very beginning of her career in the mid-1950s. When Abakanowicz died last April in Warsaw, her dramatic life, and its direct

impact on her work, was emphasized in numerous obituaries. Today, she remains Poland's most-exhibited artist, with works in almost every major museum in the world, where they are prominently displayed.

Eugeniusz Markowski's life abounded in dramatic events as well. His biography has been mostly known from the laconic notes in his exhibition catalogues produced on the occasion of many exhibitions of his work during his lifetime, most of which took place before the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Markowski graduated from the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts a year before the outbreak of the war and was wounded while participating in the defense of his country against the German invasion in the fall of 1939. After the Polish defeat, he escaped to Italy, where he actively took part in local artistic life, wrote articles for the Polish press, and worked for the Polish Embassy in Rome. He joined the Libera Associazione Arti Figurative (Free Association of Figurative Arts), which counted among its founding members the artists Gino Severini, Mario Mafai, Renato Guttuso and the architect Mario Ridolfi. The famous Futurist Enrico Prampolini authored an essay on Markowski's art for a small book on him, in which the Italian stressed the atmosphere of irony and the grotesque in Markowski's paintings.<sup>6</sup> In 1950, Markowski moved to Ottawa, Canada, where he took on the function of the *chargé d'affaires* at the Polish Embassy, responsible for, among other duties, the repatriating of Polish art left in North America after the beginning of World War II. He also continued his journalistic career—as a correspondent for the “Polpress” established by the communist Union of Polish Patriots (ZPP) in the Soviet Union in 1944, which became the official press agency of the Polish government. After his return to Poland in 1955 he assumed the position of Director of the Department of Cultural Promotion Abroad at the Polish Ministry of Culture and Art. Between 1970 and 1984, he taught at his alma mater, as well as the State Higher School of Visual Arts in Poznań. In State Socialist Poland, Markowski achieved major artistic recognition, but when he passed away in 2007 his death was barely recorded in the Polish mainstream media, let alone the international press.<sup>7</sup>

The biographies of these two artists—even if only presented in a significantly abbreviated form here—bear witness to the complexities of maintaining a successful artistic career in Poland, because art and politics there were often intertwined in a “schizophrenic” way.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in State Socialist Poland (unlike in the Soviet Union or East Germany) the government allowed relative freedom to artists, at least in terms of artistic expression, as long as they refrained from overtly criticizing the political system, and both Abakanowicz and Markowski took advantage of that leniency from early on. Their embraced expressiveness derived in large part from *art informel*—as practiced by such diverse artists as Jean Dubuffet, Wols, Alberto Giacometti, Karel Appel, and Jean Fautrier, all familiar to many Polish artists. *Art informel* was influenced by post-war existentialism and that philosophy had a significant impact on Abakanowicz and Markowski as well. However, while Abakanowicz's artistic language might reflect the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, Markowski's seem to have

been intellectually closer to the writings of Witold Gombrowicz, which, in such works as *Ferdydurke*, deliberately portrayed existence as an unserious, even funny, essence.

To me, Abakanowicz's figures seem Nietzschean, Markowski's—Don Quixotean. We may also say that they experience a Brechtian alienation while, at the same time, remaining committed to living individual lives.<sup>9</sup> Such emblematic figures appear in each artist's works with a stubborn consistency: as headless humanoids in the art of the former and as grotesque performers in that of the latter. And they return with obsessive repetitiveness. I find puzzling what Abakanowicz said about repetition, that it is “contrary to the workings of the mind, to its forward movement; it is contrary to the imagination.”<sup>10</sup> But she might have been right. As the theater director and artist Tadeusz Kantor astutely observed in 1955: “Any pressure coming from irrational causes is foreign to the modern man.”<sup>11</sup> Abakanowicz's work can be perceived as “unimaginative” in the sense that, indeed, it often comes with references to a specific memory, memory which requires being not just recalled, but, in fact, *rehearsed* in the artist's studio before it can be given a final form. Emblematic for that approach are her “Crowds,” made since the mid-1980s on, which the artist called “brainless organisms.”<sup>12</sup> For Abakanowicz, the headless, genderless figures arranged in different configurations in them — as if during a public demonstration, an execution, or a religious ceremony — speak the truth about human character much louder than faces: “The face can lie. The back cannot,” she argued, referring to her series “Backs.”<sup>13</sup> To further emphasize the proximity of her figures to real people, Abakanowicz made them *step down* from the traditional pedestal to assume positions directly on the ground, sometimes leaving them on a wobbly bench or a wooden trunk, where they became anti-monuments. And yet, despite their anti-monumental qualities, Abakanowicz's sculptures were masterfully crafted, with full consideration given to the uniqueness, and mystery, of the materials—such as sisal, burlap, resin, bronze, steel, or wood—that she worked with, often using several of them in one piece.

What is “unimaginative” and yet depicted in Markowski's paintings is the animalistic and animistic nature of his figures, which, in fact, as pathetic as it appears, is thoroughly human, even joyful, while animated by the winds of history and the wings of religion. They are his “aborigines” making dizzying somersaults in Space and his “worriers,” knights turned peasants, peasants turned knights, riding on horses and bulls. “We are the homo sapiens species. But, we carry the same instincts as the animals. It is important to me to show how grotesque we become, when carried by emotions we reject culture. We are naked, without realizing it”—the artist explained.<sup>14</sup> He could have said: “The naked body can't lie.” Markowski's naked people fight with each other, haunt each other, debate, pray, play music, make love, and allow their backs to be used as benches for others to sit on. On the occasion of the artist's major exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 1962, the art historian Zdzisław



Keipiński praised Markowski's innovation in the language of Marxist dialectics: "A merchant-usurer and a whore, a prelate and a Satan, a diplomat-official and a rabble proletarian feeding in the grounds of those with full bellies, timeless silhouettes from the theater of ludic imagination speak in art again, awakening echoes of the Last Judgments on Medieval portals, of plebian manuscripts from the peasant war in Germany of the Reformation period and French country fair farce from the time of the Hundred Years War. Markowski brings back literary content to painting, which it has been avoiding for a long time"<sup>15</sup> The literary aspect of his paintings is important; Markowski's paintings tell stories; and that literalness is reinforced by the incorporation of handwritten graffiti-style text and photographs. But, to pinpoint the originality of Markowski's figures is not simple. The originality of his art should not be directly related to the disadvantaged socio-economic status of his characters (as Keipiński attempted), nor to formal innovation as far as the approach to figurative painting is concerned, which, to his admirers, made Markowski a pioneer of the neo-expressionism practiced in the 1980s. Today what strikes one in his art is its tragicomic eroticism, graphic and yet ambiguous, even, perhaps especially, in terms of the gender identity and roles reenacted—a subject that was not exactly a taboo in State Socialist Poland, but which was seldom addressed in a complex, non-didactic, "non-dialectic" manner in the visual arts. And, of course, Markowski was fully committed to his craft as a painter, making his expressive works fine examples of "slow painting," that is, painted images that require great skill to make them, and which reveal their visual power over time.

As the figures in the works of Magdalena Abakanowicz and Eugeniusz Markowski *keep on walking* in the Green Point Projects in New York, over the crowded *theatrum mundi* depicted in their works looms the burden of World War II and its consequences. In that context, I picture these figures as the descendants of the people painted by Bronisław Wojciech Linke in *The Bus* (1959-1961). This truly horrifying image shows a crowd riding in a bus of Polish history, with half of its roof gone; among the figures shown are a mother with a baby, several zombie-like creatures, a large naked plastic doll, a headless man in a blue suit and a pink dress shirt, a sculpted bust of Stalin, a bottle dressed in traditional Kraków-region colorful costume, which includes a famous hat with a peacock feather. All of these characters resemble "human insects" from Kafka's world, but they seem to be performing the dance macabre from Stanisław Wyspiański's 1901 drama *The Wedding*.<sup>16</sup> They have survived another war, but have now found themselves caught in the giant spider web of post-war Polish reality, in a post-Apocalypse: They belong to the country after the thaw of 1956 that ended the era of Stalinism, but not the rule of the Communists. Their future remains unpredictable and, ultimately, extremely dangerous for those who disobey the authorities, including artists. Once they put their feet on the ground they will have to learn to live—and will keep on walking.

Marek Bartelik



Bronisław Wojciech Linke (1906 - 1962), *The Bus*, 1961, oil on canvas, 134 x 178.5 cm (ca. 53 x 70"), Collection of the National Museum in Warsaw.

## Endnotes

1. Quoted by Albrecht Schönherr, in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences of his Friends*, edited by Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald Gregor Smith, translated from the German by Käthe Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 129.
2. Mariusz Rosiak, "Teatr wyzwolonych żywiołów;" quoted from <http://www.arsenal.art.pl/wystawa/archiwum2272/>, accessed on September 30, 2017.
3. Major studies devoted to her work and life include: Michael Brenson, *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Recent Sculpture and Magdalena Abakanowicz: War Games*, exh. cats. (1993); Barbara Rose, *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (1994); Joanna Inglot, *The Figurative Sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz: Bodies, Environments, and Myths* (2004); and Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Fate and Art: Monologue* (2008). Abakanowicz authored an autobiographical text, entitled "Portrait X 20" and dated on 1978-80, which was published in *Magdalena Abakanowicz*, exh. cat. (Chicago and New York: Museum of Contemporary Art and Abbeville, 1982). In addition to those studies, there are numerous monographs and exhibition catalogues published in Polish.
4. See, Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, transl. by Katalin and Stephen Landesmann with the help of Steve Wasserman (New York: Basic Books/ New Republic Books, 1987).
5. For information about Markowski's life see the interview with him conducted by Krzysztof Stanisławski for *Sztuka*, vol 4, 1988.
6. *Eugeniusz Markowski*, published in the series "Documenti d'arte contemporanea" by the Grandi Edizioni Vega in Torino in 1947.
7. The art critic Monika Małkowska commented in the daily *Rzeczpospolita* on the occasion of two exhibitions following the artist's death: "He died eight months ago, age 95. Almost no one noted it. We may say—bad luck again, which haunted his art; but not him personally. Eugeniusz Markowski had a life worth of a film script." Monika Małkowska, "Zamieszany w sprawy świata", *Rzeczpospolita* (October 23, 2007); quoted from <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/64235-Zamieszany-w-sprawy-swiatea.html#ap-1>, accessed on September 30, 2017.
8. "Schizophrenic" was one of the most common words used to describe daily life in Poland under communism. Abakanowicz used it when talking to Suzanne Muchnic for the article "She's Turned her Backs on the World," *The Los Angeles Times* (March 25, 2001), conducted on the occasion of her exhibition at Grant Selwyn Fine Arts; quoted from <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/mar/25/entertainment/ca-42311>, accessed on October 1, 2017. Her series "Heads," 1973-75, was originally called "Schizoid Heads."
9. "We Are All Children of Don Quixote" was the title of one of Markowski's drawings produce in Italy.
10. Barbara Rose, *Magdalena Abakanowicz* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., Publishers, 1994), 20.
11. Tadeusz Kantor, "Z notatnika," in Wiesław Borowski, *Tadeusz Kantor* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1982), 161.
12. Muchnic, "She's Turned her Backs on the World."
13. Ibid.
14. Małkowska, "Zamieszany w sprawy świata."
15. Quoted from unsigned biographical profile posted on [http://www.galeriagiza.pl/wystawa\\_markowski/markowski\\_biografia.html](http://www.galeriagiza.pl/wystawa_markowski/markowski_biografia.html), accessed on September 30, 2017.
16. *The Wedding* (*Wesele*, in Polish; 1901) is a drama based on a real-life event, which focuses on the wedding ceremony of a poet from Kraków with a peasant bride. The play has been interpreted as a symbolic and satirical portrayal of the national characteristics of the Polish society at the very beginning of the twentieth century, when the country was still under the foreign occupation.





Magdalena  
**Abakanowicz**



**EMBRIOLOGY**

no date

welded metal

17 x 29 x 16 cm



Magdalena Abakanowicz

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**MASK**

no date

jute, resin, wood

64,5 x 20 x 20 cm



Magdalena Abakanowicz

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**UNTITLED**

no date  
jute, resin, wood  
137 x 47 x 24,5 cm





Magdalena Abakanowicz

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**KATHARSIS**

1985  
lithography on paper  
76 x 56 cm



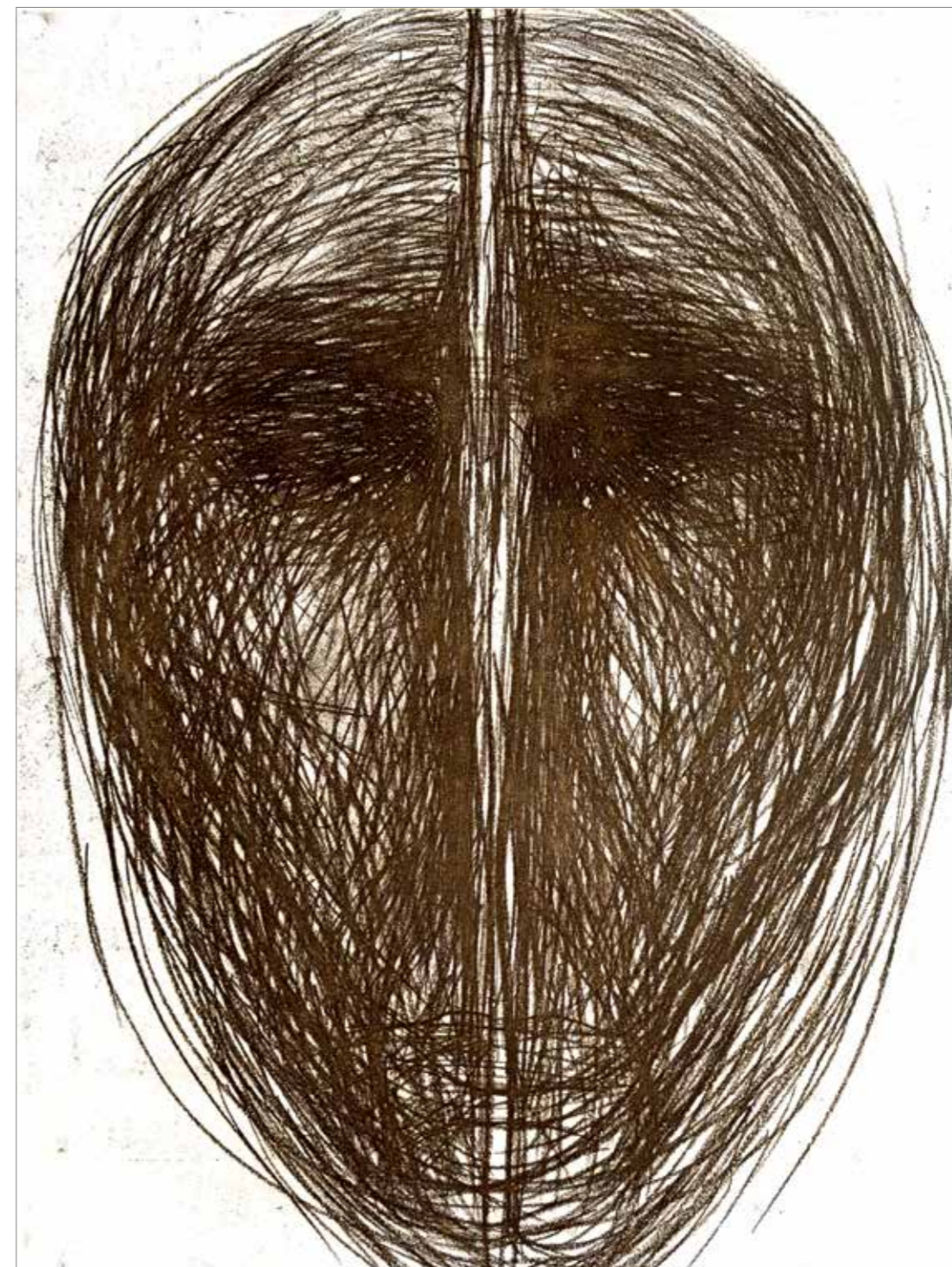


Magdalena Abakanowicz

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**KATHARSIS**

1985  
lithography on paper  
76 x 56 cm





Magdalena Abakanowicz

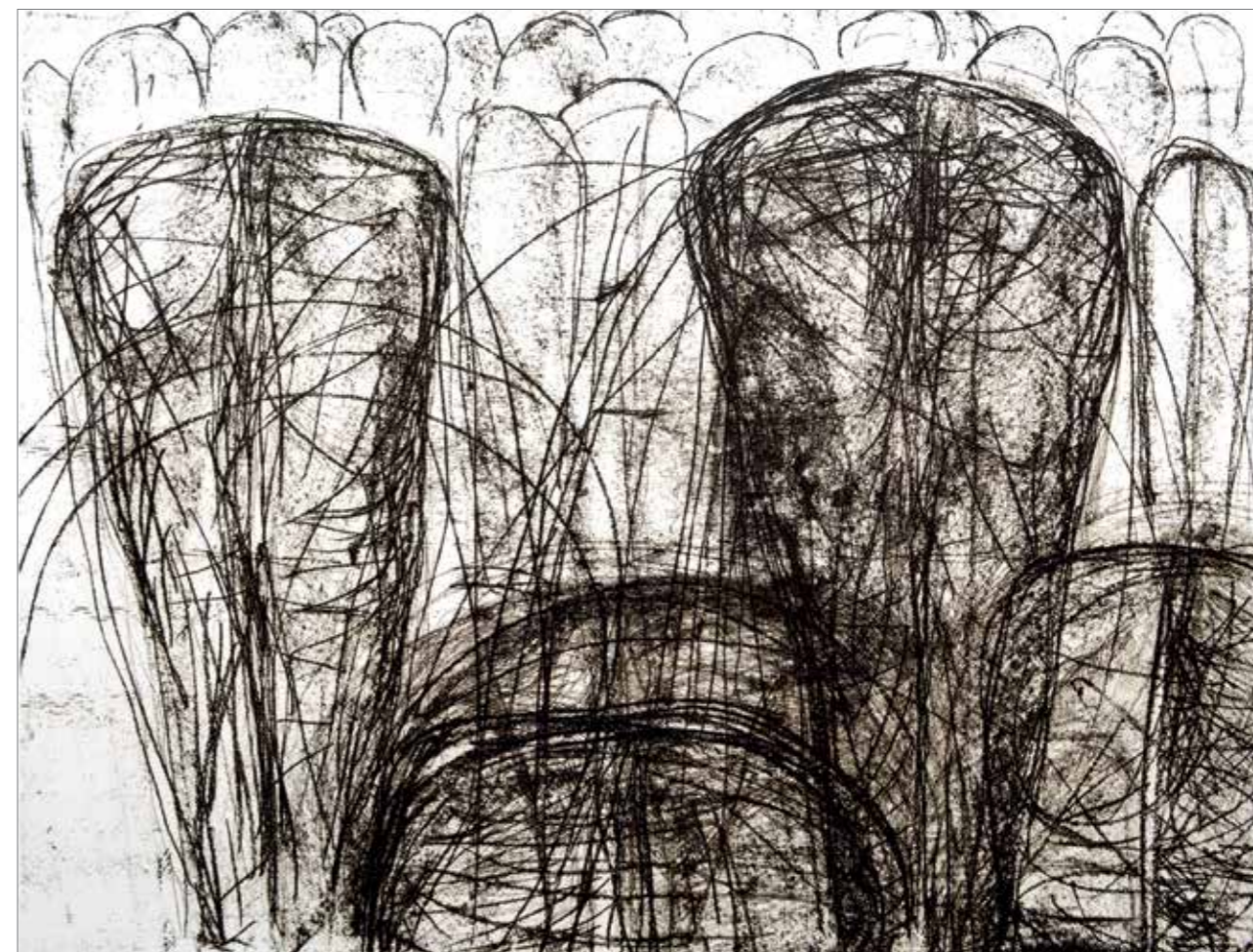
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**KATHARSIS**

1985  
lithography on paper  
76 x 56 cm







**KATHARSIS**  
1985  
lithography on paper  
76 x 56 cm

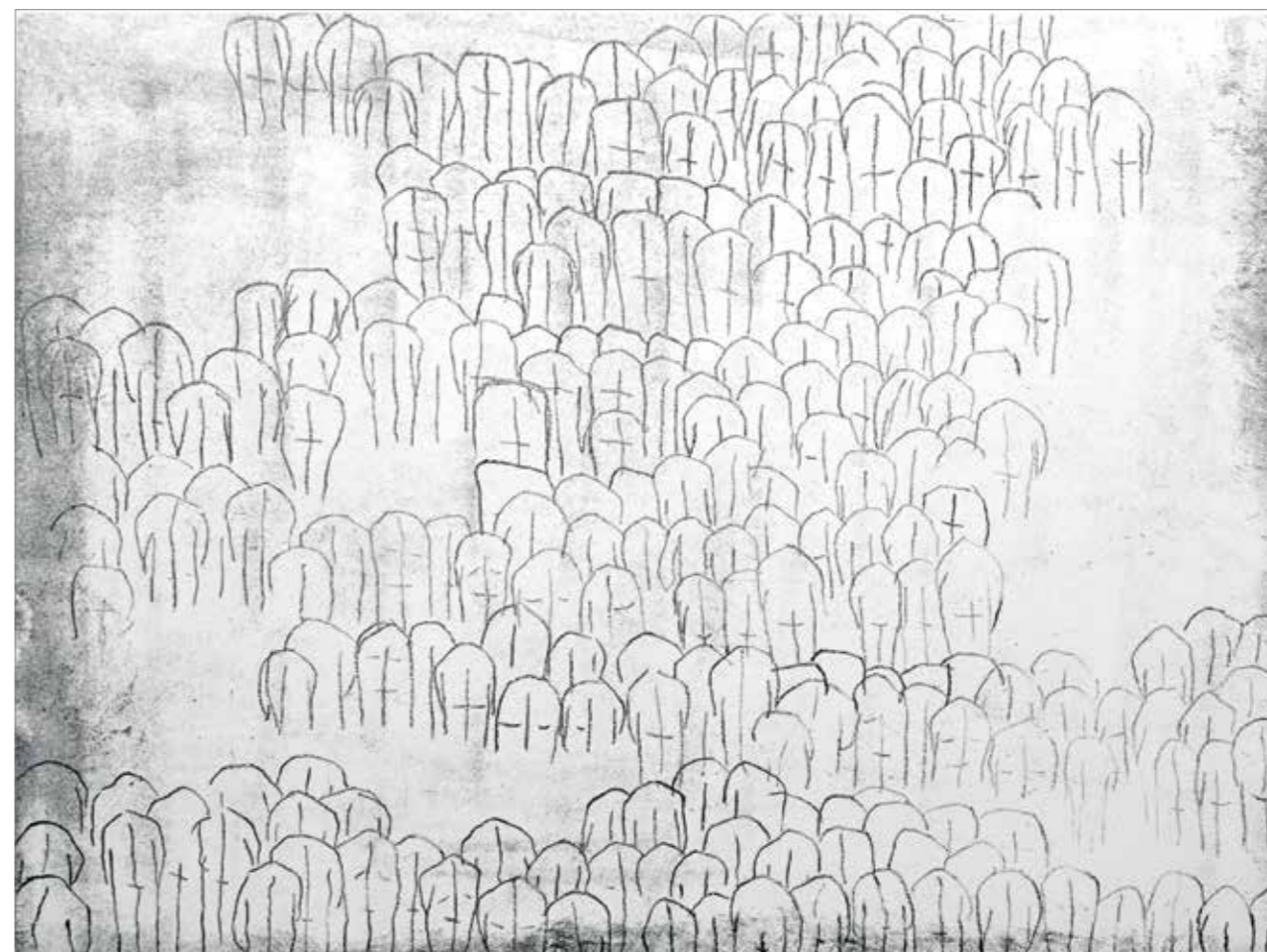


**KATHARSIS**  
1985  
lithography on paper  
76 x 56 cm



Magdalena Abakanowicz

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**KATHARSIS**  
1985  
lithography on paper  
76 x 56 cm





Eugeniusz  
**Markowski**





CONTEMPLATION - 2

1976

oil on canvas

135 x 110 cm





**A CARD**

1976  
oil on canvas  
126 x 140 cm



Eugeniusz Markowski

**A PYRAMID**  
1980  
oil on canvas  
136 x 80 cm





Eugeniusz Markowski

TWO PERSONS – 2. SZ. 2

1981

oil on canvas

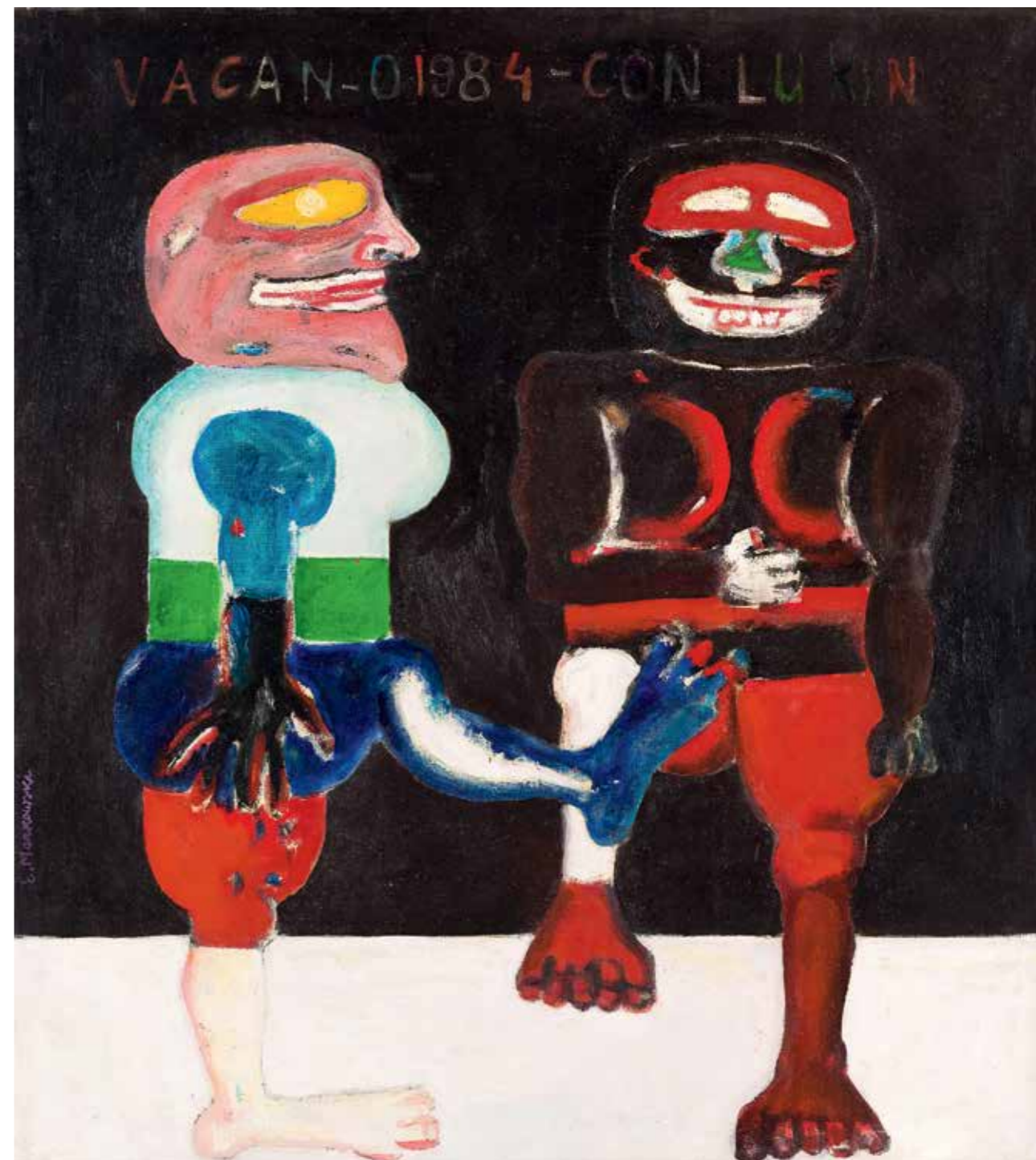
120 x 100 cm





VACAN-01984-CON LU KIN

1984  
oil on canvas  
80 x 90 cm



Eugeniusz Markowski

**A WALKING LESSON - 2**

1987

oil on canvas

150 x 120 cm





A+B  
1989  
oil on canvas  
140 x 110 cm





UNTITLED

no date  
ink on paper  
24 x 19 cm

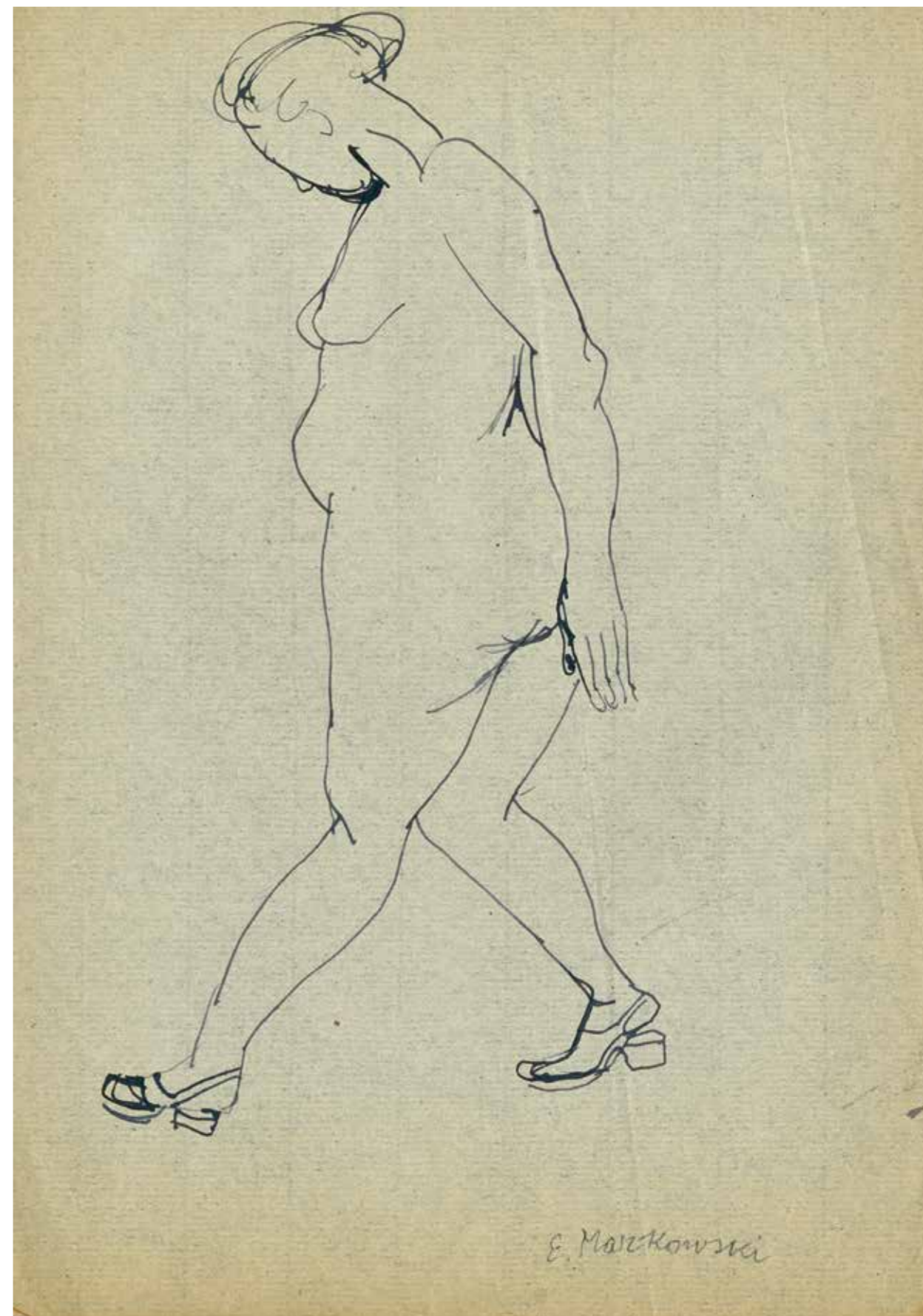




Eugeniusz Markowski

---

**UNTITLED**  
no date  
ink on paper  
30 x 21 cm



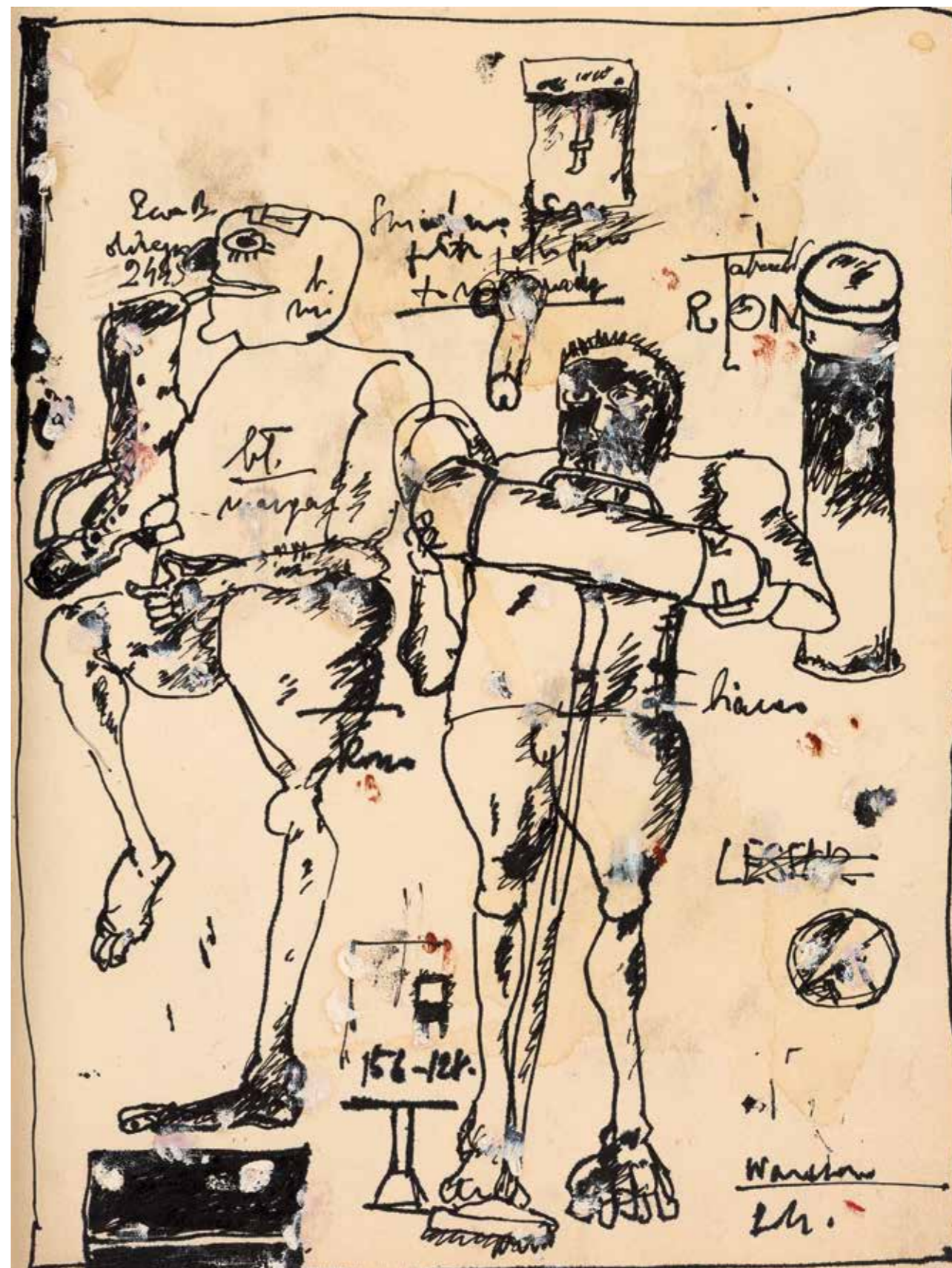
**UNTITLED**

no date  
ink on paper  
21 x 17 cm





UNTITLED  
no date  
ink on paper  
28 x 21 cm





Eugeniusz Markowski

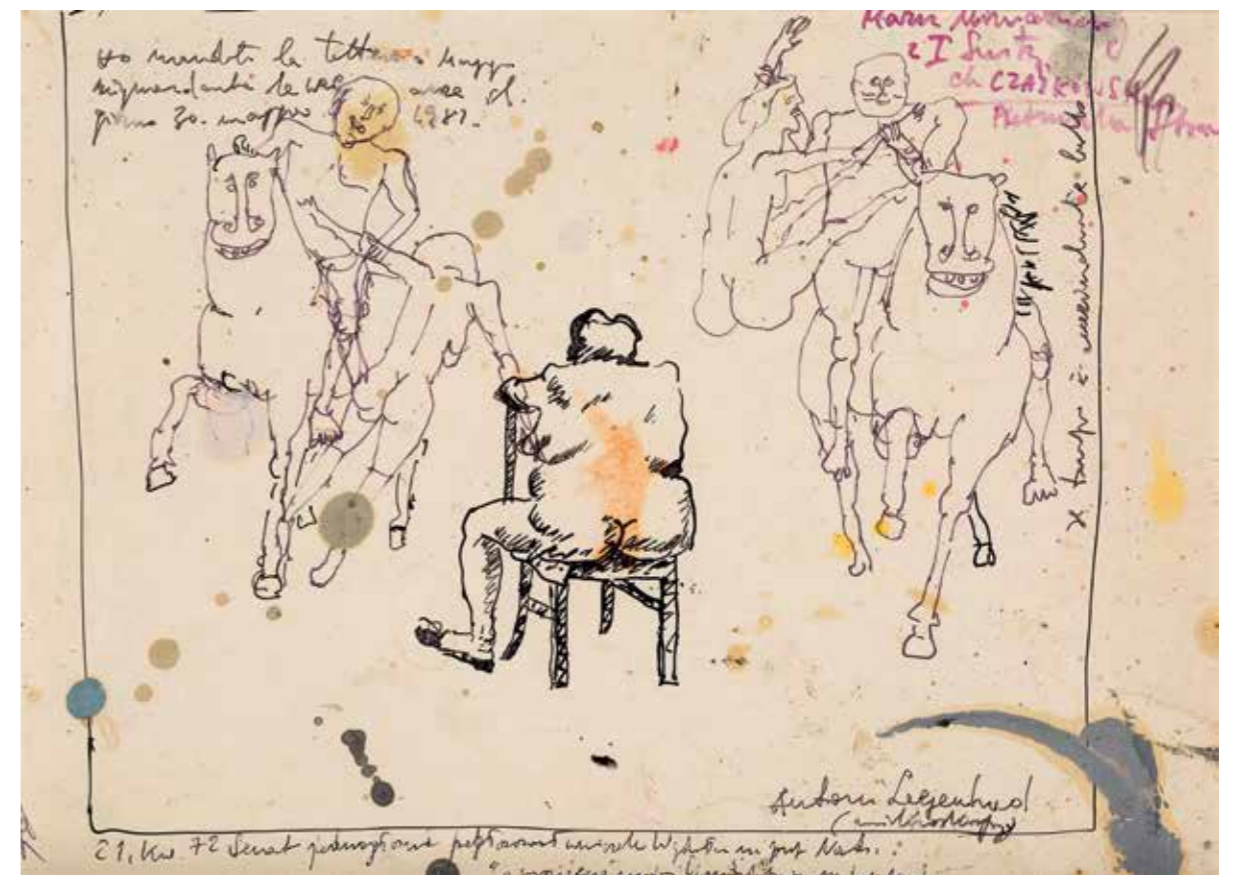
UNTITLED

no date  
ink on paper  
21 x 29 cm



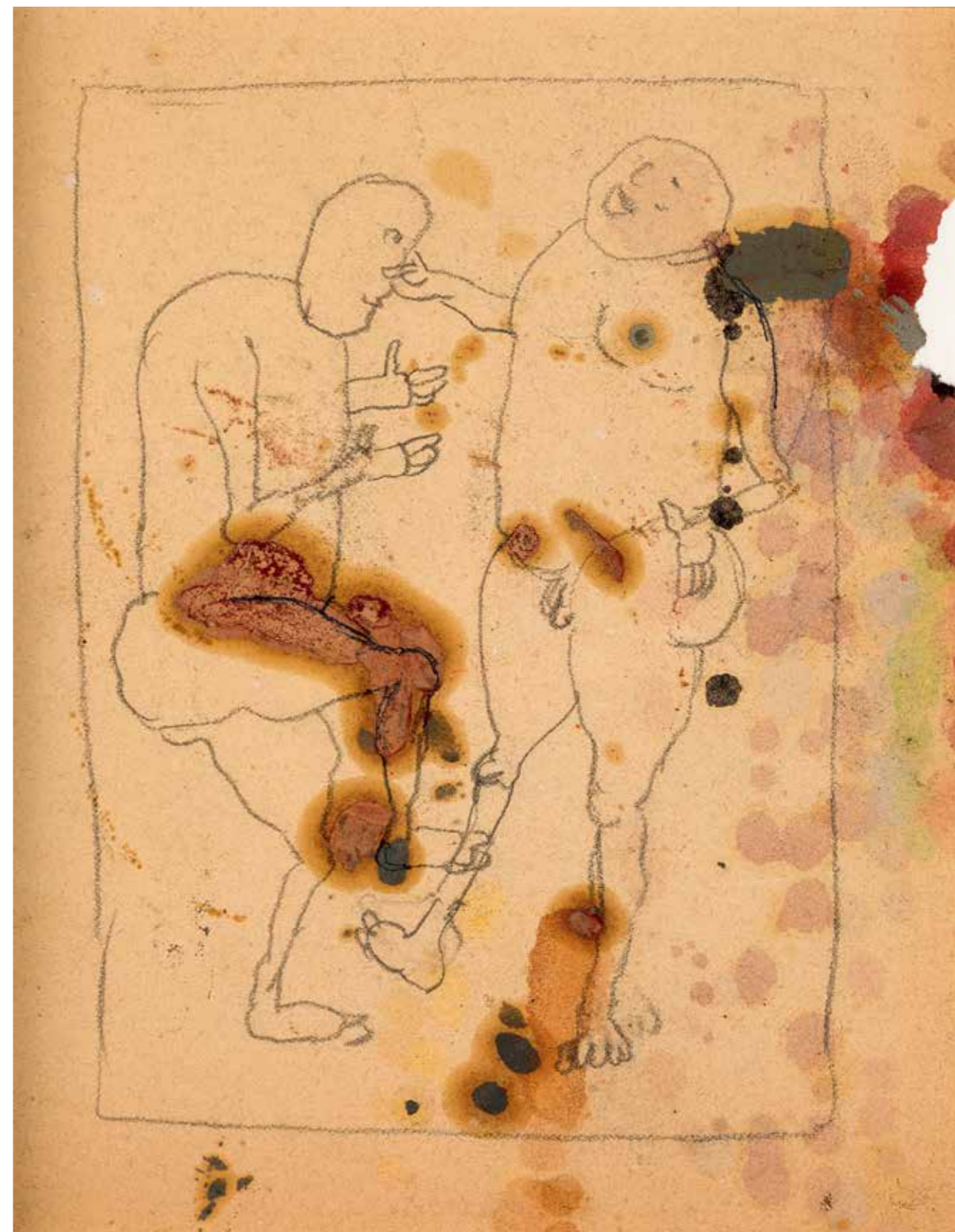
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no date  
ink on paper  
20 x 28 cm





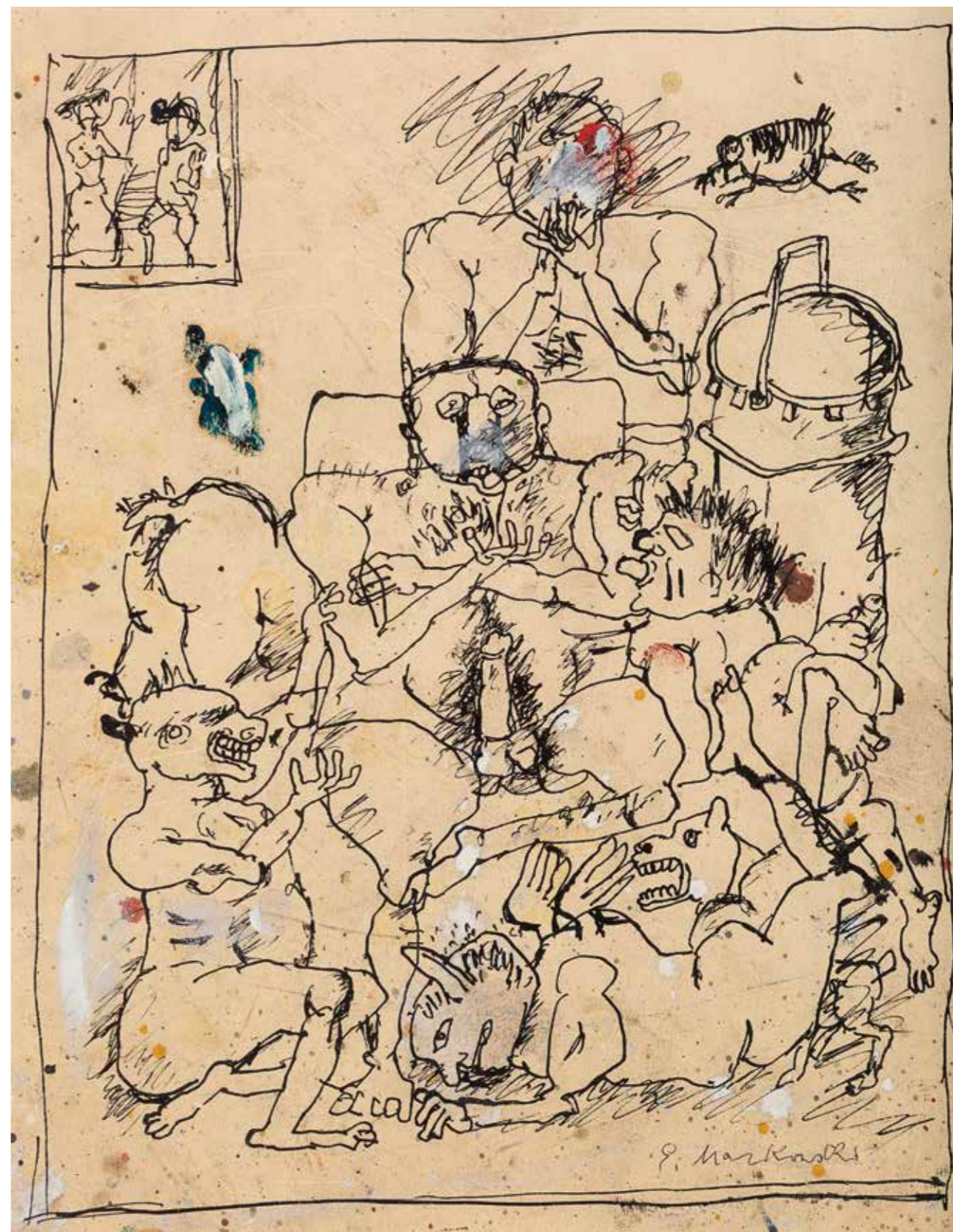
**UNTITLED**  
no date  
pencil on paper  
24,5 x 19 cm





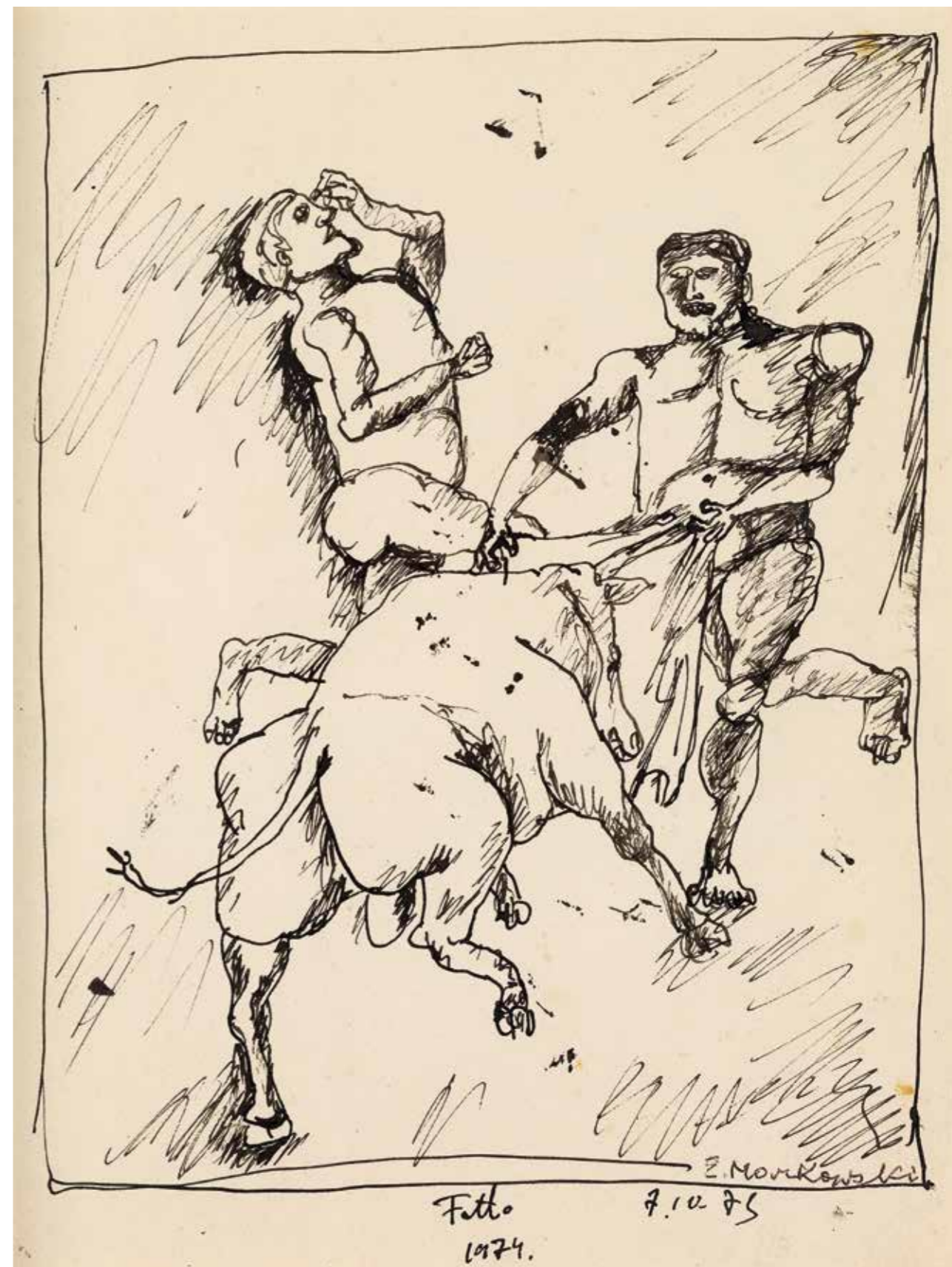
UNTITLED

no date  
ink on paper  
34 x 26 cm





FATTO  
1974  
ink on paper  
24 x 18 cm





Eugeniusz Markowski

**FONEMOFON**  
1976  
gouache on paper  
41 x 30 cm





UNTITLED

no date  
tempera on paper  
36,5 x 28 cm



**UNTITLED**

no date  
tempera on paper  
35 x 20 cm





Eugeniusz Markowski

UNTITLED

no date  
tempera on paper  
28 x 35,5 cm



UNTITLED

no date  
tempera on paper  
29 x 34 cm



## Exhibitions - Magdalena Abakanowicz

1962	Tapisseries. Magdalena Abakanowicz. Galerie Dautzenberg, Paris
1968	2-en 3-dimensionale weefsels. Stedelijk von Abbe Muzeum Eindhoven; Museum voor Stad en Lande Groningen; Helmhaus Zurich
1969	Tapisseries und raumliche. Texturen. Stadtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, Mannheim
1970	En konfrontation. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm
1971	The fabric of forms of Magdalena Abakanowicz, Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena
1972	Environments. Aberdeen Art Gallery, Aberdeen
1973	Rope structures, Arnolfini Museum, Bristol
1975	Organic Structures and Human Forms, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London
1976	Organic structures and soft forms, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1982	Abakanowicz. Alterations. Musee d Art Moderne de la Ville Paris, Glenbow – Alberta Institute, Calgary
1983/4	Magdalena Abakanowicz. Retrospective. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Visual Arts Center of Alaska, Alaska, Portland Art Museum, Portland, National Academy of Science, Washington
1985/6	Magdalena Abakanowicz – About Men, Sculpture. Xavier Fourcade Inc., New York, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Galeria Sztuki Plastycznej KUL, Lublin
1988	War Games and Inkarnations. Galerie Turske & Turske, Zurich
1990	Magdalena Abakanowicz. Gemeentmuseum Arnhem, Arnhem
1992/94	Magdalena Abakanowicz. Abington Art Center – Sculpture Garden, Philadelphia
1994/95	Magdalena Abakanowicz. Galeria Marlborough, Madrid, Museo Fundacion Pilar y Joan Miro, Barcelona, CSW Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Sotheby's, Stockholm
1996/1997	Hand – like Trees. Doris Freedman Plaza, New York
1997	Mutants. Marlborough Gallery, New York
1998	Abakanowicz. Starmach Gallery, Cracow
1999	Abakanowicz on the Roof, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
1999	Wild flowers (drawings) Marlborough Gallery, New York
2000	Black crowd – Pour le merite. Skulpturengarten, Dortmund
2000	95 Figures from the Crowd of 1095 Figures Marlborough Gallery, New York
2000	Working proces. The Gori Collection, Santomato di Pistoia, Italy
2001	About Human Condition. Grant Selwyn Fine Art, Beverly Hills, Musee d Art Moderne et d Art Contemporain, Liege, Wiliam Benton Museum of Art, Connecticut
2002	Space of stone. Grounds for Sculpture. Hamilton, New York
2003	Dancing figures. Marlborough Fine Art, London, Beck & Eggeling International Fine Art, Dusseldorf
2003	The long wait. MacLaren Fine Art, Barrie
2003	About imagination. Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids
2004	Mutation & Crystalization. Pei Ling Chan Gallery, Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah
2004	Hurma. Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpetriere, Paris
2004	Sculpture. Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum, Museum Franz Gertsch, Burgdorf
2004	Melchior, Jonas and the eight white faces. Taguchi Fine Art, Tokio
2005	Space to Experience. Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale
2005	La Foule V. Galerie Saint-Severin, Paris
2005	Im Dialog VI. Stadtkirche Darmstadt, Darmstadt
2005	Works on paper. Marlborough Gallery, New York
2006	Sculptures et Dessins. Marlborough Monaco, Monaco
2006	Vision beyond words. Trondhjem Kunstmuseum, Trondheim
2007	Coexistence – Dream, Gruby and Koziot. Taguchi Fine Art, Tokio
2008	Where are the areas of calm? Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid
2009	Space to Experience. Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro, Milan, Bad Homburg
2011	Magdalena Abakanowicz – Life and Work. Muzeum Moderniho Umeni, Olomouc
2012	Magdalena Abakanowicz – The Human Adventure. Akbank Sanat, Istanbul
2014/15	New York Avenue Sculpture Project – Magdalena Abakanowicz. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington
2015	Crowd and Individual. Venice, Dusseldorf
2016	Abakanowicz//Pijarowski – The Art Dimensions (Prologue – Warsaw), Warsaw

## Exhibitions - Eugeniusz Markowski

1962	“Metaphors”, BWA Sopot, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
1963	7 <sup>th</sup> Biennale of Art, São Paulo
1964	Profile IV, Polonische Kunst Heute' [Profiles, Polish Art Today], Stadlische Kunstgalerie, Bochum, Germany
1965	Solo show of paintings and drawings, Chiocciola Gallery, Pauda, Italy
1966	Exhibition of Ten Polish Painters, Sveagalleriet, Stockholm
1967	Solo show of paintings, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
1968	Six painters from Poland, Royal College of Art Galleries, London
1969	Solo show paintings, Castle of the Pomeranian Dukes, Poland
1970	1000 Years of Polish Art, Royal Academy of Art, London
1972	Solo show of paintings, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
1973	Solo show of paintings, Kunsthalle, Mannheim, Germany
1975	Contemporary Polish Painting, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City
1981	Solo show, Studio Gallery, Warsaw
1983	“Imagination and Reality”, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
1984	Solo show of paintings, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
1986	Eugeniusz Markowski – drawing, Studio Arts Centre, Warsaw
1989	“The Open Door, Exhibition of Contemporary Polish Painting”, Palace, Copenhagen
1991	“20 <sup>th</sup> -century Art Collection of the Museum of Art in Łódź”, Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw
1996	Eugeniusz Markowski – painting, National Museum, Szczecin
1997	“Limits to the Painted Image – Painting in Poland in the 1990s”, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw
1998	“Part of the Collection:”, National Museum, Poznań
1999	Paintings and drawings, Jesuits' Gallery, Poznań
2004	AC Gallery, Cracow
2005	Eugeniusz Markowski – painting, DAP Gallery, Warsaw



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