***The Dark Arts* explores the wide-ranging, fantastical visual universe of Polish artist Aleksandra Waliszewska. Bringing together over 200 works by 42 artists from Poland, Ukraine, Czech Republic, and the Baltic states, this exhibition unpacks Waliszewska's intensive dialogue with the fin-de-siècle Symbolist movement—particularly focusing on the culturally specific subjects she shares with her Eastern and Northern predecessors.**

Like her Symbolist forbears, Waliszewska's art is invested in the metaphorical meanings behind her visual narratives—allowing her to dissect the complexities of the human condition. The exhibition's transhistorical dialogue aims to give deeper context to Waliszewska's preoccupation with mythological tropes, apocalyptic scenarios, and charged Balto-Slavic landscapes.

The works in the exhibition are grouped around several chapters stemming from recurrent themes in Waliszewska's oeuvre. As the visitor walks through the space, they will encounter these thematic clusters that also juxtapose Waliszewska's work with other artists with whom she shares formal and thematic affinities. These sections make up the historical 'family tree' that *The Dark Arts* elucidates.

Curators:

Alison M. Gingeras, Natalia Sielewicz

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Aleksandra Waliszewska does not title her works. All the pieces presented at the exhibition were created between 1997 and 2022. These are gouaches and pastels on paper, and a few oil paintings on canvas, presented here for the first time.

Exhibited Artists

Aleksandra Waliszewska

Maria Anto, Bolesław Biegas, Wanda Bibrowicz, Erna von Brinckmann, Bernhard Borchert, Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis, Frans Crabbe van Espleghem, Anna Dębska, Kazimiera Dębska, Emīlija Gruzīte, Marian Henel, Mieczysław Jakimowicz, Marcė Katiliūtė, Theodor Kittelsen, Erich Kügelgen, Konstanty Laszczka, Bronisław Linke, Mykola Murashko, Teofil Ociepka, Edward Okuń, Jaroslav Panuška, Juozas Pjaulokas, Aleksander Promet, Yevmen Pschechenko, Kristjan Raud, Vaclovas Ratas-Rataiskis, Jan Rembowski, Hugo Simberg, Gustavs Šķilters, Karel Šlenger, Nikolai Triik, Teodors Ūders, Vitkauskas, Joanna Waliszewska, Marian Wawrzeniecki, Witold Wojtkiewicz, Andrzej Wróblewski, Rihards Zariņš, Bogdan Ziętek, Antanas Žmuidzinavičius, Stefan Żechowski

MUSEUM ON THE VISTULA

Wybrzeże Kościuszkowskie 22

Opening hours

Tuesday—Friday	12 p.m. – 8 p.m.
Saturday	11 a.m. – 8 p.m.
Sunday	11 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Exhibition guide: waliszewska.artmuseum.pl

Guided tour in English – every Saturday at 4 p.m.

All events accompanying the exhibition are available on website artmuseum.pl

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We encourage parents and guardians to familiarize themselves with the exhibition, as some of the content presented here may be considered inappropriate for children. Admission for visitors under the age of 14 is possible only with the written consent of their parents or guardians.

Partners of the Exhibition

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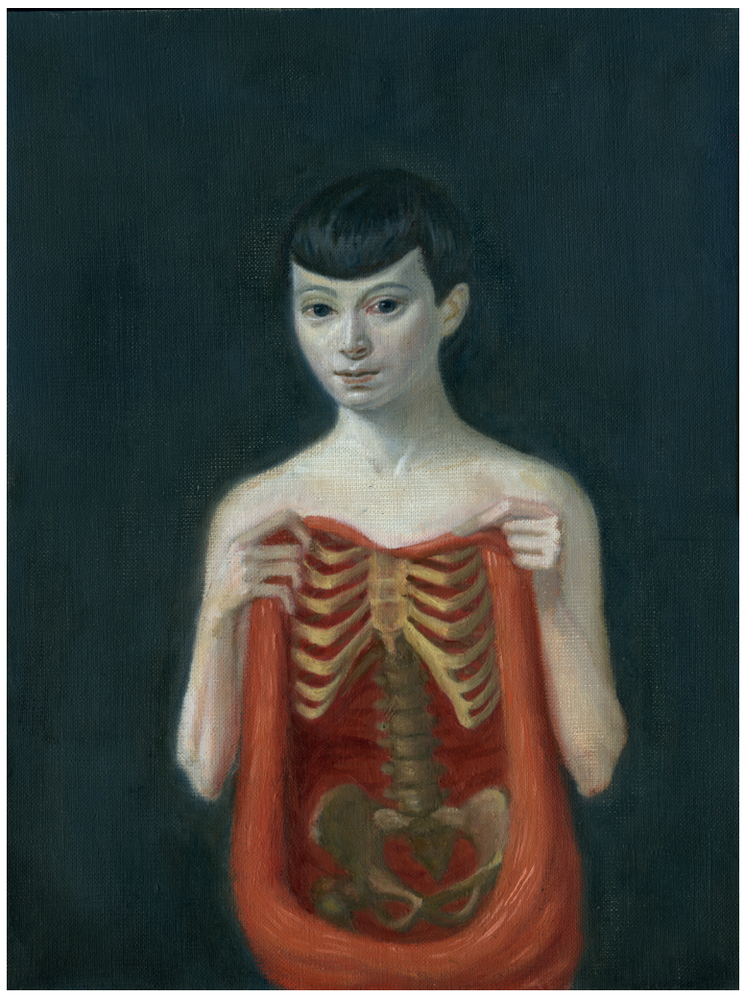
MORTALITY, DISEASE & MOURNING

Death is an omnipresent theme in Waliszewska's oeuvre. The traditional emblems of human mortality make regular appearances in her paintings–skeletons, flayed open flesh, exposed organs, oozing wounds, festering corpses, faces with exposed skulls, coffins, open graves, gallows, and of course the Grim Reaper's scythe. Reaching back to the Middle Ages, the allegorical representation of human fragility has been a mainstay of artistic production, from the *Danses Macabres* in 1400s woodcuts, to the skull-strewn Vanitas pictures of the Dutch Golden Age, to medieval Christian illuminated manuscripts. In Waliszewska's work, the surmounting of the fear of mortality and disease can be traced to the strategies deployed by the Polish Symbolists, masters of the Młoda Polska (Young Poland) movement—Witold Wojtkiewicz, Mieczysław Jakimowicz, Jan Rembowski, Marian Wawrzeniecki—who, in the existential fight against their own fatal illnesses, combined irony with tragedy, self-deprecation with dandy-like self-styling.



Waliszewska's own brand of the macabre frequently draws from these Symbolists' mise-en-scènes, she counterbalances gratuitous pathos with her irreverent sense of humor. One of her favorite subversion strategies is to insert punks and gothic drunkards into the center of these Młoda Polska-esque mourning narratives. Yet the sense of vanitas and perishability underlies many of her subversive images, perhaps since numerous works by Młoda Polska painters were lost or destroyed during World War II—thus inspiring her drive to recreate these iconic scenes.

CATMANIA & ANIMALIA

If there is one signature subject in Waliszewska's two decades of work, it is her obsession with cats. Hers are no ordinary house cats. Her cat protagonists lounge lazily in Młoda Polska-style interiors, smoke cigarettes absorbed in discussion with one other, participate in battles, or perform bloodthirsty rituals. Cats are ambiguous witnesses to tragedy and despair that regularly occur on her canvases. Cats can be monsters, too. However, their monstrosity is as enchanting as it is disruptive, it lures the viewer into a terrain between the living and the dead, the human and animal. For women, and others who have been historically oppressed, the identification with animals opens a possibility of reclaiming the subversive potential of the 'animal in me.'

Waliszewska was born into an exceptionally artistic family, comprised of four generations of women artists—all of whom adored and depicted animals. Her great grandmother, Kazimiera Dębska was a published writer, known for her fairytales. Her grandmother was the famous postwar sculptor Anna Dębska, known for her fantastical menagerie of animal imagery. The artist's mother Joanna Waliszewska is also a trained artist, producing paintings and sculptures. These successive generations of creative women have left an indelible mark on Waliszewska—examples of their works are being exhibited together publicly for the first time in this exhibition.

THE FIGURE OF THE UPIÓR: SLAVIC FIGURE OF THE LIVING DEAD

The uniquely Slavic history of the *upiór* (the Polish term for vampire) has become a founding source for Waliszewska's own exploration of this world of the living dead. Drawing from a wide range of visual source material, from medieval manuscripts to the nineteenth century Symbolist works that dealt with the dark figure of the upiór in Polish, Czech, and Baltic artists' works, *The Dark Arts* further enriched this cultural trope bringing it into the twenty-first century consciousness. By analogy, in his provocative study on *upiorism*, medieval scholar Łukasz Kozak argues that *upiórs*, knows also as *strzygońs* or *wieszcze*, depending on their geographical specificity, embodied a memory of real-life events, anxieties, and actions, and stand for people who fell victim to exclusion and persecution during their lifetime, and hence were haunted after death. Some protagonists of Waliszewska's paintings—as if they themselves were *upiórs*—exercise various forms of agency, while remaining on the fringe of societal norms and ordinary human relations.

ENCHANTED LANDSCAPES: FOREST & SWAMP

Sirens, skeletons, reptilian *femme fatales*, zombies, and other lost souls: the swamp and forest in Waliszewska's oeuvre is a tense, enigmatic space, inhabited by a supernatural bestiary, and where unusual encounters between life and death occur.

In Balto-Slavic Symbolist work, as in Waliszewska's oeuvre, the muddy slime is where desires can be fulfilled. *Trzęsawisko*—one of the terms in the Polish language for a swamp—derives its root from the word *trząść* (to tremble), pointing thus towards the dangerous liaisons between the sensation of sinking and the affective impact of fear and ecstasy felt in the proximity of losing one's ground and falling into an abyss.

MATRIARCHY, MADONNAS, MERMAIDS & MAIDENS

Deploying her signature subversion of her deep art historical knowledge base, Waliszewska frequently revisits classical themes featuring female protagonists: Christian Madonnas, the medieval trope of the Maiden, the pagan priestess or witch, and the folk theme of the Mermaid. In each retelling of these timeworn subjects, Waliszewska makes these archetypes her own. She injects them with her macabre sensibility, while keeping female agency as the central force of her visual narratives. Rarely are her women passive victims, her female iconography projects empowered agencies and reversals of the male gaze. In many of Waliszewska's paintings, women exist among their own kind in a single-sex dystopia.

When Waliszewska appropriates pre-existing Symbolist tropes in her depictions of women, there seems to be a corrective agenda. Whereas some of her favorite Symbolist artists depicted generic women, without individuation, as a vehicle to explore 'feminine evil,' Waliszewska's maidens are devoid of moral judgement, while they are also hyper-specifically individuated, often based on likenesses of her friends or celebrities. Her entire oeuvre depicting women refutes the allegorical conventions of past art that portrays woman as the embodiment of societal ills, anxiety about sex and sin. Waliszewska knowingly upends this historical convention, as if liberating each female protagonist, casting her story in an amoral light. Her women get up to some pretty sinister deeds in some works—her girls might be vampires, cannibals, murderesses—yet, they are not empty vessels for male, moral judgements. Instead, Waliszewska's women carry the full agency of their actions, no matter how nefarious or lascivious.