

**„THE STORAGE ART MUSEUM” FROM CONSTANȚA TO SANTANDER.  
THE FEMALE BODY BETWEEN MYTH AND RESISTANCE IN  
ROMANIAN GRAPHIC ART FROM THE COMMUNIST PERIOD**

**Abstract:** *“The Female Body Between Myth and Resistance in Romanian Graphic Art from the Communist Period” is an exhibition of the Constanța Art Museum, opened on February 25th 2026 at the headquarters of the government of the Autonomous Community of Cantabria, Spain, in partnership with the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) Madrid. The event takes place under the patronage of the Embassy of Romania in the Kingdom of Spain and is part of a series of events celebrating 140 years of diplomatic relations between Romania and Spain. The exhibition, which is part of the broader project “The Storage Art Museum”, was opened to the public in Spain until March 31st 2026. In the visual universe of communism, the female figure occupies a central, yet deeply ambiguous place. Elevated to the status of a symbol of progress, productive force, and the “bright future”, she is at the same time dehumanized, reduced to an ideological function. Communist graphic art systematically constructs the myth of the super-woman: an indefatigable figure, eternally young, eternally smiling, capable of working without effort, of giving birth to the future and of educating it according to state doctrine.*

**Keywords:** *Constanța Art Museum, Romanian graphic art, communist propaganda, gender representation, female body, Resistance.*

## **1. Introduction**

In posters and illustrations, she dominates the visual space alongside machinery, factories, and agricultural fields, fully integrated into the state’s productive mechanism. Femininity is redefined: it no longer belongs to intimacy or sensitivity, but is subordinated to efficiency, sacrifice, and social utility. Behind this visual ideal, however, a painful reality was concealed. Real women lived through daily hardship generated by an imposed double role: worker and mother, model citizen and pillar of the family, active participant in the “construction of socialism” and guarantor of demographic reproduction and child-rearing. Propaganda promised emancipation and equality, but in practice delivered an additional burden. Women were required to be everything, without being allowed to be themselves. Beneath the optimistic surface of the image lay physical exhaustion, strict control over the body, lack of freedom of choice, and constant pressure to conform to an impossible ideal.

Yet these images are not only instruments of power. When examined closely, they can also be read as spaces of tension. In certain rigid gazes, in bodily disproportions, or in exaggerated heroic gestures, one can glimpse a fissure—an excess that betrays the artificial construction of the myth. Real women moved through these representations, wearing them like masks, but never fully merging with them. The exhibition proposes a critical reading of these images: not as simple propaganda documents, but as mirrors of a struggle. Between the ideal woman and the real woman stretches a space of conflict, suffering, and resistance.

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The communist super-woman is, ultimately, a paradox: an omnipotent figure at the symbolic level, but entirely deprived of power in the reality of everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Construction of the Communist Super-Woman: Myth, Ideology, and Representation

The selection of works in this exhibition outlines a recurring typology of the female worker, present in scenes of harvest, gathering, agricultural labor, or industrial activity. In works such as *The Workers* by Emilia Dumitrescu, *Harvest* or *At Dawn at Work* by Iulian Olariu, the female body is captured in full action, integrated into a production rhythm that appears naturalized. Gestures are firm, repeatable, almost mechanical. Thus, we witness a choreography of labor in which the subject is dissolved into role. This aesthetics of labor is not neutral. From a historical perspective,



Collage of Graphic Artworks from Constanța Art Museum included in the Santander Exhibition

the female body becomes an administered territory: it must work, produce food, sustain the economy, and simultaneously guarantee the biological continuity of the state. Works such as *The Collective Women Workers* by Lucia Cosmescu or *Women Hoeing* by Dimitrie Nicolaide transform agricultural activity into an almost moral act, where discipline and sacrifice are elevated into virtues. The myth of the communist super-woman is constructed precisely through this accumulation of roles, with the woman being not only a worker but also a specialist in the new fields of “socialist progress,” such as *The Laboratory Technician* by Ana Iliuț. Access to public and professional space is presented as emancipation, but this emancipation is conditioned by the acceptance of a single model of femininity: productive, obedient, and permanently happy.

Suffering is not merely absent but definitively excluded from the representation of the female body. The smile, posture, and monumentality of the body conceal fatigue, constraint, and exhaustion. The communist woman never cries; she only works. Works from the sphere of industrial labor and textile production, such as *Spinners*, *Natasha the Net Weaver*, *The Cabinet with Bobbins*, or *Relon*, are essential for understanding this symbolic mechanization of the female body. Thread, bobbin, net, and synthetic material become extensions of the body, and the body in turn becomes part of the (re)productive apparatus. The excess of order, compositional clarity, and heroism reveals the artificiality of the ideological construction. In the rigidity of gestures and the repetition of themes such as *Grafting Seedlings*, *Apple Harvest*, or *Fruit Picking*, monotony and constraint emerge. Where propaganda attempts to fix an ideal, a paradoxical fissure opens. Everything is too perfect to be true.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.revistatomis.ro/2026/03/16/muzeul-din-depozit-la-santander>

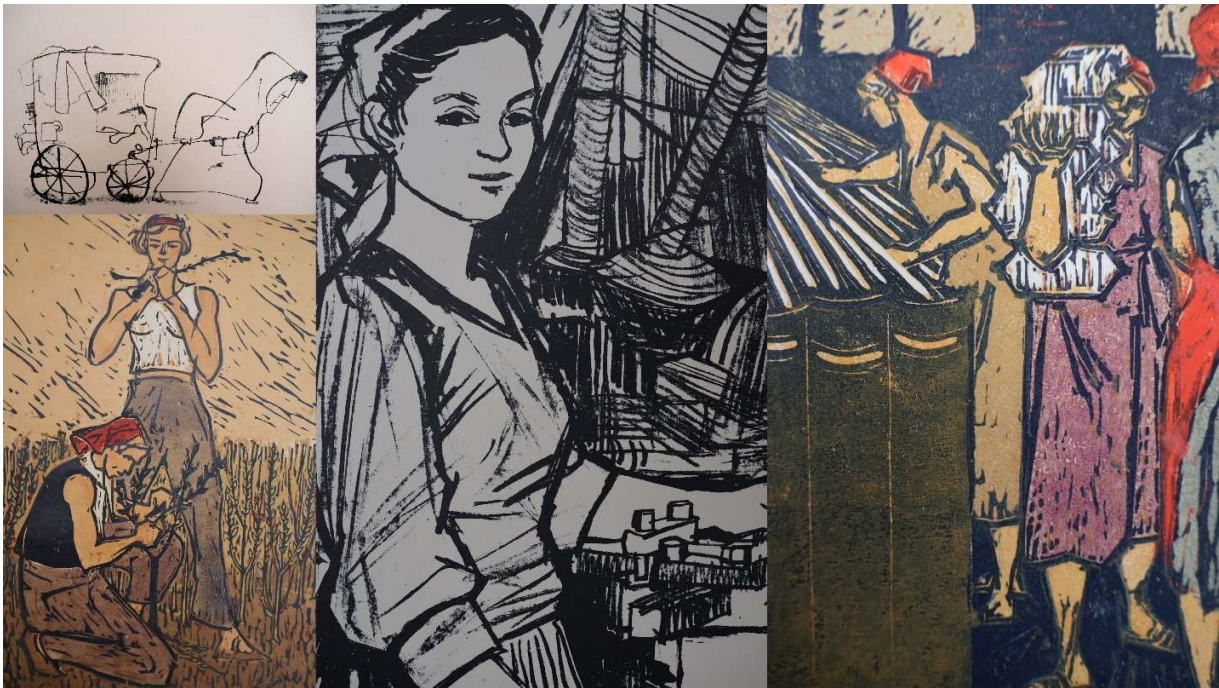


Poster for the Exhibition “The Female Body between myth and resistance” in Santander, 2026

### 3. Reading Against the Image: Resistance and Subversion

Geta Brătescu’s illustrations for *Mother Courage* provide an essential counterpoint to the exhibition, transforming the figure of the brave mother into a universal symbol of survival and feminine sacrifice. Through her simple lines, empty spaces, and essential gestures, Brătescu extends Brecht’s dramaturgical character, giving it a contemplative visual dimension that highlights the tension between loss and protection. The artist, known for her participation in the Venice Biennale, exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou and MoMA, and for her contributions to contemporary art, exemplifies total creative freedom, successfully reinterpreting a classical theme without diminishing its message.

This exhibition proposes a realist reading of the female body during the communist period, one that does not necessarily seek spectacular gestures of revolt, but instead recovers histories of the lived body. The women in these images are symbols of ideology. Between the idealized body of propaganda and the physically burdened body of the working woman unfolds a shared history of image-based control. Thus, the exhibition becomes a reflection on how representation can constrain, falsify, and instrumentalize, but also on how, beyond images, women continued to endure, resist, and assert their identity, even in silence. It is a story of myth and disenchantment, of imposed strength and real suffering of the body transformed into symbol, but also of life that must be lived beyond fear or pain. Within this theoretical framework, the work of women artists operating under state socialism can be reinterpreted as a series of negotiated visual strategies situated between ideological constraint and aesthetic autonomy. While official artistic production prioritized representations aligned with Socialist Realist norms, numerous women artists developed subtle modes of formal ambiguity, introspection, and symbolic displacement. At the center of this discussion remains Geta Brătescu, whose artistic practice functions as a laboratory for rethinking the body as a conceptual instrument.



Collage of Graphic Artworks from Constanța Art Museum included in the Santander Exhibition

#### 4. Women Artists and Visual Negotiation under Communism

Across drawing, collage, photography, and performance-based works, Brătescu dismantles the body into fragmented units of perception and gesture, replacing propagandistic monumentality with a micro-physics of artistic action. In this configuration, the body is no longer a symbol of the state, but a site of visual thinking and self-reflexive construction.

A further relevant figure is Mariana Celac, whose interdisciplinary practice spanning architecture, theory, and visual inquiry introduces a critical perspective on built space and its role in disciplining the female body within socialist everyday life. Although less visible within strictly art-historical canons, her contribution is significant for understanding the intersection between spatial organization, ideology, and embodied experience.

These artistic positions can be productively read alongside international counterparts such as Natalia LL, Ewa Partum, and Lynda Benglis, whose practices, though emerging in distinct political and institutional contexts, similarly interrogate the female body as a site of visual power and negotiation. Despite contextual differences, what unites these practices is a shared refusal of the female body as a purely normative or stabilizing representational device.

The female body in communist visual culture was never merely a representational object. As the works presented in the exhibition demonstrate, it functioned simultaneously as a political construct, a productive instrument, and a symbolic battlefield upon which competing narratives of power, identity, and social control were inscribed. The idealized figures of women workers, harvesters, laboratory technicians, and textile laborers reveal the extent to which state ideology sought to regulate not only women's labor but also the visual language through which femininity could be imagined and represented. Yet, as previously discussed, these images also contain traces of resistance, ambiguity and lived experience that exceed the official discourse.

Such tensions become even more visible when the discussion is extended beyond the Romanian context and placed within a broader East-Central European artistic framework. Here, the female body emerges not only as an ideological sign but also as a site of artistic experimentation and symbolic

transformation. The question is no longer limited to how women were represented by official visual culture, but also how women artists themselves negotiated the meanings attached to femininity, embodiment, and creative agency.

### 5. Negotiating the Female Body in Eastern European Art

The case of Magdalena Abakanowicz is particularly revealing in this regard. Although she repeatedly rejected direct association with feminist art and distanced herself from interpretations that emphasized the textile techniques employed in her work, her artistic practice inevitably intersected with questions central to feminist discourse. As scholars of feminist art history have frequently observed, textile production, weaving, and fiber-based practices occupy a significant place within the history of women's artistic labor. Abakanowicz's monumental woven forms, known as the Abakans, transformed these traditionally domestic techniques into large-scale sculptural environments that challenged established hierarchies between fine art and craft.<sup>2</sup>

This tension became evident during the artist's exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum in the early 1970s. According to curator Edorah Moore, Abakanowicz expressed frustration when visitors focused primarily on the weaving techniques rather than on the conceptual and existential dimensions of the works themselves. The artist insisted on the practical reasons behind her choice of materials, emphasizing their flexibility and adaptability within the limited conditions of her Warsaw studio. Nevertheless, contemporary critics interpreted the installations through a markedly different lens. Rather than seeing them as demonstrations of technical craftsmanship, many recognized within these organic forms powerful references to corporeality, fertility, and the maternal body. The monumental structures appeared as symbolic wombs, evoking archetypal images of the Great Mother while simultaneously resisting fixed interpretation.

The significance of Abakanowicz for the present discussion lies precisely in this ambiguity. Much like the women depicted in socialist graphic art, her works occupy an unstable territory between imposed meaning and interpretive openness. However, unlike the propagandistic images that sought to stabilize the female body within predefined ideological roles, Abakanowicz's sculptural environments transform the body into an uncertain, mutable, and often fragmented presence. The body is no longer represented as productive, disciplined, and transparent; it becomes organic, vulnerable, and resistant to categorization.

In California, Magdalena Abakanowicz enjoyed remarkable success, joking that her popularity rivalled that of the Beatles. Although feminism had already become a powerful movement at the time, Abakanowicz preferred not to be identified with its representatives, even though both the content of her work and the cultural references it employed placed her among artists whose concerns were closely aligned with feminist discourse. From the very beginning of her career, she resisted being labelled a „woman artist,” believing that such categorization trivialized the serious artistic intentions underlying her work. Consequently, Magdalena Abakanowicz insisted that her art should be regarded as gender-neutral.

When asked about the women's emancipation movement in her native country, her response echoed the position of the official ideology while also reflecting the (ultimately naïve) belief in gender equality that prevailed during the communist era in Poland: „No. After the war, an entire generation of Poles had to change. We [women] drive trucks, build houses, become engineers. In Poland... I am not seen as a woman artist, and I am accustomed to equality between the sexes.” Even so, although by that time women had gained access to occupations that had previously been reserved for men, Polish women were paid significantly less than their counterparts in Western Europe and, indeed, received lower wages than Polish men performing comparable work.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Inglot, *The figurative sculpture of Magdalena Abakanowicz*, University of California Press, 2004, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 302.

A similar strategy can be identified in the work of Geta Brătescu, whose artistic investigations repeatedly questioned the boundaries between body, identity, and representation. Through drawing, collage, performance, and photography, Brătescu constructed a visual language in which the female body appeared as a site of continuous self-definition rather than ideological inscription. While the communist visual regime promoted standardized models of femininity, Brătescu foregrounded fragmentation, introspection, and personal agency.



Works by Magdalena Abakanowicz, Tate Modern London, link:

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/nov/20/magdalena-abakanowicz-tate-modern-london>

Viewed together, the practices of artists such as Geta Brătescu and Magdalena Abakanowicz reveal an alternative history of the female body in Eastern European art. Rather than functioning solely as an object of political control, the body emerges as a dynamic field of negotiation between public ideology and private experience, between institutional narratives and individual subjectivity. It is precisely within this space of tension that the notion of the female body as a battlefield acquires its full significance. The struggle is not only over the ownership of the body itself, but also over the meanings attached to it: whether it will serve as an emblem of collective ideology, a symbol of maternal archetypes, or a vehicle for personal and artistic self-determination.

Consequently, the female body appears throughout the visual culture of state socialism not as a stable category, but as a contested terrain where power, memory, labor, gender, and identity intersect. The exhibition's artworks, together with the broader artistic practices discussed here, demonstrate that beneath the apparent coherence of official representations lay a complex network of negotiations through which women artists continued to redefine the possibilities of visibility and resistance. According to Ștefania Mihalache's article „Socialism and the Camouflage of Gender,” in communist Romania feminism emerged as an integral component of propaganda promoting a new female identity aligned with the ideology of the New Socialist Man. Two seemingly convergent discourses can be identified: that of women's liberation and that of ideological control. Beneath the appearance of a sexual revolution presented as emancipation lay, in fact, the domination of a state-defined model of femininity, embodied by the woman of limitless achievement—the Soviet woman: „(...) she chooses those fields of activity that correspond to her wishes, inclinations, and abilities, and she will work under the same conditions as men. Alongside her work in

production, she will spend another part of the day as an educator, teacher, or nurse; a third part devoted to art or science; and a fourth performing some administrative function.”<sup>4</sup>

The woman who failed to conform to this ideal was portrayed in starkly negative terms: „Instead of a healthy and cheerful comrade, a vigorous mother, a wife capable of fulfilling her domestic duties, the man has a sickly and nervous wife who is in constant need of medical care, cannot tolerate the slightest draft of air, nor the faintest noise.”<sup>5</sup> Maria Constantinescu echoed this ideological rhetoric with evident admiration: „Never in the history of humanity, and nowhere in the world, has woman enjoyed more rights and greater respect than in the Soviet Union. The Soviet government (...) completely transformed her existence. It liberated her, granted her the rights of a free human being, called upon her to participate actively in public life, in the building of the state and the economy, and made her the equal of man. (...) The Soviets, factories, institutions, and collective fields became the schools in which the new woman—the Soviet woman—was educated through labour.”<sup>6</sup>

This discourse illustrates how the official rhetoric of gender equality functioned less as a project of genuine emancipation than as a mechanism for reshaping women's identities according to the political and economic imperatives of the socialist state. The ideal of the "new woman" promised equality while simultaneously imposing an all-encompassing model of productivity, self-sacrifice, and ideological conformity.

More conservative than his predecessor, Stalin promoted the model of the ideal woman: a leading worker in production, with one hand on the lathe, one on the flag (as Gail Kligman famously observed), another holding a child, another stirring a cooking pot, another wielding a floor cloth, and yet another harvesting crops as part of the system of so-called "patriotic labour." Consequently, the most celebrated "Little Father" in the history of the Soviet Union established the ideology of women's multiple obligations. His counterparts in other socialist states—most notably Nicolae Ceaușescu, elevated the glorification of the abstract communist woman to unprecedented heights: an indefatigable worker, a mother (often against her own will), an enthusiastic heroine, a magician capable of creating meals from scarce resources, and a devoted builder of communism. Moreover, Ceaușescu nationalized women's reproductive capacities, extending totalitarian control to the very governance of the female uterus.<sup>7</sup>

As a conclusion, the author Ștefania Mihalache argues that during the communist period there were two distinct strands of feminism: „Bolshevik feminists adopted a radical approach grounded in utopian ideals, firmly believing in a world completely transformed through proletarian power, in which gender roles themselves would be fundamentally redefined. By contrast, bourgeois feminists, while more attentive to the actual nature of gender differences, were nevertheless willing to make strategic compromises... Another significant difference is that bourgeois feminism developed as an elitist movement, whereas socialist feminists concentrated primarily on educating working-class women and awakening the political consciousness of women from the lower strata of society...”<sup>8</sup>

Speaking about that period, Mihaela Miroiu also notes an interesting phenomenon. While Western society, decadent and corrupt, was developing second-wave feminism, focused on valuing differences between women and men, the status of women in Romania had dramatic connotations. Thus, whereas in the West there was an emphasis on the idea that women should publicly and politically express their own interests, rather than merely adopting those of men as the only ones deemed worthy of being political (even if many interests overlapped with those of women), and while those “decadent” women were gradually

<sup>4</sup> August Babel, *Femeia și socialismul*, Ed. Politică, București, 1961, p. 501.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p.185.

<sup>6</sup> Paraschiva Cîncea, *Mișcarea pentru emanciparea femeii în România*, Ed. Politică, București, 1961, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> Mihaela Miroiu, *Neprețuitele femei*, Ed. Polirom, București, 2006, p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> Ștefania Mihalache, *Socialismul și camuflarea de gen*, în „Jurnal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies”, nr. 6, 2003.

securing laws against domestic violence, against forced prostitution, equal pay for equal work, and legislation aimed at preventing and combating discrimination, while equality in competition was being corrected through policies of equal opportunity, the generation of Romanian women in the decade between 1960 and 1970, contemporary with the “corrupt” generation of Western women, was compelled, willingly or not, to go to work, to ideological training sessions, to forced gynecological examinations, to unpredictable and endless queues, to patriotic labour, to nightly waiting for gas and hot water, and to cultural events dedicated to glorifying the „Father like Leader”.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The exhibition *The Female Body Between Myth and Resistance in Romanian Graphic Art from the Communist Period* demonstrates that representations of the female body in Romanian graphic art under communism functioned simultaneously as instruments of ideological propaganda and as sites of symbolic negotiation. The official image of the woman, as an exemplary worker, devoted mother, and active builder of socialism, served to reinforce a political ideal that concealed the realities of physical exhaustion, reproductive control, and the restriction of individual freedom.

The analysis of works from the Constanța Art Museum collection reveals that, beneath the apparent coherence of official visual narratives, many images contain subtle ambiguities and formal tensions that invite a critical reading of the relationship between power, gender, and representation. Within this context, the artistic practices of Geta Brătescu, considered alongside those of Eastern European artists such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Natalia LL, and Ewa Partum, demonstrate how women artists developed alternative visual strategies through which the female body became a space of memory, subjectivity, and creative agency rather than ideological inscription.

By bringing together art history, gender studies, and visual culture, this study contributes to a broader reassessment of Romanian artistic heritage within both Eastern European and international contexts. At the same time, the presentation of the exhibition in Santander, as part of *The Storage Art Museum* project, highlights the international relevance of these themes and underscores the capacity of the Constanța Art Museum's collections to foster critical dialogue on the intersections of art, ideology, gender, and historical memory. Ultimately, the study argues that the female body in communist visual culture should be understood not as a fixed ideological construct but as a contested terrain where power, identity, resistance, and artistic autonomy continuously intersect.

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<sup>9</sup> Mihaela Miroiu, *op.cit.*, p. 216.

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**„MUZEUL DE ARTĂ DIN DEPOZIT” DE LA CONSTANȚA LA SANTANDER.  
CORPUL FEMININ ÎNTRE MIT ȘI REZISTENȚĂ ÎN  
ARTA GRAFICĂ ROMÂNEASCĂ DIN PERIOADA COMUNISTĂ**

**Rezumat:** *„Corpul feminin între mit și rezistență în grafica românească din perioada comunistă” este o expoziție a Muzeului de Artă Constanța, deschisă la 25 februarie 2026 la sediul Guvernului Comunității Autonome Cantabria, din Spania, în parteneriat cu Institutul Cultural Român (ICR) Madrid. Evenimentul se desfășoară sub patronajul Ambasadei României în Regatul Spaniei și face parte dintr-o serie de manifestări care celebrează 140 de ani de relații diplomatice între România și Spania. Expoziția, care se încadrează în proiectul mai larg „Muzeul de Artă din Depozit”, a fost deschisă publicului din Spania până la 31 martie 2026.*

*În universul vizual al comunismului, figura feminină ocupă un loc central, dar profund ambiguu. Ridică la statutul de simbol al progresului, al forței de muncă și al „viitorului luminos”, ea este, în același timp, dezumanizată, redusă la o funcție ideologică. Grafica comunistă construiește sistematic mitul super-femeii: o figură inepuizabilă, etern tânără, etern zâmbitoare, capabilă să muncească fără efort, să nască viitorul și să-l educe conform doctrinei de stat.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *Muzeul de Artă din Constanța, arta grafică românească, propaganda comunistă, reprezentarea de gen, corpul feminin, Rezistența.*