



Virginia Maksymowicz
**THE LIGHTNESS
OF BEARING**

**ROWAN UNIVERSITY
ART GALLERY & MUSEUM**



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September 5 - October 28, 2023



The Lightness of Bearing is a selection of works by Virginia Maksymowicz that considers the symbolic resilience and strength of the female figure in art and architecture. Pulling from antiquity, Virginia blends the mythology of caryatids, architectural columns of women effortlessly bearing the weight of massive architectural structures, with contemporary imagery of women from indigenous and ethnic cultures bearing the weight of ritualistic traditions. Included are two new pieces that respond to historically significant spaces now occupied by Rowan University, in a nod to its centennial celebration. One work honors the Lenni-Lenape who were native to the land. The other is an installation inspired by Hollybush mansion and its mistress, Josephine Allen Whitney, wife of Thomas Whitney, whose factory gave Glassboro its name.

Mary Salvante
Director & Chief Curator
Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum



Questions

Andrea Kirsh

Who bears the load? What is the relationship of beauty to strength? of the individual to society? of myth to history? Virginia Maksymowicz has spent a lifetime looking and questioning; looking at life in the environments around her and as represented in the history of art – that archive of social and cultural values. She has researched and questioned and synthesized her thoughts into art that provokes further attention to social life and cultural values. Her work offers a model of how to observe the wealth of information in our surroundings, how to raise our own questions and make meaning from them. Maksymowicz's work is grounded in the female body as a site of identity and knowledge, a source of production and reproduction, a basis of social ordering systems, a reflection of projected ideas and emotions, and a fundamental subject in the history of art. Her work is deeply feminist, but pivots from that maxim of second-generation feminism: *the personal is political* to look at the politics of social and structural forms.

Who sustains us? Who provides the food and water necessary for life? Can the decorative provide support? *Comparisons* (2015-2023) incorporates images from a trans-historical, international cast of women, real and carved, bearing weight on their heads and providing the real and the symbolic sustenance of bread: carrying the weight of buildings, as caryatids that function as

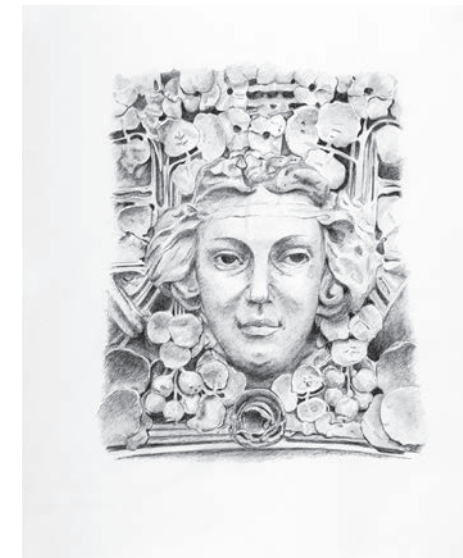
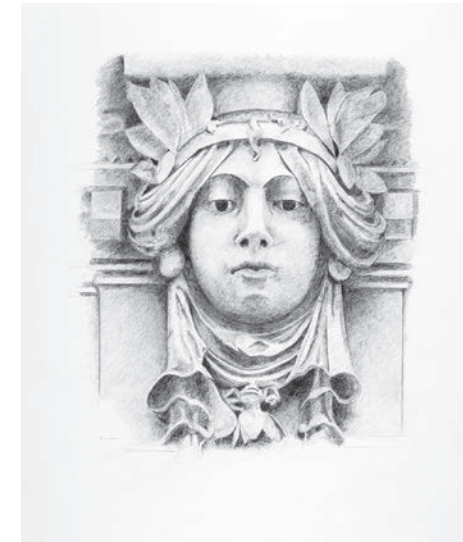
columns supporting the South porch of the Erechtheion at the Acropolis, as referenced in the *Bearers* series (2008/2015), or the many women who to this day carry food and water on their heads, as do women in West Africa, and the incorporation of this activity into folk customs, reflected by women in Tomar, Portugal bearing enormous stacks of bread for the Festa dos Tabulieiros or Russian women carrying baskets of bread and salt in welcoming ceremonies. The artist has added two further pairs of women and columns for the Rowan exhibition that acknowledge local and national history: a Zuni woman paired with a Classical column supporting a ball, and a Lenape woman paired with a column from Saint-Guilhelm-le-Désert, now at the Cloisters in New York.

Comparisons consists of pairs of long, silk banners digitally printed with photographic images. Some are hung so that the images overlap, as in a double exposure; others are displayed side by side. The silk is white and the printed images, while colored, appear to be fading from view in the center of each banner. The translucent silk moves with passing air currents. The installation creates an environment of changing, overlapping, and fleeting pictures that imply shifting points of view, perhaps the sorting process of memory or the function of the unconscious. This forces the viewer to move to make out the paired images and to become part of the conversation.

What do we celebrate? Who do we memorialize? Who bakes the bread? *Panis Angelicus* (2009-2023) (image on page 8) is both a monument and a site of devotion, its story entwined with that of Persephone, the Corinthian column, and the sacral function of bread. Demeter was goddess of agriculture, harvest and grain, whose daughter, Persephone was abducted by Hades, god of the dead. The gods made a deal – that Persephone would split her time between the underworld and the world above, which was the basis of the changing seasons. The Roman writer, Vitruvius, traced the form of the Corinthian column to the wild acanthus leaves which enveloped the basket placed on Persephone’s grave.

Panis Angelicus is an arrangement of five Corinthian capitals: four stacked as a column, the other upended, so that it becomes a basket for the bread that fills it, creating a monumental form. It is ringed with loaves of bread, as sacred sites are covered with piles of devotional offerings. The bread in *Panis Angelicus* is related to a number of the women depicted in *Comparisons* who are carrying bread on festive occasions, which likely derive from pagan ceremonies. For Christians, bread is associated with the body of Christ through the Eucharist. The small figures of cherubim and seraphim that are intermixed with bread loaves at the column’s base reinforce the Christian reference, as does the title. *Panis Angelicus* is made of cast resin and a form of hardened plaster called Hydrostone. It is uniformly white. At first glance, it looks like stone, but that illusion disappears at close range. Instead, its ubiquitous monochrome emphasizes the abstraction of ideas from which it was created.

Zhyttya (2022) takes the format of three, stacked, stemmed basins formed with acanthus leaves, which stand on a fluted base that looks like a section of a Classical column. They are also made of cast resin, somewhat more variegated in tone than *Panis Angelicus*, and an abundance of actual wheat appears triumphantly above the top basin. “Zhyttya” is Ukrainian for “life,” and the monument is both a beacon to the Ukrainians, in the midst of a war of survival, and a reminder to the world of the importance of Ukraine in supplying such a fundamental part of the world’s diet. While the piece doesn’t explicitly refer to women, the majority of home cooking is universally women’s work, and women will have to try to feed their families without it. And metaphorically, it refers to



Demeter and Persephone in that the nested basins contain the wheat and acanthus associated with both these goddesses.

Are ideas gendered? What does it mean to translate an idea into a work of art? How can you protect hopes and dreams? Can we create new metaphors? *Caryatids in Five Books* (2012) (image on page 11) is composed of five open books, cast in Hydrostone. Each of the spreads has the text of a poem by Cristina-Monica Moldoveanu¹ at left, and facing it, an image of a caryatid, selected from Maksymowicz’s photographic archive. The poem is about a little girl who makes a doll out of chalk, and her doll survives the long-erased blackboard of classroom mathematics lessons. The caryatids represent women across history, and their models were once little girls, whose play was their first expression of creativity. The caryatids also evoke the men who sculpted them and a patriarchal culture that employed women’s bodies as architectural decoration.

Can public meaning become private? Is somebody watching? *Mascarons* (2020-2021) is a series of twelve charcoal-pencil drawings based upon architectural details that the artist discovered during a trip to Buenos Aires. Such decorative carvings are termed “mascarons” or big masks. They are used variously in architecture, occasionally with obvious symbolic intent, such as masks of Comedy and Tragedy, or beasts to provide protection. Sergio Kiernan, author of *Las Máscaras de Buenos Aires*², posits that many of the mascarons in his city are particularized faces of women and girls, likely the wives and daughters of the architects and builders. What does it mean to place the face of a loved one on a building’s façade? Assuming the architects and builders were all men, didn’t they have sons? Why were women’s faces thought appropriate? The drawings are a reminder that Maksymowicz is a superb craftsman steeped in traditional sculpture and drawing. The conceptual basis of her work is executed with extraordinary technique, and she chooses the methods to suit the ideas. Why use drawing to make images so precisely detailed that they could be taken as photographs? Can we assume that the artist, having spent so much time with images of those twelve girls and women, has personal feelings invested in them?



Artist's statement

"My artwork in recent years has followed a complex journey through architecture and figurative elements. I am interested in the metaphorical implications of the female body, especially when tied to place: buildings, fountains and other structures. The Erechtheion caryatids and the cult of Demeter, with their legacy in architectural ornamentation, continue to symbolically undergird the material and social character of human society, and the role women play in it. I do not aim to "prove" the connections I make through historical methodology. Instead, as a visual artist, I want to give them tangible form so that they can literally be seen from a new perspective.

The title of this exhibition, *The Lightness of Bearing*, was chosen specifically because of its play on words, which references feminist interpretations of architecture – in particular the Erechtheion caryatids. Although these female figures function as weight-bearing columns, they appear to perform their eternal duty without effort. This architectural form is a perfect metaphor for addressing the significance and power of women as structural supports for society.

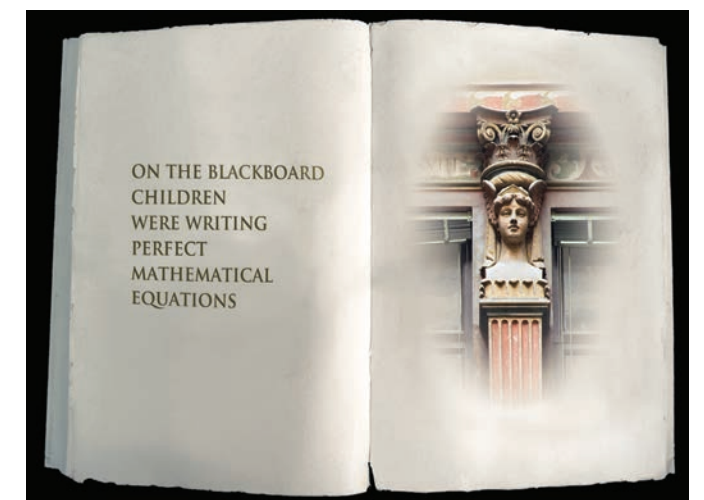
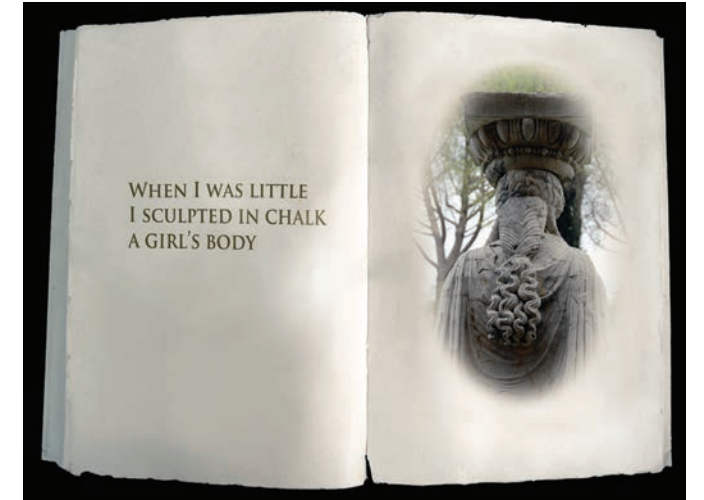
In *Comparisons*, seven sets of paired images interleave architectural details with the bodies of women from a variety of ethnic traditions. *Caryatids in Five Books* displays photographic images of caryatids and verses from a poem by Romanian poet, Cristina-Monica Moldoveanu. *Panis Angelicus* blends the tangible with the ineffable, the material with the spiritual, and the architectural with the metaphorical. *Zhyttya*, which in Ukranian means life, references classical architecture, Demeter and Persephone, and the traditional Christmas *didukh* in the eternal hope for spring. Throughout the show myth becomes matter, through the overlay of imagery.

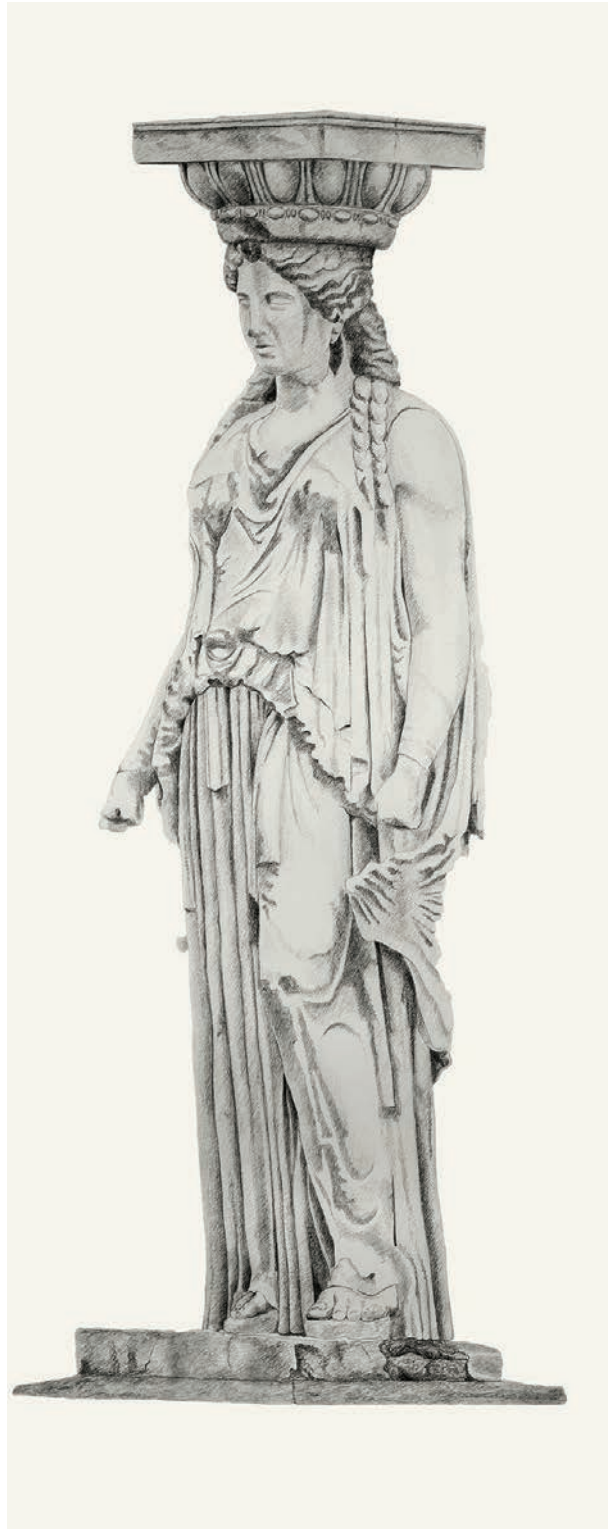
Bearers and *Mascarons* present other links between the human body and architecture. "Mascaron" — a word that literally means "big mask" — is the architectural term for an ornamental face peering from the façade of a building. These faces are usually, although not always, human, and sometimes are grotesque. But rather than scaring us away, these mascarons seem to be protecting us. During the initial days of the COVID pandemic, I found myself drawn to, and drawing, these figures, relying upon a totally unexpected type of mask.

The Architecture of Memory references another architectural concept, which posits that rooms can function as receptacles of memory. This new installation, made specifically for the Rowan University Art Gallery, employs casts of architectural molding from one of the rooms in Hollybush. It frames the memory of Josephine Allen Whitney, who gave birth to seven children in that house, but about whom history remembers very little.

The Garden of Earthly Delights was made for an upper room at the Boland Gallery at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. The gallery's walls were framed by architectural molding. Working within those constraints, I created a series of festoon-like wreaths encircling a woman's face. The faces have fruits or vegetables forced into their mouths, with words underneath that are used to describe the characteristics of those fruits . . . or, allegorically, that are often used to describe the characteristics of women."

Virginia Maksymowicz





Exhibition checklist

Comparisons, 2015 - 2023,

Inkjet print on silk, wooden dowels,
42 x 96 inches each [cover, pages 1, 2, 8, 10-11, 12-13]

*Festa dos Tabuleiros, Tomar, Portugal -
Caryatid Corinthian Capital, Lecce, Italy*

*Corinthian Capital Column, Vatican Museums -
Woman Carrying Baskets, Ghana*

*Canephora, Vatican Museums, Rome Italy -
Folk Statue, Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni,
EUR, Rome, Italy*

*Caryatid in Catania Sicily -
Balinese Banten, Indonesia*

*Bread and Salt Welcome Russia -
Angel of Peace Monument, Munich*

*Zuni Water Carrier, New Mexico -
Sphere Finial Column*

*Lenapi Woman, Delaware Tribe -
Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert Column, France*

The Architecture of Memory, 2023,

Hydrostone, wood, mixed-media,
Approximately 180 x 180 inches [page 7, back cover]

Zhyttya (Life), 2022,

Fiberglass resin, marble chips, wheat,
72 x 26 inches [page 4]

Panis Angelicus, 2009-2023,

Hydrostone and fiberglass/resin,
bread casts from loaves,
Installation size varies, approximately 72 x 48 inches
[inside cover, page 8, 10]

Caryatids in Five Books, 2012,

Poem by Cristina-Monica Moldoveanu, hydrostone,
lazertran, wood, acrylic paint,
Each book 11 x 7.25 x 1 inches [page 2, 10-11]

Bearers, 2008/2015,

Inkjet print from graphite drawing,
22 x 48 inches [page 8, 10, 12-13]

*Folk Statue | Simonetti Angel | Demeter |
Vatican Canephora | Isis | Hadrian Caryatid*

Mascarons, 2020-21,

Graphite and charcoal pencil on rag paper, from photos
made in Buenos Aires, Argentina,
14 x 17 inches [page 5, 10]

*Pasco 695 | San Luis 2948 | Anselmo Aieta 1089 |
Defensa 1024 | Liniars 1846 | Garay 3231 |
Cabrera 3899 | Entre Rios 1521 | Alisana 2540 |
Billinghurst 1741 | Salta 572 |
Combate de los Pozos 1590*

Garden of Earthly Delights, 1998

Handmade paper and acrylic paint, faces cast from life,
36 inches diameter each [page 6, inside back cover]



Virginia Maksymowicz was born in 1952 in Brooklyn, NY, and now lives in Philadelphia, PA. She received a B.A. in Fine Arts from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York (1973) and an M.F.A. in Visual Arts from the University of California, San Diego (1977).

Upon returning to New York, Maksymowicz spent two years working under the auspices of the Cultural Council Foundation's CETA Artists Project (1978-79), a federally-funded program that employed 10,000 artists nationwide (the same number as the WPA's Federal Art Project).

She has exhibited her work at the Franklin Furnace, Alternative Museum, the Elizabeth Foundation and Grey Gallery in New York City; the Mitchell Museum in Illinois; the Michener and Woodmere Museums in Pennsylvania; and in college, university, and nonprofit galleries throughout the U.S. and abroad.

She is a past recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in sculpture (1984), and over the years has been honored with other grants and awards. Her artwork has been reviewed in *Sculpture Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *New York Newsday*, the *New Art Examiner* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Her series, *The History of Art*, appears on the cover of *The Female Body*, published by the University of Michigan Press.

She has been a visiting artist at the American Academy in Rome (2006; 2012; 2014), an artist-in-residence at the Powel House Museum in Philadelphia (2006-07), and a fellow at the Vermont Studio Center (2007).

Maksymowicz is a Professor Emerita of Art, Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.



Andrea Kirsh is a generalist art historian, curator and writer with a particular interest in contemporary art. She co-wrote a book on painting materials and techniques, *Seeing Through Paintings; Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies* (YUP, 2000), and has contributed regularly to *Artblog* (www.theartblog.org) since 2006.

Acknowledgements

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Additional thanks go to our Gallery Coordinator Kristin Qualls, our Art Installers Steven Weber and Tyler Kline, and our Student Assistants Isabella Cristinzinai, Andrea Gomez, Rachel Hanan, and Reid Higgins for their support.

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Photography courtesy of:

Constance Mensh | www.constancemensh.com (cover, pages 2, 4, 8, 13, inside back cover, back cover)

Blaise Tobia (pages 5, 7, 11, 12, 15 top)

Andrea Kirch (page 15 bottom)

And the artist (inside cover, pages 1, 6)

Catalog Design:

Kristin Qualls

ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY & MUSEUM

A Museum Destination for Contemporary Art

Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum serves as a vibrant cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and surrounding region. We are committed to cultivating an accessible and just environment that encourages dialogue and collaboration between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, and the general public through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, artist talks and other public programming. Our mission is to present diverse forms of contemporary art by professional artists with content that is thought provoking, relevant, and timely. With our exhibitions and programming, we seek to engender curiosity and a passion for contemporary art, enrich the quality of life for area residents, and create a welcoming and inclusive cultural destination at Rowan University.



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