

**BWA**

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**STAN**

**THE BODY  
IN TENSIONED  
MATERIAL**

# ***Szklarki: The Body in Tensioned Material***

## **Body. Resistance. Calories.**

*Szklarki: The Body in Tensioned Material* revolves around tensions, not as a momentary state, but as a lasting condition, organizing both material and physical experience. Tension is not a metaphor here; it is a real process that infiltrates biological and physical structures, revealing their mutual dependencies. The body becomes a system of forces responding to the stimuli, strain, and rhythms of the environment, while glass is a material whose form arises from a constant balance of stresses. The two meet less through representation, therefore, than in a shared logic, where stability is always temporary, and every form holds the potential to crack.

The concept of embodiment in feminist art theory does not mean a stable presence in the body, given once and for all. It is more of a constant, dynamic negotiation process, in which material, language, and power relationships merge to create the conditions of our existence. A key element in this process is language—not as a passive mirror reflecting reality, but an active tool for constructing it. How we speak shapes not only our perception of the world, but also individual subjecthood. A feminist perspective shows that gender, social, and cultural norms are perpetuated in language structure, organizing our thoughts, often before we can name these norms or become conscious of their influence.

The issue of representation and the capacity to voice our experiences are most clearly revealed in the sexual sphere. These experiences were historically marginalized, repressed, or controlled by dominant male interpretive frameworks. As Tanya Augsburg notes, a breakthrough occurred in the 1960s and 70s. The sexual revolution, access to contraceptives, and the women's lib movement not only boosted female autonomy in the private sphere, but above all, allowed women to develop their own autonomous forms of erotic expression in art.

Feminist art thus became a parallel project of working on language: it generates a new *ars erotica*, ways of presenting and understanding desire without reproducing the hegemonic structures of the gaze. In this sense, art does not just describe reality, it actively reconstructs it, giving voice to what was passed over in silence, and transforming the body from the object of a gaze into the subject of a personal narrative.

*Szklarki* can be read as a material extension of these processes—instead of a verbal language, the exhibition uses physical materials. Glass operates as a medium that not only represents meaning but contributes to it through its properties: susceptibility to temperature, tension, and touch. It records relationships between the body and technology, between gesture and structure.

Historically speaking, the medium of glass has been inscribed in a gender divide that determines who is “able” to work with it, and how. Glassblowing, which requires strength and teamwork, has been a male domain, while repetitive and time-consuming work has been designated “women’s handicrafts.” The artists at this exhibition not only enter this history, they transform it, picking up the techniques and redefining their meaning.

The juxtaposition of different rhythms of work—the intensity of glassblowing against the slow, meditative assembly of beads—shows that technology is never neutral. It organizes the perception of a work, and reproduces or subverts existing hierarchies. Much like language, the material becomes a space of negotiation.

In the pieces here, the body is not a stable category; it is a process subject to pressure, transformation, and strain. In this regard, these works can be read in dialogue with feminist practices of representing sexuality—as an attempt to reclaim agency over the visible and tangible. Holding onto traces of work, tension, and gesture, glass serves as an alternative archive of experience, a material “writing” of the body.

From this standpoint, the tension between

the norm and its transgression becomes central, described by Judith Butler as an effect of the performativity of gender. Butler writes: "The cultural effect of gender is the result of a stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."\* The body is not given once and for all; it arises through repetition, which simultaneously stabilizes and destabilizes it. The exhibition develops this perspective, showing that every stabilization of form creates an opportunity for cracks, deformation, and redefinition.

In this context, we also have feminist body horror, understood not as an aesthetic genre, but as a way of perceiving the body as a discontinuous structure, prone to transformation, mutation, and decay. It is an aesthetic materialization of a female rage that can be muted, pathologized, or reduced to hysteria in patriarchal narratives, and finds expression in art as a destructive and creative force. Body horror reveals what is repressed in normative representations: material fragility, excess, the organic unpredictability and processual nature of the body. It ceases to be a contained, obedient form, and becomes a space of tension between control and decay, visibility and the abject, where rage transforms into physical deformity.

With regard to glass, this logic is especially legible. This material exists in a state of permanent tension, where every form holds the potential to crack, leak, and fall apart. Like women's anger, glass is at once beautiful and dangerous, fragile and sharp; its aesthetic perfectly renders the dynamic of women's rage, which does not seek compromise, but expresses itself through the risk of tearing down structures, to free what is hidden beneath the surface.

To my mind, this exhibition is also an example of queering as an epistemological and affective act, undercutting the stability of identity,

\* Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

physicality, and materiality. This is not about the simple representation of difference, but the active disruption of norms that define what is visible and recognized as meaningful. In this sense, queer becomes a tool for reclaiming agency, letting us apprehend the body beyond binary oppositions: form and deformity, control and chaos, norms and transgression.

The relationship between body and material is not based on one dominating the other, but on constant negotiation and work. The body of the artist does not function solely as a tool of formation, but as a participant in the process that demands adaptation to the properties of the material. The movement of the hands, the weight of the body, the rhythm of the breath, the concentration and repetition of gestures become parts of the structure of the objects created. The subtitle of the exhibition, *The Body in Tensioned Material*, indicates a shared point of reference for these practices. It pertains to the tensions in the body, understood as a defense mechanism in response to stress, emotion, and physical strain, and to the tension inscribed in the relations between the material, the process, and the space of the exhibition.

# Body

1. “**Body**—another name for the clay used for making any kind of pot including the fireclay used for making glass pots.”\*

**Sadhbh Mowlds’s** art practice revolves around the materiality of the body, its transformations and the line between realism and deformation. She calls her art her “body of work,” meaning both her collected pieces and the corporeal archive of experiences, affects, and tensions inscribed in the materials.

A central facet of her work, including the pieces presented here, is a hyper-realism seen not merely as striving for an ideal representation, but also as a tool for generating anxiety and physical intensity. Her weeks-long work on faces and body parts demands extraordinarily precise, almost meditative movements. Every hair is added separately, and the silicone mold surfaces are layered on with an airbrush to render the various skin tones. The artist is fascinated by pores, wrinkles, jowls, and the body’s organic forms—aspects generally covered up or repressed by normative representations of feminine beauty.

Since 2021, Mowlds has been hard at work on silicone molds. Some of her first works in this technique are presented at this exhibition, *Susceptible I + II* (2021); their faces have been removed. This gesture is an attempt to deny these figures an unequivocal identity and undermine the ways in which the female body is visually identified and consumed. The recurring motif of reflection and multiplication suggests that we function as each other’s mirrors—constantly replicating gestures, behaviors, and social patterns. These figures seem to have come from “the same mold,” creating a loop of reflection and mimicry.

\* Harold Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass* (Thames and Hudson, 1977).

In *Inhibited I + II* (2022) we find red lines and organic glass forms resembling tissue, body parts, or tangled internal organs. These materials evoke gender-coded physicality: the menstruation, fluidity, and deformations of the female body. These forms are in a state of constant flux, balancing between fascination and repulsion. The artist consciously uses an aesthetic of the uncanny and the grotesque; she probes the viewer's response and the social boundaries of what is considered beautiful or acceptable.

A vital motif in her latest work, *Dispensable* (2026), is transparent glass limbs (arms) that symbolize a loss of agency and subjugation to patriarchal structures. The transparency of the glass suggests fragility and loss of control—a moment of transition between body and material. Mowlds draws from Sartre's theory of "bad faith," pointing to the experience of living in a patriarchal society, in which femininity is constructed through impossible beauty standards and social expectations.

# Resistance

2. “**Resistance**—the ability of a material to resist the passage of electrical current. It is commonly used as a method of generating heat as in the case of electric elements.”\*

The work of **Marta Byrdziak** concentrates on female physicality, sexuality, and the cultural mechanisms of shame and control. The point of departure for many of her objects is the vulva motif (*The Pudendum Project*, 2020–present), with references to religion, folklore, and the pagan cycles of nature building a multilayered narrative of femininity. She makes extraordinary, phantasmagoric pieces, somewhere between the grotesque and object Surrealism, with a touch of camp.

Byrdziak calls attention to the fact that, despite its fundamental role in the human experience, sexuality has been encumbered by religious narratives of shame for centuries, especially when it comes to the female body. Her works, such as *Chastity Belt* (2020), employ the *vagina dentata* (“vagina with teeth”) motif, a symbol of anxiety over female sexuality and of attempts to rein it in. The body and nature operate as spaces of control here, but of resistance as well.

A vital feature of these works is hair, which the artist interprets as channeling energy, memory, and social status. Byrdziak draws some of her inspiration from the beliefs of the ancient Slavs, for whom hair had symbolic and ritual significance. She calls attention to the social norms that regulate women’s hair—which is only acceptable on certain parts of the body and subject to normative expectations.

In *Put a Sock in It* (2024), the artist transforms Zakopane leather slippers into glass. The title says it all. This object comments on the pressures exerted on women, and expectations of submission, silencing,

\* Ibid.

and subjugation to social norms.

A similar mechanism appears in *Let Your Hair Down* (2022), where the braid motif evokes Rapunzel, juxtaposed with the more aggressive form of the chastity belt. The title alludes to the fairy tale, but is also an invitation to break social conventions. Hair becomes a tool of seduction and control, but also a symbol of freedom and restrictions.

In *Babushka* (2024), the form resembles the haystacks found in fields. It alludes to the tradition of married women covering their hair and to knowledge passed down through generations. The glass parts are inspired by kerchief patterns and folk ornaments, becoming a material trace of memory and women's shared experience.

Another vital aspect of Byrdziak's practice is reflecting on the work of glassblowing itself. She stresses the significance of chance, physicality, and collective nature of toiling at the glassworks. She also sculpts with her free hand, works at the burner, and shapes molds.

# Calorie

3. “**Calorie**—the amount of heat required to raise 1 g of water through 1°C. The calorie unit has now been largely replaced by the joule. One calorie = 4.1868 joules.”\*

The works of **Maja Kitajewska**, which she calls “elastic sculptures,” create piles of bodies and forms made through gravity alone. Matter acquires a “fleshiness” in the exhibition space. The viewer does not encounter flat images but three-dimensional structures, which, although being static, seem to breathe.

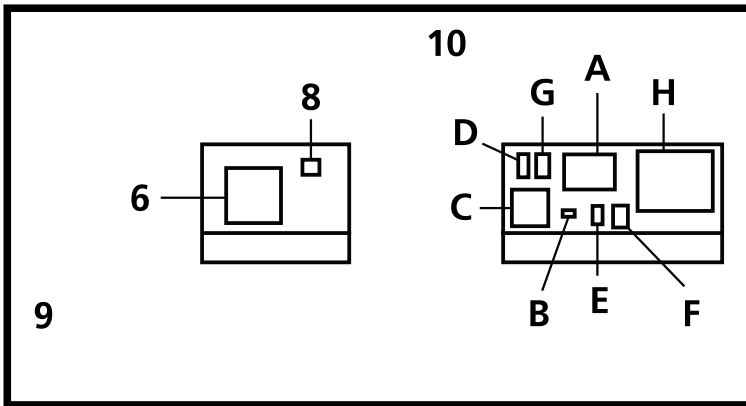
The heart of the exhibition is a series of autobiographical pieces, *Self-Portrait | Skin I (2022–2023) and Skin II + III (2025)*, using glass and beads to create a “bejeweled tissue.” The tiny glass parts reflect the light, creating an epidermal effect, thus fulfilling the artist’s intent: to show the body as innervated and sensitive.

The viewers will find traces of the great effort that went into creating these pieces. The technique here is meditative, but also masochistic—Maja’s shredded fingertips and sore back are an integral part of these objects’ story. The series of works resembling clothes in a shop suggests mass production, though each one is a unique, autobiographical act. The Untitled series (2026)—objects resembling ski masks and gloves—calls to mind anonymity, but in Maja’s approach renders a sensitivity visible. This is a play on forms: skin (leather) as clothing, clothing as skin.

These works are not merely a presentation of objects; they are also an invitation to reflect on the passing of time (*vanitas*). Fragile, transparent glass serves to preserve the ephemeral. Maja tries to freeze a moment, to leave a trace that survives, though the nature of her work suggests that nothing is forever.

\* Ibid.

*Mammal* (2021) occupies a special place. This object presents two breasts enclosed in oval glass frames; from one nipple hangs a pearl, symbolizing milk flowing from the body. The glass surface here becomes an invisible barrier separating the viewer from human biology. This gesture might be seen as an echo of a strategy of Francis Bacon's, isolating his figures behind a plate of glass to generate distance between the picture and the audience. In Maja's work, glass embodies the tension between nature and culture: civilization develops a person while simultaneously cutting them off from primary experiences. Mother's milk, which is full of nutritious probiotics, becomes an allegory for flora and fauna we are increasingly leaving behind.

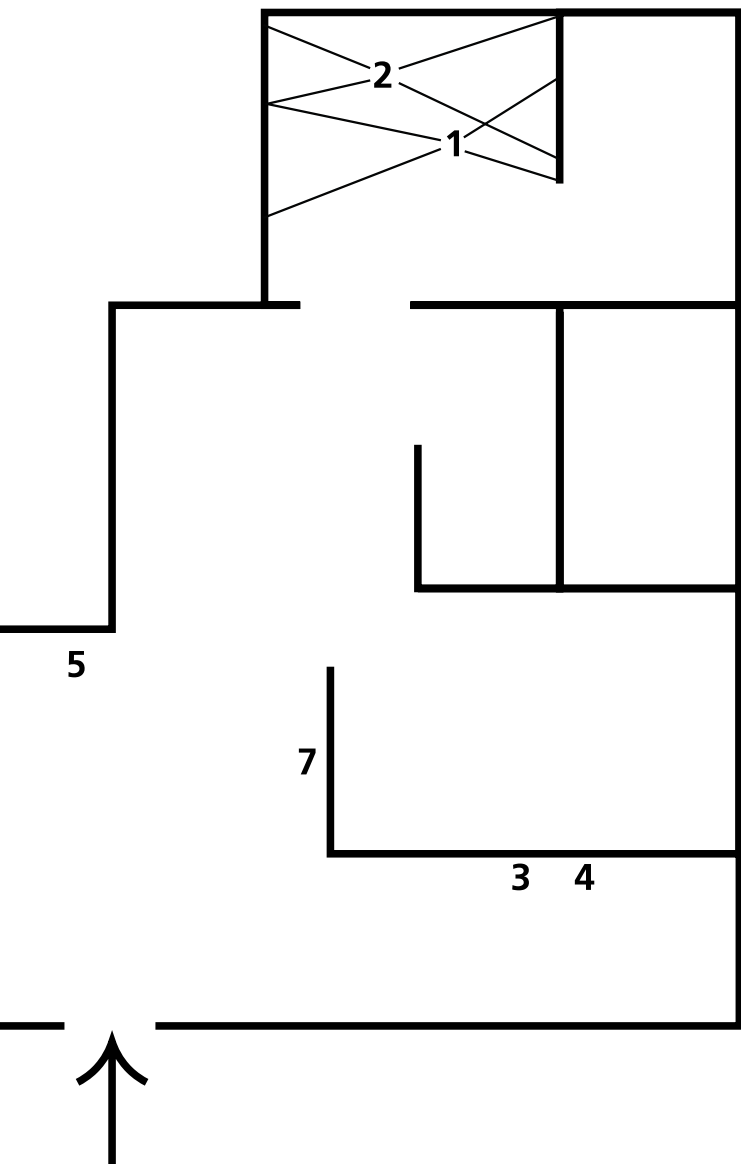


**Sadhbh Mowlds**

1. ***All Tied Up I***, 2022
2. ***All Tied Up II***, 2022
3. ***Impressionable I***, 2021
4. ***Impressionable II***, 2021
5. ***Redundant***, 2026

**Marta Byrdziak**

6. ***Babushka***, 2024
7. ***Let Your Hair Down***, 2022
8. ***Put A Sock In It***, 2024
9. ***Chastity Belt***, 2020
10. ***Vulva Project***, 2026



**Maja Kitajewska**

A ***Skin III***, 2025

B ***Mammal***, 2021

C ***Skin II***, 2025

D **Untitled**, 2021

E **Untitled**, 2025

F **Untitled**, 2025

G **Untitled**, 2025

H ***Self-Portrait | Skin I***, 2022–2023

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Sadhbh Mowlds

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