

LET IT SHINE. BEYOND VEHA PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE

KATE NGAN WA AO
ROZALINA BUSEL
OLGA ANNA MARKOWSKA
LESIA PCHOLKA
KATARZYNA SIENKIEWICZ

CURATOR: VERA ZALUTSKAYA

2.06-10.09.2023

*MIEJSKI OŚRODEK SZTUKI
GORZÓW WIELKOPOLSKI
MOSART.PL*

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The central point of the exhibition is the VEHA archive, founded in 2017 by Lesia Pcholka and remaining one of the most important initiatives for the preservation of the Belarusian visual heritage. The project involves the collection and cataloguing of amateur and family photographs, documenting various aspects of social life since the advent of this medium in contemporary Belarus. The themes of the collection so far have included family shots in front of home-woven carpets, wedding and funeral compositions, and images of people against a forest backdrop. A separate book with photographs and research texts has been produced for each theme. By collecting, researching and disseminating a visual social archive, VEHA aims to preserve the traces of the history of everyday life in Belarus. Given that the Belarusian state and public institutions often erase or even destroy remains of local culture, either deliberately or due to a lack of resources, the VEHA project can be seen as a manifestation of both cultural and civic activism.

Artists from Belarus, Poland and Macau were invited to participate in the exhibition. Most of the presented works were created specifically for the show. Olga Anna Markowska, who comes from the Podlasie region, focuses on the relationship between the human and the forest, including by transforming Belarusian folk songs dedicated to nature into contemporary musical compositions. Katarzyna Sienkiewicz, being part of the Belarusian minority in Poland, reveals her own family history, which is linked to weaving (both of her grandmothers were weavers) and Belarusian culture. Originally from Macau, Kate Ngan Wa Ao refers to a specific way of looking at history that is emblematic of areas that lie 'in-between' different, often violent, powers and cultures (a feature shared by Belarus and Macau). Rozalina Busel is the author of a poetic installation that combines key attributes of human life and death and visualises the connection between selected themes of the VEHA archive. Lesia Pcholka, the originator and founder of the initiative, has created several works linking the themes of all the archive's sections. They refer to the complex, often contradictory elements characteristic of Belarusian culture, which cannot be reduced to a monolithic set of national signs and symbols. The title of the exhibition Let it Shine is taken from a fragment of the poem 'To Live' by Larysa Heniyush (1910–1983), a Belarusian poet and émigré politician who lived in the time featured in most of the photographs from the VEHA archive. Her understanding of life centres around the simplest of issues: attachment to Mother Earth, forests and gardens; intergenerational bonds, memory, home, and hopes for the best. These are themes that are often found in private family collections containing individual histories. They form a national history when gathered into a larger collection, such as the VEHA archive. This history is presented in its grassroots form, devoid of grand narratives, well-known names and widely celebrated dates. This allows for a detailed grasp of the manifestations of the local natural and cultural environment through the presentation of the most universal elements of human life.

VEHA archive: <https://www.instagram.com/veha.archive/>

Olga Anna Markowska,

*Untitled,
music piece for zither, printed cotton voile, 500 x 130 cm,
2023*

Olga Anna Markowska's installation is inspired by the album *Ludzi Lesu* (people of the forest) from the VEHA archive. Using a photomontage technique, the artist created an image composed of portraits of all the people whose photographs appeared in the aforementioned collection. The resulting image was reproduced and printed on fabric, creating patterns reminiscent of those once found on self-made carpets. Markowska focuses on the human element of the archive, emphasising its social dimension. By combining portraits into a whole, the artist restores anonymity to the photographed people. The work is complemented by an original musical composition for zither, created on the basis of Belarusian folk songs dedicated to nature combined with field recordings of bird sounds. In Markowska's installation, nature is not contrasted with culture. The two areas, whose basic and most important elements are multiplicity and changeability, complement each other.





Kate Ngan Wa Ao

No Colour is Fine, video, object, 2023

Originally from Macau, Kate Ngan Wa Ao refers to a specific way of looking at history that is emblematic of areas that lie 'in-between' different, often violent, powers and cultures (a feature shared by Belarus and Macau). She is interested in meanings that are invisible at first glance. Thus, according to the artist, VEHA's black and white archive contains colour on a symbolic level. It is about preserving Belarus' own 'colour scheme' and telling the history of people inhabiting its land. Today, colours represent various complex issues such as race, political parties, beliefs (like the white-red-white flag in Belarus) and divisions. In multicultural places such as Belarus or Macau, colours mix but can sometimes lead to clashes. They can also be a unifying force. In the work *No Colour is Fine*, the artist juxtaposed selected colors with their names. The colors themselves are neutral in meaning, but human terms suggest specific references and can evoke emotions.





Kate Ngan Wa Ao, No Colour is Fine, video, object, 2023

Lesia Pcholka

Try to Read My Stones, installation, 2023

Roadside Sites, fine arts print, 7 photos 50 x 80 cm, 2020

The room where Lesia Pcholka's works are presented is arranged in such a way that it resembles a school classroom where a geography lesson could take place. However, how to create a program of classes if the issues they concern are non-obvious, complicated and dynamic? The works *Try to Read My Stones* and *Roadside Sites* are devoted to the ways of marking space in Belarus, a country whose borders have changed many times throughout history, even in the course of the 20th century, the period from which most of the photographs in the VEHA archive come. The work *Try to Read My Stones*, presents 9 maps of Belarus embedded in school chairs, referring to the history of the aforementioned century (1918, 1918-1919, 1919, 1920-1921, 1922-1924, 1924-1927, 1938-1940, 1941-1945). The changeability of the borders is the result of the geopolitical transformations that took place in Belarus in an exceptionally dynamic and cruel way (multiple changes of power and political systems, wars, etc.). These processes could not but leave a strong imprint on the local culture and the fate of the people. One such manifestation is the eclecticism of visual culture, the tendency to freely combine meanings and cultural images. This phenomenon is alluded to in Pcholka's series of photographs *Roadside Sites* depicting crosses installed on the boundaries of Belarusian villages. In an attempt to verify the knowledge acquired during her artistic training, Pcholka travelled to the sites described in Michas Ramaniuk's book *Belarusian National Crosses* (2000), the result of more than 25 years of research and documentation of Belarusian vernacular wooden architecture. It turned out that the crosses so carefully documented by Ramaniuk had already been dismantled or destroyed as a result of the forces of nature. New crosses appeared in their place. These objects of Christian etymology in Belarusian villages partly lose their original religious meaning. They are richly decorated by local residents, in accordance with their knowledge, vision of the world, faith and preferences, they are supplemented with elements of pagan culture or even take on an almost queer look.







Lesia Pcholka, Try to Read My Stones, installation, 2023

Kate Ngan Wa Ao

*Touching Palms, print on gypsum,
2023*

The work *Touching Palms* by Kate Ngan Wa Ao shows fragments of photographs printed on concrete, taken from two VEHA collections: *The Girls' Night* and *The Last Shot*. The artist focuses on images of flocked hands – of people getting married or the deceased being prepared for burial. Sometimes it is easy to guess which situation is depicted by each fragment, and other times, it is not. In this way, the artist highlights the depth of symbolic meaning contained in the simplicity of gestures.





Rozalina Busel

*Meditation Room II, object / aluminum frame,
textile, 180 x 70 x 180 cm, 2023*

Rozalina Busel's work explores the theme of boundaries, both geographical and symbolic, for example between life and death. Meditation Room II combines elements alluding to the most important stages of a person's life, with its shape resembling a cradle, a coffin and a wedding veil at the same time. The work was created as part of the residency programme at the BWA Studio in Wrocław. In the VEHA archive, the wedding and funeral photographs were presented in a two-volume publication. The seemingly distant subjects share a similar ritual dimension: they bring the community together and serve to experience transitional moments in human and community life.



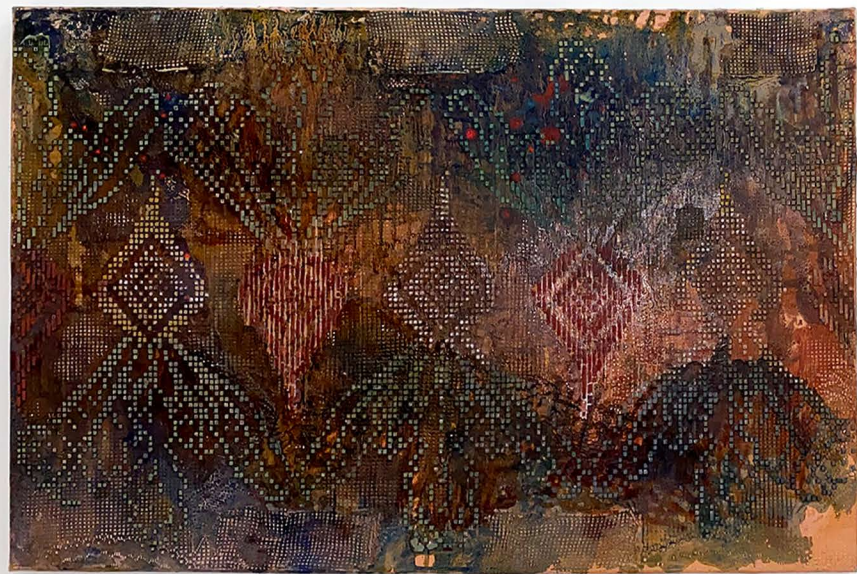


Katarzyna Sienkiewicz

Katarzyna Sienkiewicz is a Polish artist who comes from the Belarusian minority in Podlasie. Her family has been living on the same lands for many years, which have changed their national affiliation depending on the geopolitical situation. Great-grandmother Luba Sienkiewicz and the artist's maternal ancestors, her grandmother Halina Woroniecka and her sister-in-law, Walentyna Kuźma (formerly Woroniecka), were weavers. The exhibition showcases kilims woven by Halina and passed down to her daughters as part of their dowry. Katarzyna Sienkiewicz continues the weaving tradition. She learned weaving in a visual arts high school and now, after completing her painting studies, she creates intermedial artworks that closely resemble weaving techniques, featuring traditional Belarusian ornaments. Similar to the VEHA Najlepšy bok collection, Sienkiewicz's artworks emphasize the special connection between Belarusian rural culture and weaving. Among others, perebory and pasiaki (kilims) were widely used in everyday life and accompanied people during various ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. They were handed down from generation to generation as part of the dowry. Even the girlfriend of Katarzyna's tragically deceased uncle, Mirosław Woroniecki, during the funeral received a fabric from her prospective mother-in-law, as a symbolic family keepsake. One of the artworks is dedicated to this funeral, depicting the grieving mother Halina - the author of the fabric placed beneath the coffin, and also the grandmother Paulina. The displayed kilim is the original one. The significance of handwoven fabrics is further emphasized by the fact that family photographs were often taken against the backdrop of these precious relics, as evidenced by both the Sienkiewicz family's photographic archive and the VEHA Najlepšy bok archive.







**NIECH ŚWIECI
WOKÓŁ FOTOGRAFICZNEGO
ARCHIWUM VEHA**

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ХАЙ ЗЗЯЕ
ВАКОЛ ФОТААРХІВА VEHA

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КЕЙТ НГАН ВА АО

ROZALINA BUSEL
РАЗАЛІНА БУСЕЛ

OLGA ANNA MARKOWSKA
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