

## Małgorzata Mirga-Tas: Siukar Manusia

Frith Street Gallery, London  
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Populating the walls of Frith Street Gallery's polished concrete box are nine appliquéd portraits, stitched onto night-blue velvet backgrounds pulled taut across canvas stretchers. Artist and Roma activist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's series 'Siukar Manusia', which means 'great' or 'wonderful people' in the Romani language, features life-size depictions of Romani people connected to the area of Nowa Huta in east Krakow. Built after the Second World War, Nowa Huta has, from its inception, been home to a community of Bergitka Roma – a non-nomadic group that adopted a settled lifestyle in the 18th century and who were moved to the area at the behest of the communist government to help construct the district. Mirga-Tas's portraits are presented along with a guide providing brief biographies of the sitters. Most of those depicted survived the Roma genocide, also known as 'The Devouring', in which it is estimated that from 1935 to 1945 up to 500,000 Roma and Sinti people were killed across Europe.

Made from pieces of clothing and household linens donated by Mirga-Tas's family and friends, and occasionally purchased at charity shops, the appliquéd portraits include the likeness of Krystyna Gil (1938–2021), a community elder. The image is based on a still from Gil's appearance in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, in which she recounts the murder of her family in 1943 and her imprisonment in Plaszow concentration camp. Following the War, Gil became a Romani women's rights activist and was the first Romani tram driver in Kraków. Other portraits in the series are based on archival photographs from Mirga-Tas's family collection, and from the families of the sitters who, if they are alive, are given a say in how their avatar is dressed. Grażyna Oraczko, for example, is pictured alongside her father, Andrzej, wearing a golden-hued dress she selected from a collection of garments that previously belonged to Mirga-Tas's mother. Geometric patterned shirts, floral dresses and plush jackets; lace tablecloths, bold upholstery and sumptuous lampshades clothe people and furnish their environments, while patches of fresh linen delineated with acrylic marker stand in for faces, hands and other areas of exposed skin. Subtending these lovingly assembled portraits is the lustrous velvet ground, made from the only evidently brand-new fabric which, while not devoid of its own story, here provides a neutral context that focuses attention on the intricacies of the sitters' attire.

Mirga-Tas's textile compositions can be monumental and magnificent: her installation for the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022, where she was the first Romani artist to represent a country since national representation began in 1907, clad every surface of the Polish pavilion inside and out with patchwork and appliquéd banners depicting Romani people through the ages but, whatever their scale, her works retain a sense of intimacy. She produces them in collaboration with a team that includes family members, who together trace and transfer images, cut and sew fabric swatches following her designs. Although it is true that the materials in these works are, in one sense, recycled, the ethical parameters of Mirga-Tas's work transcend a simple desire to avoid waste. The garments she



Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Augustyn Gabor with his daughter Elżbieta*, 2022

acquires for her artistic use are precious, akin to relics or heirlooms rather than mere goods purchased from a supplier. They are the currency of a gift economy in which the parties know each other intimately and transact in an atmosphere of trust, not least because some of the articles of clothing must carry traces of their former owners: microscopic particles of shed skin, a stray hair that has burrowed its way into a collar or cuff.

In the studio, Mirga-Tas often kneels and crawls across vast swathes of fabric, which affords her an aerial perspective on pieces in progress. This horizontality evokes some of the qualities of Roma culture detailed by the anthropologist, Mirga-Tas's cousin Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka who, in an essay in Mirga-Tas's book *Travelling Images*, identifies the inspirational and 'avant-garde character' of Roma culture: it is 'global though rooted in local contexts, radically diverse ... yet characterised by a strong sense of unity and solidarity - [it] provides an example of post-national reality in which pluralism, hybridity, multiculturalism and multidimensionality of lifestyles are considered as assets.' Mirga-Tas's renderings of Roma people through the centuries and across the map have been embraced internationally, in museums, expos and at the commercial galleries that represent her in three countries. Notwithstanding such widespread acclaim, it is at the most intimate level that her work achieves its power and poignancy, by honouring the specificities of individual lives, down to the threads that clothed them, and summoning up cloth's capacities to individuate, protect and exalt her kin.

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