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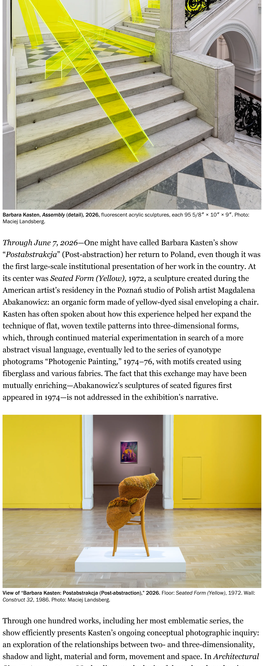
Space Exploration: Barbara Kasten Between Painting and Photography

The American Artist's Retrospective in Warsaw Traces Her Exploration of Two- and Three-Dimensionality

Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

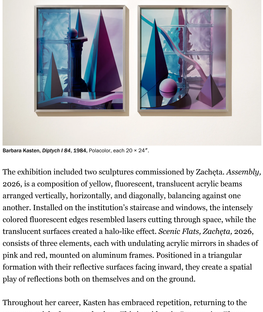
By Marzena Jarczak

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Barbara Kasten, *Assembly* (detail), 2026, fluorescent acrylic sculptures, each 95 5/8" × 10" × 9". Photo: Maciej Landsberg.

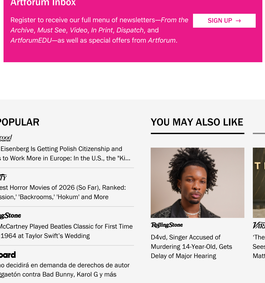
Through June 7, 2026—One might have called Barbara Kasten's show "*Postabstrakcja*" (Post-abstraction) her return to Poland, even though it was the first large-scale institutional presentation of her work in the country. At its center was *Seated Form (Yellow)*, 1972, a sculpture created during the American artist's residency in the Poznań studio of Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz: an organic form made of yellow-dyed sisal enveloping a chair. Kasten has often spoken about how this experience helped her expand the technique of flat, woven textile patterns into three-dimensional forms, which, through continued material experimentation in search of a more abstract visual language, eventually led to the series of cyanotype photograms "Photogenic Painting," 1974–76, with motifs created using fiberglass and various fabrics. The fact that this exchange may have been mutually enriching—Abakanowicz's sculptures of seated figures first appeared in 1974—is not addressed in the exhibition's narrative.



View of "Barbara Kasten: Postabstrakcja (Post-abstraction)," 2026. Floor: *Seated Form (Yellow)*, 1972. Wall: *Construct 32*, 1986. Photo: Maciej Landsberg.

Through one hundred works, including her most emblematic series, the show efficiently presents Kasten's ongoing conceptual photographic inquiry: an exploration of the relationships between two- and three-dimensionality, shadow and light, material and form, movement and space. In *Architectural Site 17, August 29, 1988*, she disrupts the logic of the ordered modernist architecture of the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. She simultaneously expands the view—using geometric glass elements to reflect various architectural features such as the ceiling, railings, or a fragment of neoclassical sculpture, all illuminated with yellow, blue, and red light—and condenses it by presenting everything within a single plane, organized frontally, free from any digital manipulation. (Kasten continues to work without Photoshop or similar editing software.) In *Diptych I 84 (Construct XXVI)*, 1984, she explores the complexities of color by projecting purple and blue light onto studio-built compositions of mirrors, translucent glass blocks, columns, and pyramidal elements with circular and undulating shapes. These latter forms, combined with the uneven surfaces of the glass blocks, enhance the sense of movement generated by the contrast between light and shadow. This same interplay—further revealing the textures of mirrors and Plexiglas surfaces—appears in the video *Shadow = Light*, 2010, where light projected onto moving geometric constructions introduces new architectural orders.

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Barbara Kasten, *Diptych I 84*, 1984. Polacolor, each 20 × 24".

The exhibition included two sculptures commissioned by Zachęta. *Assembly*, 2026, is a composition of yellow, fluorescent, translucent acrylic beams arranged vertically, horizontally, and diagonally, balancing against one another. Installed on the institution's staircase and windows, the intensely colored fluorescent edges resembled lasers cutting through space, while the translucent surfaces created a halo-like effect. *Scenic Flats, Zachęta*, 2026, consists of three elements, each with undulating acrylic mirrors in shades of pink and red, mounted on aluminum frames. Positioned in a triangular formation with their reflective surfaces facing inward, they create a spatial play of reflections both on themselves and on the ground.

Throughout her career, Kasten has embraced repetition, returning to the same materials, forms, and colors. This is evident in *Progression Eleven*, 2019, in which a photograph of a multicolored Plexiglas composition is intersected perpendicularly by triangular pieces of fluorescent acrylic, casting new shadows and reflections onto the printed image depending on both the movement of light and the viewer. Perhaps this continuous search for new possibilities within the familiar is what makes Kasten's work compelling. It is as if she were probing the potential of a space between two types of optical composition outlined by an artist she credits as a key influence, László Moholy-Nagy. In his book *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), he refers to the static (exhausted by painting) and the kinetic (enabled by then-new, technology-based media). Rather than accepting his attempt to sideline painting, she incorporates it into her thinking about color, form, plane, and chiaroscuro.

A series of exhibitions, including Kasten's first major American survey (at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, in 2015); its European equivalent at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, 2020; and now the Zachęta show, have demonstrated how her oeuvre is informed by modernist photography, sculpture, architecture, and film. Perhaps the time has come to reconsider Kasten's work by bringing painting into focus—recognizing it as another fundamental dimension of her visual language, yet one that has somehow remained in the background of critical discussions of her work.

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