Medardo Rosso. Inventing Modern Sculpture
Wall texts

Ground Floor
Photography

In 1905, art critic Ludwig Hevesi described Medardo Rosso as a creator of “a kind of photo-sculpture,” alluding to the evanescent, blurred qualities of his forms. Given his focus on the fugitive, Rosso’s deep engagement with photography was thus perhaps inevitable.

Unusually for his time, Rosso made photography central to his sculptural process. As opposed to, for instance, Auguste Rodin, who hired renowned photographers to spectacularly document and promote his works, Rosso insisted on taking his own pictures. Cropped and collaged, his curious, often tiny images attest to experimental interventions inside and outside the darkroom. From 1900 onward, Rosso used photography not just to stage his sculptures but also to test how angles, lighting, and framing altered perception. He adjusted the casts accordingly, then photographed the new results. In his hands, photography thus became both a record of and a catalyst for transformation.

By 1902, Rosso started exhibiting his photographs alongside his sculptures, seeing the former as more than mere documentation. Of the five hundred known photographs that he created and circulated, around half are presented here, as either annotated historic prints, glass negatives, or later prints made from his originals.

Kunstmuseum Basel
St. Alban-Graben 8
Postfach, CH-4010 Basel
T +41 61 206 62 62
kunstmuseumbasel.ch

Kontakt für Medien:
kunstmuseumbasel.medien@bs.ch

Display

“We are nothing other than the consequences
of the things that surround us.”
—Medardo Rosso

For Medardo Rosso, the making of sculpture was only part of the creative act; equally important was its meticulous staging. In the center of this room, a selection of sculptures are presented on the historic pedestals favored by the artist, including the *gabbie* (Italian for “cages”), or glass showcases, that he used to frame them. Rosso saw these enclosures as a way to define the surrounding air and space as part of the sculpture. In his lifetime he insisted on highly controlled, frontal views—emphasizing specific perspectives and deliberately withholding others, rarely allowing the backs to be seen. The arrangement in this room deliberately resists his approach. A more open encounter with his works, which are viewable from all sides, reveals traces of his process, highlights materiality, and offers unfettered access to the radicality of his forms.

Rosso’s presentations involved yet more idiosyncrasies. His photographs are evidence of his penchant for showing sculpture in tight groupings, at varied heights, and in orchestrated dialogues with other artworks (his own and others’). Building on these strategies, his *Portrait d’Henri Rouart* (Portrait of Henri Rouart, 1890) is here shown alongside Auguste Rodin’s *Torse* (Torso, 1878–79) and Paul Cezanne’s *Cinq baigneuses* (Five Bathers, 1885/1887), reflecting juxtapositions that the artist explored in his day. Upstairs, Rosso’s sculptures are presented alongside works by his contemporaries and artists working now, continuing this emphasis on the conversational and the act of staging, and further underscoring his art’s enduring modernity.

Second floor
Room 1
Repetition and Variation

From the late 1890s onward, Medardo Rosso repeatedly returned to a repertoire of roughly forty sculptural motifs. Until his death, he reimagined them—casting new variants, reworking surfaces, photographing, then starting over yet again. He used diverse reproduction techniques and often attended to the casting himself rather than outsourcing it to a foundry. The many variations resist the notion of a single, definitive version of an artwork.

Rosso's most reproduced sculpture, *Enfant juif* (Jewish Boy, 1893), epitomizes this. Though mechanically cast, each version has subtle differences in material, color, surface, gaze, and tilt, transforming what another artist would have treated as a serial object into an array of unique artworks. The results blur the line between original and copy, with every sculpture radiating its own distinct aura.

Decades later, movements such as Pop art, Minimalism, and appropriation art revisited these same concerns. Here, Andy Warhol's and Sherrie Levine's mediations on mass reproduction share space with six versions of *Enfant juif* as well as Sidsel Meineche Hansen's mold for a devotional figure made for endless replication. Each differently gestures at the tension between singularity and seriality.

Room 2
Anti-Monumentality

Medardo Rosso envisioned sculpture not as fixed and imposing, but as fugitive, shifting. He radically broke with European sculptural tradition by eschewing permanence in favor of impermanence, grandeur in favor of intimacy. His figures are small, provisional, vulnerable—an antidote to the heroic monuments of his time. Their materiality reinforces this: the artist favored wax and plaster, mediums typically reserved for preparatory studies. Soft and fragile, they defy the claims of durability and mightiness of monumental sculpture.

Rosso's subjects, too, reject the exalted. No rulers, no luminaries—instead, the working class, the unemployed, the overlooked. It was a quiet yet radical refusal of sculpture's historic role in glorifying power.

His legacy lingers. Edgar Degas's near-contemporaneous painting of a fallen jockey, Simone Fattal's craggy and misshapen goddess, and Richard Serra's precariously balanced steel pole all echo Rosso's dismantling of dominance. Rosso didn't need a literal fall—his figures already waver on the edge, as if solidity itself has come undone.

Room 3
Process and Performance

“Nothing is material in space.”
—Medardo Rosso

Across his career, Medardo Rosso’s focus shifted increasingly from the notion of a finished artwork and toward the act of making—material, process, and the event-like nature of artistic creation. He left fingerprints, knife marks, casting seams, and even accidental cracks visible, not as flaws, but as evidence of process. Instead of relying on foundries like most of his contemporaries, he began doing his own casting and even performed spectacular casting sessions for guests in his studio.

His repeated returns to laughing figures, for example, were attempts to capture that most fleeting of gestures. Rosso didn’t just sculpt these—he set them in motion, capturing them in photographic sequences that anticipated the flickering dynamism of Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s photographs, an example of which is on view here. The tension of suspended movement runs through Giovanni Anselmo’s twisted form, where a heavy mass is held taut by a restrained force. A similar sense of tension and release shapes Senga Nengudi’s nylon and sand sculptures, which stretch, sag, and settle like bodies in motion, and were integral to the performances Nengudi began staging in the 1970s.

- **Senga Nengudi, *R.S.V.P., Reverie – Stale Mate*, 2014**
  Starting in the mid-1960s, Senga Nengudi (*1943 Chicago, Illinois, USA), a central figure in the Black Arts Movement in Los Angeles, developed an artistic practice rooted in process and transformation. Half a century after Medardo Rosso, she, too, explored what sculpture could be—celebrating change, fragility, and aliveness. At the heart of her R.S.V.P. series, documented here in a photograph of an early studio performance, is the Black female body, shaped by intersecting histories of race, gender, and power. For these works, dyed, sand-filled nylon stockings stretch between walls or hang, their sagging forms evoking the weight of violence and systemic inequality. The sculptures were made to be activated by dancers. The title, drawn from the acronym for *répondez s’il vous plaît* (meaning “please reply”), hints at their being an invitation to engage with the work—subtly alluding to themes of participation, response, and performativity. Tensed almost to the point of rupture, these precarious forms refuse to collapse entirely, transforming vulnerability itself into a form of resistance.

Room 4
Touching, Embracing, Shaping

In *Aetas aurea* (Golden Age, 1886), Medardo Rosso portrays his wife tenderly embracing their son. Across various cast versions and photographs, the subjects' relationship—and their connection to the surrounding space—shifts. Sometimes they seem to merge, while at others, they blur into their environment—an effect Rosso repeatedly explored. A closer look reveals the mother's hand pressing into the child's cheek, a mirror of the sculptor's act of molding form.

In other artists' works on view here, touch is likewise not just a creative gesture but a force that erodes distinctions between artist and medium, parent and child, subject and form. Phyllida Barlow's ephemeral assemblages, shaped during the night and inspired by the touch of her then-small children, exist now only as photographic documentation. Louise Bourgeois's sewn parent and child, locked in a suffocating embrace, transform maternal intimacy into sculptural entanglement. And Alina Szapocznikow's life cast of her son turns a caress into a haunting imprint. Whether stitched, cast, or modeled, these works make touch and parental "care" unsettlingly tangible.

Room 5
Appearance and Disappearance I

Medardo Rosso's abiding preoccupation was to capture a fleeting moment. To achieve this, he experimented with positioning and lighting and often coated his plaster sculptures in translucent wax—all to make them seem to shift form as one moves around them. But it was arguably in photography that he most fully explored perception's elusiveness.

Ecce Puer (Behold the Child, 1906), the last new motif Rosso created, makes this transience particularly tangible. In any material, its face appears ethereal—more suggestion than definition. In photographs, blurring further unsettles its contours, with light itself acting like a veil. This play of appearance and disappearance found its most radical expression in *Madame X* (1896?), a sculpture represented here through Rosso's photographs of it and Erin Shirreff's 2013 video homage. Created from 132 still images recording shifts in light across a picture of *Madame X*, the video translates Rosso's most abstract sculpture into a flickering game of shadow and illumination, mirroring the dissolution of form so fundamental to his art.

Room 6
Appearance and Disappearance II

“We do not exist! We are only plays of light in space.
More air, more light, more space!”
—Medardo Rosso

In Medardo Rosso’s hands, representation is elusive. Light reshapes the craggy edges and unpolished materials of his sculptures, and shadows further unsettle their contours. Faces emerge dimly, only to blur and recede almost as quickly. The sculptor Constantin Brâncuși, who likely first encountered Rosso’s work in a 1904 exhibition in Paris, recognized him as a vital precedent. Even though Rosso’s raw surfaces may seem at odds with Brâncuși’s refined forms, Rosso offered a model for how sculpture could dissolve into space rather than simply occupy it, and how photography could be an extension of sculptural form.

The idea of form on the verge of disintegration, whether actual or merely perceptual, has been reconsidered across generations and contexts. David Hammons conjures a Black head at the threshold between abstraction and recognition by affixing Harlem barbershop clippings to a rock—an economy of form that recalls Rosso and Brâncuși while confronting modernism’s appropriation of African art. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for his part, imbued his work with conditions for loss and renewal: a pile of sweets, evoking his partner’s AIDS-afflicted body, perpetually shifts form as visitors take from it and the museum replenishes it.

Room 7
Mise-en-Scène

What if the way we frame art could transform our experience of it? Medardo Rosso was convinced that nothing exists in isolation, and thus not only devised broader dialogues around his work but also dictated the intimate conditions of its display. He often installed his sculptures in specially made glass cases on wooden plinths (as seen on the ground floor). These were not just protective enclosures, but meticulously staged settings that defined visual boundaries and guided the viewer's gaze. Display, for Rosso, was integral to meaning.

Rosso's approach echoed with later artists who embedded framing into their work. Francesca Woodman repeatedly enclosed herself within architecture and furniture, integrating setting and subject before freezing the image as a photograph. Paul Thek likewise turned framing into a statement, sealing his uncanny sculptural replicas of raw meat in vitrines, much as Rosso sought to encase shifting, amorphous forms. Marcel Duchamp, for his part, built portable showcases to serve as miniature retrospectives, acknowledging, like Rosso, that context shapes content.

- **Eva Hesse, *Case II*, 1968**
  Eva Hesse (1936 Hamburg, Germany–1970 New York, USA) was early in her use of unpredictable materials like latex, rubber, epoxy resin, and fiberglass, often drawn from the industrial world and unconventional in the context of art making at the time. *Case II* gathers her small material experiments—made of gauze, latex, wax, and wire mesh—arranged like delicacies in a bakery vitrine. Though these forms began as tentative studies, Hesse exhibited *Case II* in her breakthrough 1968 solo exhibition in New York. Like Medardo Rosso before her, she embraced the unfinished and the provisional, pushing the boundaries of what makes a work of art "complete." Yet she also understood, as did Rosso, that things so intimate in scale and visibly vulnerable require a frame that protects them and compels us to see them as works of art.

- **Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1998–1999**
  In *Untitled*, Robert Gober (*1954 Wallingford, Connecticut, USA) adopts a disturbing form of framing: an uncannily lifelike male torso is forced into a seemingly ordinary plastic storage box. The body appears as if churned out on a factory line—brutally severed from the world of the living and stripped of individuality. The box not only contains but also isolates the torso, while a drain embedded in the figure's stomach leads into emptiness—a motif Gober first conceived during the AIDS crisis, when fears around bodies, contamination, and

loss shaped the public imagination. Gober's use of framing recalls Paul Thek's so-called meat pieces, encased in glass boxes, and connects as well to Medardo Rosso's peculiar, partial figures and his insistence on their meticulous framing. For all three, framing amplifies both the vulnerability and the alienation of the fragmented bodies on display. In Gober's case, framing becomes inseparable from violence, turning the body into an object both exposed and contained.

Room 8
Form Undone I

“I am busy with materials.”
—Medardo Rosso

“Gaseous” was how one critic described Medardo Rosso’s sculptures—a fitting word, despite the work’s insistent physical presence. For Rosso, materiality was everything, even as he pursued the undoing of form. His sculptures never fully resolve—if they cohere for a moment, they inevitably then slip toward disintegration. This is evident in *Portinaia* (Concierge, 1883–1884) and *Madame Noblet* (1897), where the modeled, “finished” sides seem as rough and amorphous as the backs of his other sculptures. *Malato all’ospedale* (Sick Man in Hospital, 1889) carries this even further. Rosso’s use of wax—traditionally associated with death masks and embalmed flesh—heightens the work’s sense of mortality and transience.

From the 1960s onward, formlessness ran like a thread through the work of artists including Isa Genzken, Yayoi Kusama, Robert Morris, Carol Rama, and Alina Szapocznikow. Each, in their own way, tested sculpture’s capacity to behave like bodies in flux—pliable, oozing, potentially abject, and ultimately unstable.

- **Alina Szapocznikow, *Fotorzeźby*, 1971/2007**
  “I sat, deep in thought, chewing absent-mindedly my chewing gum. Pulling out of my mouth the strangest forms, I suddenly realized the existence of an extraordinary collection of abstract sculpture, passing between my teeth. It would be enough to photograph and enlarge my chewed-up discoveries, to face the fact of sculptural creation. And its ordinariness.” That is how Alina Szapocznikow (1926 Kalisz, Poland–1973 Passy, France) explains the accidental beginnings of her *Fotorzeźby* (Photosculptures). By the 1960s, she was radically rethinking sculpture as an intimate record of memory and the body. Like Medardo Rosso before her, she understood the artistic process as something immediate and experimental, and recognized that photography could itself become a sculptural tool. In *Fotorzeźby*, Szapocznikow envisages sculpture as a direct imprint shaped within the darkness of the oral cavity: intimately formed, then discarded. Captured in photographs, these pieces of chewed gum sit between the raw immediacy of bodily creation and the permanence conferred by the camera’s lens. They are an improvised trace of the body that produced them—marked by vulnerability and a faint sense of repulsion. The irreverent sculptor created only a few photographic works in her lifetime, and she insisted that they, too, be considered sculptural pieces. One of these few known works, *Fotorzeźby* challenges our notions of what sculpture can be.

Room 9
Form Undone

For Medardo Rosso, drawing was not a preliminary step, but an extension of the same questions that drove his sculpture and photography. His small-scale renderings were not strict representations, but rather fleeting impressions of places, figures, and forms. He worked in quick, jagged lines, often on invitation cards, envelopes, or menus. He then photographed these seemingly slight pieces and exhibited them, emphasizing their significance to him.

Nebulousness tugs against clear description in Rosso's work, no matter the medium. Consider *Enfant au sein* (Child at Breast, 1890), one of his most radical sculptures. The only two bronze versions he made, both shown here, nod to the timeless mother-and-child motif yet nearly absorb the figures into an indistinct mass. Only at second glance can we discern the child's head, nestled against its mother's breast and cradled in her disembodied arms. Earlier photographs reveal that the mother's head was once modeled, but it was either consciously removed or accidentally broken before casting. In any case, its absence became part of the deliberate result: a fragmentary suggestion of mother and child, fused as if into congealed lava.

- **Carol Rama, *Bricolage R4*, 1964**
  The work of Carol Rama (1918–2015 Turin, Italy) is marked by rebellion, experimentation, and material diversity, often circling around the human body. With her unsparing gaze at sexuality, pleasure, illness, and death, Rama questioned societal norms. Starting in the 1960s, she began experimenting with industrial materials such as rubber, metal, and doll eyes in her so-called bricolages, expanding collage into dense material assemblages. In *Bricolage R4*, a viscous mass seems to have coagulated against a red background, caught between liquefaction and solidification—an effect also found in the sculptures of Medardo Rosso. Like Rosso, Rama was also from Turin and would certainly have known his work. Both artists used unconventional materials to create artworks that are at once intimate, subversive, and almost ectoplasmic.