



CURBED



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Magda Sawon Is Always Too Early

As told to Diana Budds [@DianaBudds](#)



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New York's "21 Questions" column is back with an eye on creative New Yorkers. Magda Sawon is the co-founder, with her husband, Tamás Banovich, of Postmasters, a contemporary-art gallery that opened in the East Village in 1984 and moved to Soho in 1989, Chelsea in 1998, and, finally, Tribeca in 2013. Last month, the gallery announced that it's closing its space after a dispute with the landlord and will transition to mounting nomadic exhibitions.

Name: Magda Sawon

Age: 67

Neighborhood: Tribeca

Occupation: Co-founder of Postmasters Gallery

What's hanging above your couch?

What's more important to me is what stands in *front* of my couch because the couch is the perfect place to sit and look at something — and that is a sculpture by Luke Murphy. He gave us what I would call an electronic fireplace. It's made of vintage LEDs, and he runs a program through it of digital patterns and pixels, which never repeat. It's mesmerizing.

What's the first job you had in New York?

I came to New York in 1981 and got a job at Bendel's selling shoes. At the time, it was a super-high-end store — better than Barneys. Jackie Onassis and Cher were there shopping and a lot of women who were engaged in the art world. One of my regulars was Estelle Schwartz, who was running an art program for women through the New School. Because my schedule was flexible, I joined the program, and that's how I got a behind-the-scenes look at the art and gallery world.

What color are you always drawn to?

Blue, from the super-extreme Diana Vreeland navy blue to Yves Klein blue to a cloud where the whiteness is touched by a tiny, tiny amount of pigment. My favorite film is *Blue*, by Derek Jarman, which is nothing but blue for 60 minutes.

What art or artifact are you most surprised you own?

I own a 19th-century mirror with a very elaborate, flowery frame. It surprised me because I'm drawn to super-contemporary objects that reflect our time and the culture of the moment in which we live. And yet I love to see myself in a Baroque mirror. It was given to us by my husband Tamás's mother, who lives in Budapest and has a house full of treasures. The mirror is one she decided to part with.

Which New Yorker would you want to hang out with?

John Cameron Mitchell. I'm a major *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* fan. I've seen it on Broadway seven times, once with Neil Patrick Harris in the lead and six times with Mitchell starring. I just think Mitchell is an incredible, talented being and had a progressive attitude about gender and sexuality very early on. It probably wouldn't be impossible for me to make two or three phone calls and say, "Oh I need to meet him!" and enter his circle from my circle, but I never have. You know, let it stay in this kind of realm of mystery, hope, and fantasy.

What's the last thing you made with your hands?

I've learned a new skill of putting together boxes that our 38 years of archives are going into. It's a simple job, and with my lack of manual talent, I could handle that.

Is there one thing you own multiple versions of?

That would be Margiela Tabi shoes. My shoe fetish was developed during my first job at Bendel's. They're in various cycles of being worn to death. I have seven or eight functional pairs — a couple of boots and ballet flats in all possible colors — and maybe eight or ten that have been discarded.

What New York City museum do you always go back to?

It's a complete cliché: the Met. The encyclopedic nature of the museum allows you to pick and choose what you see according to the mood, the moment, and the context you want. The last time I went was to see Charles Ray's show and then afterward, we traversed the Greek and Roman sculptures, which became this specific and interesting context for Charles's sculptures. It's important to reach backward and see where certain things come from. There's an extraordinary amount of amnesia that runs through the art world.

What do you always have next to your computer?

EVERYTHING, in capital letters: my hard drive, my phone, my second computer, lots of paper, cookies. I don't have this kind of Mary Boone office where there is a clean table with three pencils. That would not describe my workspace.

Where is the best view of the city?

Tamás and I have a motorcycle, and my favorite view is when we return to Manhattan from the Brooklyn Bridge, preferably during late afternoon, during the magic hour when there's still light and it's not yet sunset.

What building or object do you want to redesign every time you see it?

Hudson Yards. It's just atrocious what passes for architecture in this real-estate monstrosity that was created there. And I would extend my irritation to Thomas Heatherwick's "gift" to the world, which is the horrible "shawarma" thing that isn't even open anymore. This sculptor-architect that seems to be the favorite of city real-estate people who want to leave a mark is, for me, an absolute mystery. I'm not sure how I would redesign it. It's beyond a surface effort. It should be razed so something else could be built there. Maybe there could be a way of turning it into a park.

What's one thing you would change about your field?

My hope would always be that there is more curiosity and less speculation in the perception, reception, and acquisition of art. Galleries are commercial; everything we do is supported by selling art. But the first thing we think about isn't the purely transactional component of art. We really evaluate how an artwork reflects the time, how it is at the beginning of a movement or tendency, and in the context of what is happening. My currency is the relevance to the moment of the work, that something shown now wouldn't be possible years ago. That's the M.O. for Postmasters. We have a great record of discovering work that eventually gets more and more acceptance, but at this forefront, the support is small because it's not yet completely understood and it doesn't have the familiarity to people who acquire art. We want the art market to accept that there's much more than paintings on the wall; there are amazing digital and new-media practices that are in true relationship to our time.

If you could live anywhere in New York City, where would it be?

Downtown, where we currently live. I spent my life downtown — I never lived above 21st Street — and I like the variety, the walkability, and the diversity of people who live here.

What would you hoard if it stopped being produced?

I pray to the god of fashion that Tabi shoes won't be discontinued. But that's a facetious answer. The power of the human mind is adaptability and flexibility, so forget the shoes! You know, we had this gallery for 38 years, and it started on an IBM Selectric typewriter. Then I had someone build a computer in an aluminum box, which was, let's put it this way, incredibly user-unfriendly. Then the fax machine came, then the internet. I subscribe to the idea of accommodating the next thing technologically and intellectually, more so than clinging to an idea of, *Oh my God, we've stopped producing neon lightbulbs*. Everything moves, and you have to adapt to the next thing.

What do you do to get out of a creative rut?

I watch tennis. There are a lot of changeovers, and during those moments, I come back to what's in my brain and try to problem-solve. Then I wait for the next match and do it again.

Where was your first NYC apartment, and how much was the rent?

Right after I arrived, I was staying with a friend on Waverly Place in this sort of studio loft that was enormous. She was subletting it, and I imagine it was maybe \$2,000 a month. Then I met Tamás, and I lived with him in his home, which was in a basement on 21st Street that he shared with a friend. It had a garden behind it, and I think we paid \$1,000 to a friend who was on the lease for the place.

Where in the city do you go to be alone?

I go to lunch or dinner by myself. I enjoy this loneliness. I have my phone and my book and create an anti-social cocoon around myself

What's the worst piece of career advice you've ever gotten?

The manager of the building where we have the gallery said to me, "With all due respect, I think the work you show does not support the gallery. You're really bad at business." He implied that we should do all of the good business-y things and show stuff that sells, rather than show the crazy things. It was well-meaning advice, but at the same time, it's advice I could have given myself 30 years ago! We're very committed to difficult art and probably intelligent enough to select the art that the market would accommodate much easier, but *with all due respect*, that's not my interest.

What have you given away to someone that you wish you could get back?

Nothing. I'm very generous and happy to give things away. I don't have an enormous attachment to objects.

What's your favorite NYC restaurant and regular order?

We often go to Marumi on La Guardia Place. I always order seafood salad, which comes on a bed of lettuce with mystery dressing. I cannot crack the code of what's in the dressing. I've tried to recreate it many times and can never match it. So off I go and have one over there.

What descriptive phrase do you want on your obituary headline?

"She was always too early." Whether it's a positive or negative thing, in the end, it describes what my path has been.