

DIANE

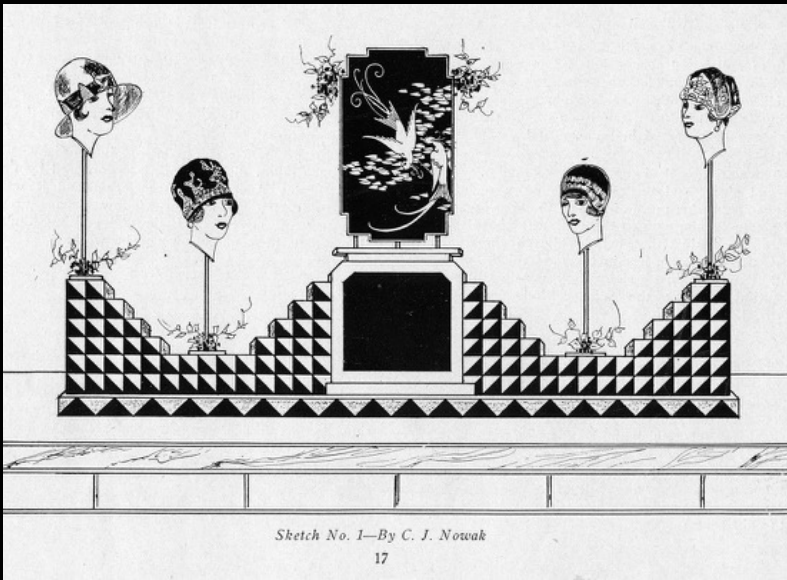
SIMPSON



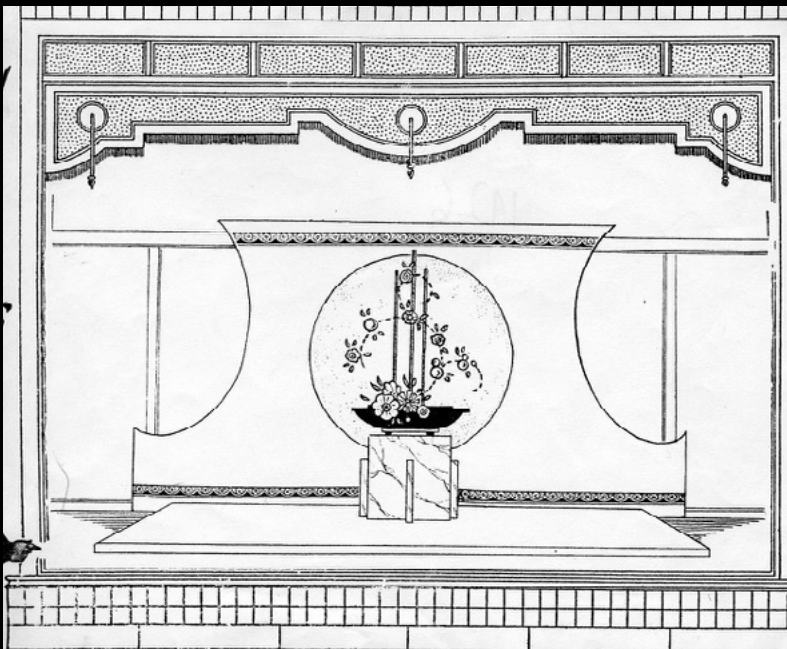
BMO Harris Bank  
Chicago Works

13

Diane Simpson, *Window Dressing: Background 4, Apron VI*, 2003/2007 Installation View; Washington Square East Gallery, New York University. Apron VI: Spun-bond polyester, aluminum, and Mylar fabric Background 4: Gatorboard, wood, enamel, wallpaper, marker 104 x 120 x 28 in.  
Photo: Charles Benton



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Walking along Broadway in early 2014, in the depths of a New York winter, I first encountered Diane Simpson's extraordinary installation *Window Dressing*: a self-consciously and unabashedly theatrical display of her sculptural works, presented in the storefront exhibition spaces of New York University's Broadway Windows gallery. Created in 2007 for the ground-floor window spaces of the Racine Art Museum in Racine, Wisconsin—an institution housed in a former department store—*Window Dressing* was originally meant to be seen from the street, the glazed windows creating a threshold between the passersby and the work. Framed by the storefront's or museum's windows, which functioned like a proscenium arch, Simpson staged the tableaux and sculptural objects to emulate the visually seductive and formally extravagant store-window displays of the 1920s and 1930s Art Deco era, a period the artist has researched extensively. Each of the tableaux in *Window Dressing* incorporates a freestanding, screen-like structure that functions as a backdrop for Simpson's discrete sculptural works, which were precisely installed in front of or suspended above them—Simpson has talked about her desire to create a "seamless" relationship between the individual sculptures and their "background" supports.



Oswald W. Grube et al., *100 Years of Architecture in Chicago: Continuity of Structure and Form* (1976), J. Philip O'Hara. Cover design: Richard Nickel.

The works in *Window Dressing*, like much of the art Simpson has made over the past forty years, explore the languages and methodologies of display and presentation. Borrowing freely from the worlds of fashion, interior decoration, architecture, and mercantile design, Simpson's work explores the seductive and persuasive nature of objects, and how the circumstances in which we encounter such objects conditions our subsequent relationships with them: whether in the museum, store, street, or home. There is a sense of instability concerning the status of Simpson's resulting sculptures: are they props, maquettes, merchandise, or artworks?

Simpson has long been interested in the formal and sociological nature of objects. She is as interested in how something looks as in how it functions symbolically. Recurring motifs in her work reveal ongoing preoccupations with clothing design and vernacular architecture. Her work is rooted in a careful consideration of the everyday, in a focused examination of the aesthetic ebbs and flows of our material culture. Simpson establishes a tension between the applied and fine arts, an interest she shares with artists as different as Marc Camille Chaimovitz and Lucy McKenzie, who also collide seemingly conflicting material and cultural histories in their work, dissolving "high" and "low" aesthetic prejudices along the way, to create their own uncanny hybrid forms. These objects, like Simpson's, are at once familiar and strange.

With *Window Dressing* Simpson also addresses, perhaps even celebrates, the creative labors of the culturally marginalized figure of the “window dresser” (a profession still somewhat frowned-upon within the arts, despite the fact that artists as significant as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol worked as window dressers in the late 1950s and early 1960s). Like the window dresser, Simpson is implicated in the processes of selection, arrangement, and presentation. In this respect the artist is not unlike a curator, who also identifies, organizes, and choreographs objects in space. Diane Simpson’s work self-reflexively amplifies such tensions, where the distinction between what is presented and how it is presented becomes moot.

*Matthew Higgs is an artist and the director of White Columns, New York’s oldest not-for-profit, alternative art space.*

## A WINDOW INTO WINDOW DRESSING

LYNNE WARREN

A little-known history shapes Diane Simpson’s *Window Dressing*, that of the rich material culture that blossomed early in the twentieth century. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, most Americans led lives unaffected by consumerism. Many could not afford more than the basic necessities, and most did not have the time to develop personal tastes and follow, never mind indulge in, shifts in style. This all began to change in the late 1800s, and in many ways Chicago is to celebrate (or blame, according to one’s views) for the rise of consumer culture. The city was the incubator of modern mercantilism; the Sears and Roebucks and Montgomery Ward companies pioneered mail-order shopping, and Marshall Field’s, Carson Pirie Scott & Company, and other now-shuttered department stores presented thrilling arrays of products in large, centrally located buildings. Passersby were tempted into these emporiums by oversized plate-glass display windows, an innovation of Marshall Field’s Retail Division Chief Harry Selfridge, who in the 1890s oversaw their installation along State Street<sup>1</sup>. The innovation of the large display window featuring the latest fashions and newest products spurred the parallel development of window dressers, then termed “window trimmers.” By 1903 there was enough growth in the field to support such trade publications as *Merchants Record and Show Window*, which described itself as an “illustrated monthly journal for merchants, display managers, and advertising men.”

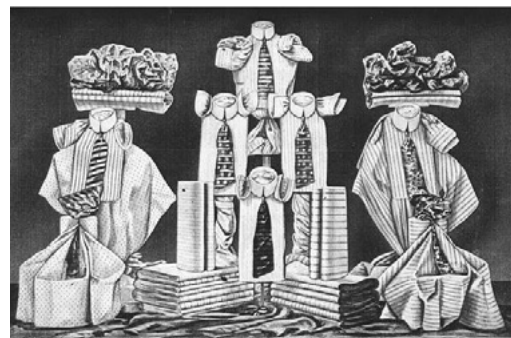
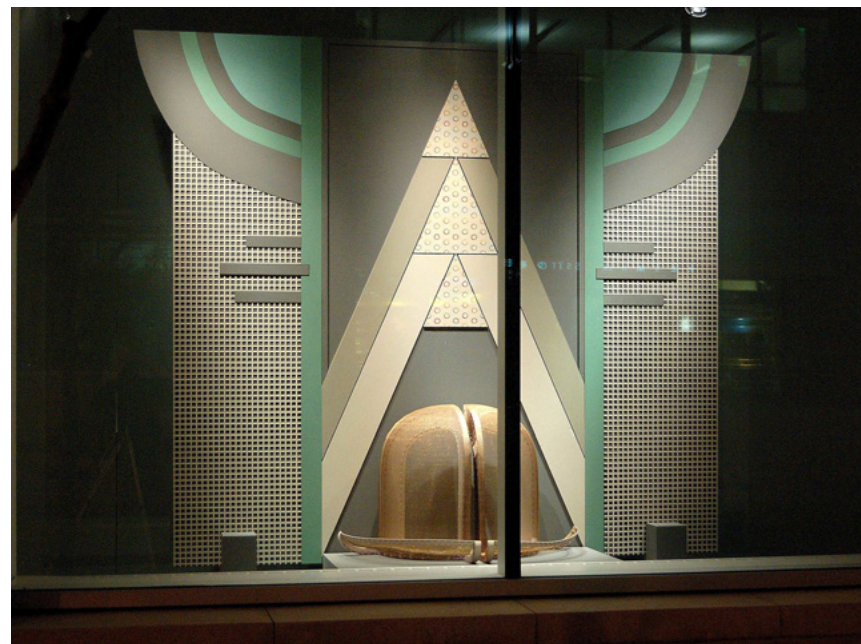


Illustration from a 1911-12 issue of *Men's Wear*, the Crerar Library, University of Chicago.

In a commission by Wisconsin’s Racine Art Museum (RAM) that was realized in 2007, Simpson found an opportunity to employ motifs and imagery she had developed after coming across a bound collection of *Merchants Record and Show Window* from 1928. Fascinated by articles on how to design eye-catching windows that featured arresting displays of merchandise—as well as by advertisements for fixtures, mannequins, artificial foliage, and other such

1 James R. Grossman, Ann Durkin Keating, and Janice L. Reiff, *Newberry Library, and Chicago Historical Society, “Field (Marshall) & Co.”* Encyclopedia of Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Selfridge went on to found the eponymous department store that still operates on London’s Bond Street.



1/8th scale model for *Window Dressing: Background 6, Vee*, 2006. Printed paper, Gatorboard, wood, plastic mesh, and string. 11 x 16 1/2 x 2 in. Photo: Kenneth H. Simpson

things—Simpson also noted an advertisement for the 1925 book *Manual of Show Window Backgrounds* by E. O. Burdgr. She subsequently located this hefty volume in the John Crerar Library at the University of Chicago, along with numerous other period books on window display.<sup>2</sup> Simpson states:

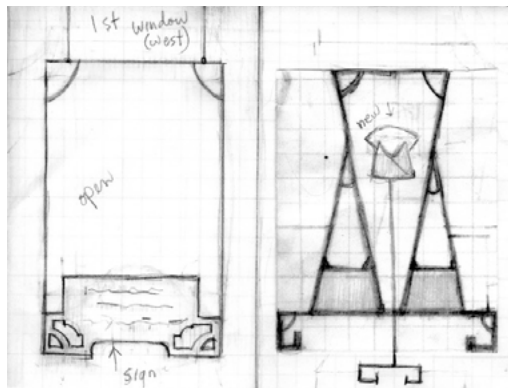
I also spent many hours poring over trade catalogues and advertisements from that period in the Chicago Public Library’s Special Collections Department. There I found Marshall Field’s advertising pamphlet “Fashions of the Hour,” with wonderfully designed pages from the late 20s. As I continued researching this subject, there were other inspiring discoveries: Art Deco tile designs in New York subway stations, a website selling original 1920s wallpaper, and a company currently manufacturing linoleum with patterns reminiscent of the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

These researches inspired Simpson to combine her sculptures with backdrops to create ersatz merchandising displays. Subsequently she was offered the RAM commission and set to work creating six such displays, one for each of the museum’s large, street-level windows. (In an uncanny coincidence, only later did she discover that the Racine Art Museum’s building had once housed a department store.) From existing work, Simpson selected *Bowler*, made in 1994 as part of a headdress series connoting various cultures. She designed and built *Background 2* and joined *Bowler* with it. *Apron VI* from 2003, inspired both by kimonos and pagoda roof shapes, was placed against *Background 4*. The elaborate *Pinafore* from 1987—evoking the apron-like garment that was once worn over girls’ dresses—became the centerpiece of *Background 3*, which was based on the design of an Art Deco gate in the 96th Street subway station in New York. Newly created were *Bib (doodle)*, joined with *Background 1*, and *Collar* and *Bib-deco*, placed to correspond to the various levels of a tiered platform of *Background 6*. To further enhance the merchandise display motif, Simpson designed and fashioned stands, platforms, hangers, and other display furniture.

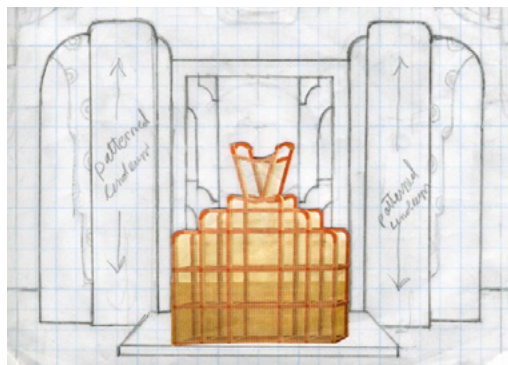
2 Established in 1894, this research library focuses on biological, medical, and physical sciences and houses collections in general science and the philosophy and history of science, medicine, and technology.

3 Transcript, Racine Art Museum Artist Talk by Diane Simpson, May 2, 2008, with artist’s revisions January 2, 2016.

But first, to work out the tableaux, she made one-eighth-inch scale models, two of which are on display in the exhibition. Simpson describes the process: "I [was] consumed with this project for more than a year. . . . It involved developing the concept, doing the research, completing the designs, choosing materials, and working out every detail in one-eighth scale models."<sup>4</sup> She then constructed the full-sized backgrounds out of foam-board, wood, and various materials that are affixed to the surfaces, including vintage and contemporary wallpapers and linoleum.



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In 2014, *Window Dressing* had a new audience when it was displayed in the windows of New York University's Washington Square East Gallery, at the intersection of Broadway and East 10th Street. That same year one of the tableaux was included in the group show *Displayed*, curated by Matthew Higgs at Anton Kern in New York. This marked the first time a tableau was presented inside a gallery, allowing one to view it unencumbered by a reflective pane of plate glass. With the MCA's Chicago premiere of four of the five *Window Dressing* tableaux, the viewer is likewise unencumbered. Also presented are source materials and models that provide a glimpse into the artist's process and show the many details that inform the finished product.

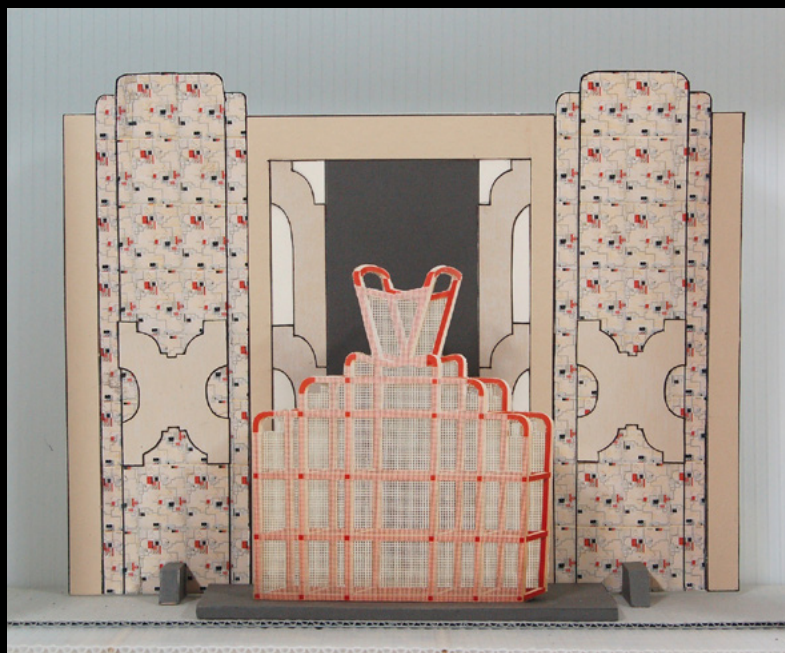
Diane Simpson's *Window Dressing* is wonderfully supported by this quote from an article in a 1921 publication of *Merchants Record and Show Window* on anniversary displays: "There is one kind of display that never fails to win wide attention and cause unlimited comment. This is the . . . window that shows wearing apparel, furniture, and miscellaneous personal odds and ends of a bygone generation."<sup>5</sup> Simpson's love of Art Deco, architecture, the Wiener Werkstatte and Arts and Craft movements, Shaker design, traditional Japanese architecture, clothing and crafts, and other forms from bygone eras that she transforms and realizes with virtuosic craftsmanship is what is truly on display in *Window Dressing*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Interesting Anniversary Display," in *Merchants Record and Show Window*, Volume XL-VIII, Number 1 (January, 1921), p. 33, accessed January 1, 2016, [https://books.google.com/books?id=IF5JAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA40&lpg=RA1-PA40&dq=MERCHANTS+RECORD+AND+SHOW+W+WINDOW.&source=bl&ots=g\\_8rjVlyIH&sig=QIUzQoDsg7k4sbwgosij7OZ5tdA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwvj\\_PzF-4bKAhXHFT4KHe-2AJUG6AEIRjAH#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=IF5JAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA40&lpg=RA1-PA40&dq=MERCHANTS+RECORD+AND+SHOW+W+WINDOW.&source=bl&ots=g_8rjVlyIH&sig=QIUzQoDsg7k4sbwgosij7OZ5tdA&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwvj_PzF-4bKAhXHFT4KHe-2AJUG6AEIRjAH#v=onepage&q&f=false).



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Diane Simpson received an MFA in 1978 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She was recently featured in a 2015 solo exhibition at the ICA/Boston, which included an early work, *Ribbed Kimono*, on loan from the MCA collection. Her work has been included in numerous two-person and group exhibitions, including the Art Institute of Chicago; White Columns, New York; Silberkuppe, Berlin; and Herald St, London. Diane Simpson is represented by Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago and JTT, New York.

Diane  
Simpson

Feb 16–  
Jul 3

Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Chicago

This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Diane Simpson*, presented from Feb 16 to Jul 3, 2016, in the Sternberg Family Gallery and Robin Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and curated by Lynne Warren.

Major support for *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Diane Simpson* is provided by BMO Harris Bank.

Additional generous support is provided by the Sandra and Jack Guthman Chicago Works Exhibition Fund.

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