



DIANE SIMPSON

JTT

Though Diane Simpson (b. 1935) has been exhibiting steadily in and around her native Chicago since the late 1970s, until recently her work was largely unseen outside of the Midwest. A small but revelatory 2013 solo show at the Lower East Side gallery JTT brought the artist's work—sparse, architectural sculptures often influenced by garment construction—to New York for the first time in over thirty years; she has since been the subject of a widely acclaimed retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Boston and gallery shows in London and Berlin.

Simpson's first exhibition at JTT functioned as a miniature survey, highlighting examples of her output from the past twenty years. By contrast, her second show at the gallery focused on a single body of work: her breakthrough "Samurai" series (1981–83), a set of eight freestanding MDF sculptures that take their cues from the austere elegance of samurai armor, seven of which were reunited for the exhibition. (One of these, *Samurai 8*, was fabricated at full size for the first time, based on a model that the artist made in 1983.) The series was inspired by a scene in Akira Kurosawa's 1980 samurai film, *Kagemusha*, in which a group of warriors sit on the ground with their backs to the camera during a ceremony. In a statement quoted in the exhibition's press material, Simpson notes

View of Diane Simpson's exhibition "Samurai," 2016–17, showing (left) *Samurai 9*, 1983, oil stain on MDF, 77 by 50 by 12 inches, and (right) *Samurai 6*, 1982, enamel on MDF, 59½ by 61 by 31 inches, at JTT.

View of Duane Linklater's exhibition "From Our Hands," 2016–17, at 80WSE.

that she was captivated by the way “the segments of their armor skirts formed arcs cascading from their waist onto the floor.”

Tellingly, Simpson’s first impulse was not to emulate the aesthetics of the samurai uniforms per se, but to seek out diagrams illustrating their construction. Up to that point, the artist, then in her forties, had worked almost exclusively in two dimensions, primarily experimenting with an intuitive approach to isometric drawing on graph paper. The “Samurai,” begun shortly after she received her MFA in 1978, following an extended hiatus from art school to raise her children, were among her earliest attempts at translating the abstract space of axonometric projection that she explored in her drawings into actual three-dimensional objects.

The resulting sculptures are scaled to the body, most standing at about five feet, but do not particularly resemble specific garments, let alone human figures. Instead, what Simpson took from the samurai armor is something like a structural principle, extracting a single detail—like the flared edge of a helmet or a pleated fold—and distilling its essential underlying form into a series of flat, interlocking planes. To create the works, she first diagrammed the forms on graph paper, and then turned the preparatory drawings into what might best be described as garment patterns, designed so that the individual MDF components could be simply slotted together. This approach to construction was in part a pragmatic response to Simpson’s lack of sculptural training, insofar as it allows the sculptures to stand upright without extensive hardware. But it also gives them a striking material presence that is paradoxically imposing and slight at the same time, as if Simpson had accomplished some miraculous feat of engineering.

The earliest, and smallest, work in the series, *Samurai 1* (1981), was represented at JTT in two forms, with the sculpture displayed on a pedestal next to a framed print detailing its components and featuring instructions for assembly carefully handwritten in pencil along the lower edge. Simpson employed rag board for the sculpture itself, decorating its surface with a patterned print on paper; in subsequent works, she applied geometric patterning directly to the board, by staining or painting the surfaces. Viewing the print and the construction in tandem emphasized the transmedial play at the core of Simpson’s work: the sculptures appear to vacillate between two and three dimensions, holding the characteristics of image and object in suspension.

—Rachel Wetzler