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Diane Simpson

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My favorite art-world tweet last year came from critic Martin Herbert, who proposed a keyboard short-cut to instantly insert today's oft-needed phrase, "under-recognized female artist." This time-saving keystroke would have come in mighty handy this autumn in London, which enjoyed survey exhibitions by Amy Sillman and the late Anni Albers alongside this first-ever UK solo presentation by American sculptor Diane Simpson. An admired figure in the Chicago art scene, Simpson had her second solo exhibition in New York in 2013, thirty-three years after the first one. She has barely exhibited in Europe, and many here—myself included—knew nothing of her stupendous work. Simpson's long-established practice involves translating elaborate technical drawings into multipart sculptures, whether wall-based, freestanding, suspended, or in combination. Her graph-paper pencil renderings are often based on forgotten also-rans from the history of clothing and design, such as the jabot (an elaborate pleated collar) or the peplum, (a wide flounce decorating the lower portion of a garment). On paper, the artist generates blueprints for her sculptures by magically tilting these archi-anatomical details axonometrically. The results, constructed from materials including plywood, steel, pipe fittings, silk, and various readymades, are extraordinary.

Jabot (pleated), 2017, looked like a multifaceted little skyscraper, a plywood house of cards balanced atop an industrial four-legged iron stand. You could happily spend a good twenty minutes closely inspecting its fabulous construction: the hinge-like open joints (invisibly screwed together on the inside), the carefully engineered polygonal elements. Or you could consider the meticulously cut-out triangles along the edge of *Tethered (pink)*, 2017, requiring repetitive small-scale scissor work, like a manicure. You might have marveled at the ribbonlike slivers of olive, pink, or mustard-yellow linen attached by evenly spaced nails along the edge of *Jabot (triplet)*, 2018, a suspended sculpture resembling three folding chairs. The exciting discovery of a barely visible flourish of reddish-colored pencil embellishing the corners of the wall work *Lambrequin and Peplum*, 2017, felt like a secret message to reward the hyper-attentive viewer. I began to sense these details weren't completing the sculptures, but, vice versa, the structures served as vehicles to display the underappreciated tasks of trimming and finishing associated with dressmaking and carpentry. Each sculpture was built from mostly planar components—sheets of low-density fiberboard, or LDF; vintage tin ceiling tiles; lengths of canvas or aluminum mesh—suggesting a piece-by-piece, DIY flat-pack construction. Even the largest works mostly comprised smaller elements you could hold in two hands (the artist does not employ assistants), implying a sense of direct touch and extreme care in placement.

Simpson appears inspired by protean shapes, decorative forms subject to human fickleness. Her hinge-like joints and modular—looking parts recall objects designed to be modified, like mid-twentieth-century "flexible furniture": adjustable shelving, multi-height clothes racks, foldout side tables, stackable chairs. The history of clothing is a rising tide of sartorial rejects, and our homes, too, are filled with overlooked design objects that are weirdly subject to fashion—footstools, curtain hardware, shelf brackets. All this changeable marginalia takes center stage in Simpson's art, and its marginalization begins to echo the artist's own position on the sidelines of the art world. Perhaps we should expand the question asked thirty years ago by the Guerrilla Girls to read UNLESS NAKED, DO WOMEN HAVE TO BE SENIOR CITIZENS TO GET INTO THE MUSEUM? I left with acute retroactive fomo; how did I miss this amazing artist?

— Gilda Williams