

# Good

# Drawings

# for

# Future

I was listening to FM radio on a recent morning commute, settling on a station playing Nigerian Highlife. The road was hilly and forested, and as the car neared the edge of the station's broadcast reach, the music started to mix with the voice of an announcer on a nearby channel. The resulting sound retained the feeling of each station, balancing their volume and discernability, not resolving one above the other.

For a few moments I settled into the overlap of the two channels and found a pleasure in the tension in between. It was beautiful, analog, and almost historic.

There is a similar oscillation present in the room with Diane Simpson's sculptures. Her objects don't move but appear to hover, presenting both their front and their sides to the viewer at the same time. Beginning with her first sculptures in the late 1970s, Simpson has adapted a two-dimensional graphic technique into three-dimensional form, as if drawing in space. The technical term for this two-dimensional perspective is 'axonometric projection,' which art historian Kate Nesin more fully describes within Simpson's body of work. Axonometric projection is a process "in which a drawn object is rotated axially away from the picture plane and maintains the same scale measurement along all of its axes."<sup>1</sup> Distinct from linear perspective — which distorts geometric forms into one, two, or three-point perspective — axonometric projections lie perpendicular to the line of sight. Axonometry developed as a graphic tool for representing both space and time, portraying a setting and the progression of a narrative. Early examples of the technique can be found in ancient Chinese scroll painting. Late 17th-century Japanese artists used axonometry "not just as a tool for depicting space but also as a tool for composition."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kate Nesin, "Source Code: Kate Nesin on the Art of Diane Simpson," *Artforum* (October 2015): Vol. 54, No. 3, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Axonometric projection has a variety of different historical precedents. More discussion can be found here: <https://jankrikke2020.medium.com/why-the-world-relies-on-a-chinese-perspective-cf3122caf67f>. It was only later in her career that Simpson learned of the term "axonometry." She found art historical examples such as the architectural depictions in the folding screens for *The Tale of Genji*. This piece, represented in the image on page 14, was particularly influential on the artist.



*Fifty-Four Scenes from 'The Tale of Genji,'* Edo Period (1615–1868)  
Late 17th century. Pair of six-panel folding screens; ink, color, gold, and  
gold leaf on paper. Each 66 15/16 in. × 12 ft 5 3/16 inches (170 × 379 cm).

This approach, which is not uncommon in two dimensions, becomes uncanny when rendered in three. Simpson's sculptures may appear quiet and static upon first approach. Only on circumnavigating them does the perspectival dynamism of the objects come to life. Her sculptures appear to shift in space echoing a corresponding shift in spatial interpretation. This transformation is atheatrical, and almost tonal. The unfolding generates wonder and even a slight desire for the object to resolve back into the drawing from where it must have come. Like passing from one radio frequency to another, Simpson's fusion of sculpture and drawing emanates a tension to be negotiated, floating in an intermedia space while we translate sculpture into drawing and back into sculpture.

Simpson's first focus was on depiction. She arrived at the use of "parallel oblique projection" as a way to describe an "object in space...without having to see the object."<sup>3</sup> Her incorporation of axonometry eventually shifted the

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with the artist, July 2021.

technique from a tool into an instrument in the composition. This formalism was certainly true of her early sculptural works in cardboard. Instead of arising out of a conceptual agenda or ideological position, Simpson's early work emerged from close observations of her own practice and process. John Cage made a similar shift when employing radio in his compositions, explaining, "It wasn't really a leap on my part; it was, rather, simply opening my ears to what was in the air."<sup>4</sup>

Out of sync with the art historical movements that might at first glance seem to define her career, Simpson began art school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in the 1950s before taking leave to start a family. She returned to her undergraduate degree part-time with a focus on figurative painting, commuting downtown for class while maintaining a studio at home in Chicago's northern suburb of Wilmette. She completed her B.F.A. in 1971 at the age of 36. When Chicago Imagism was on the rise with the Hairy Who shows at the Hyde Park Art Center in 1966 and 1967, Simpson likes to say, "I was too busy changing diapers."<sup>5</sup> Simpson was geographically as well as temporally separated from this emerging artist scene in the city. Though she was older than many of the artists identified as Imagists, by the time she entered her graduate studies, some of them were her teachers.<sup>6</sup>

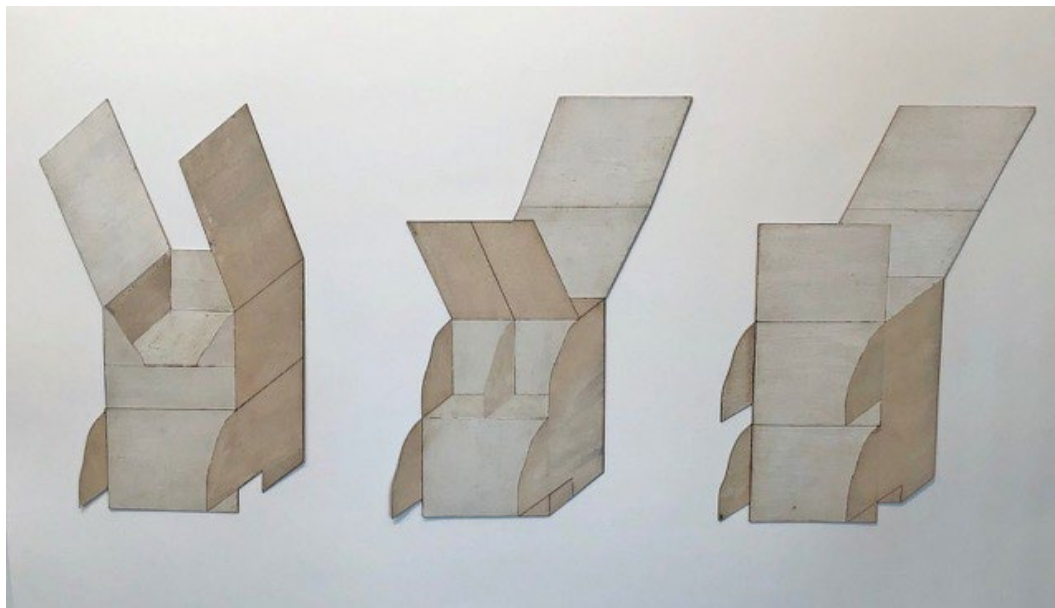
In the years after her undergraduate degree, Simpson developed an interest in printmaking. She pursued her graduate studies again at SAIC, this time in the Painting Department where she worked with Ted Halkin, Ray Yoshida, and Barbara Rossi. And yet, while in the department she never made a painting — her work in two dimensions led her instead into sculpture. Her drawings, prints, and collages focused increasingly on geometric forms like unfolding boxes, sometimes placed within abstract architectural space. She became interested in collagraphic printing. Collagraphy, as Lynne Warren described in her essay for Simpson's 2010 survey at the Chicago Cultural Center, is "...traditionally a type of print made from a board or 'plate' onto which materials are collaged, thus forming a relief that is inked and printed onto paper."<sup>7</sup> Before considering cardboard as a sculptural material, Simpson began

<sup>4</sup> John Cage in Richard Kostelanetz, "John Cage and Richard Kostelanetz: A Conversation about Radio," *The Musical Quarterly*, 1986, Oxford University Press, Vol. 72, No. 2, pp. 216–227.

<sup>5</sup> Diane Simpson and Dan Byers, "Interview" in Lucy Flint, ed. *Diane Simpson*, The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2015, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Simpson has mentioned the influence of Barbara Rossi who was one of her advisors in graduate school. Rossi really turned Simpson onto looking at clothing forms as a source material for work. Rossi was included in the Imagist exhibition *Marriage: Chicago Style* (1970) organized by Don Baum at the Hyde Park Art Center. Rossi's class "Form Invention," was very influential on generations of students. Simpson substitute taught for the class briefly.

<sup>7</sup> Lynne Warren, "Form into Flatness Into Form, The Shape-Sifting of Diane Simpson," *Diane Simpson Sculpture + Drawings 1978–2009*, Chicago: Diane Simpson and the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, 2010, p.10.



Diane Simpson, *Containers*, 1977, collagraph printing plates for print, 15 × 9 1/2 inches, 15 × 10 1/2 inches, 15 × 10 inches.

experimenting with it as an inking surface. Delving deeper into the process, she became interested in the collagraph inking plates themselves, using them to make collage works.<sup>8</sup>

Literality and illusion have been at play in Simpson's work since the late 1970s. *Contained Containers* (1976) and *Tied Box Forms* (1977) are two early experiments in which Simpson's interest in the illusionistic space of representational drawing moves incrementally off the page. Foreshadowing her interest in additive planar objects, these images show deconstructions of box-like forms opened to show multiple sides at once. In *Contained Containers* the work barely comes off the wall. The strong diagonal lines in the piece are slats of wood providing the frame for rubbings on paper that comprise the background. The forms, originally the ragboard plates used for printing, are collaged into the scene. Similarly comprised of collaged collagraph plates, *Tied Box Forms* uses actual string as both image and tying material securing the forms to their cardboard ground. The strings imitate tying a box together, they tie a box together, and they tie an image of a box together, echoing another Chicagoan's famous quote, "form ever follows function."<sup>9</sup>

Encouraged by her advisors in graduate school, Simpson experimented with making sculptures. These early sculptures were all constructed out of corrugated cardboard.<sup>10</sup> Often assigned as a material in introductory sculpture classes, corrugated cardboard is inexpensive, light, and easily cut. It was

8 See Diane Simpson, *Three Shaped Forms — (variable arrangement)* (1977) reproduced in this catalog.

9 Louis H. Sullivan, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered," *Lippincott's Magazine* (March 1896): 403–409.

10 Simpson first found tri-wall cardboard at a children's center in Wilmette, Illinois where she has lived for many years. The center had a window display of children's furniture constructed out of the cardboard. Simpson inquired about it and purchased her first sheets of cardboard from them. They directed her to their supplier, Riley & Geehr, on Fullerton Avenue in Chicago. Simpson used to go in person to the factory to pick out the flattest sheets of corrugated board.

these pragmatic factors that guided Simpson's use of the material. During her graduate studies Simpson did not hold a studio at SAIC. Instead her family accommodated her to use the dining room as her studio. She used a straight blade on a jigsaw to make the precise cuts. As a commuting student she would transport her artwork to campus in downtown Chicago for critiques and presentations. These early sculptures were not affixed together but were constructed out of facets of interlocking planes. Simpson developed this idiosyncratic engineering in order that her large-scale sculptures would disassemble and reassemble easily, packing flat for transport.

The materials in Simpson's sculpture perform multiple functions and rarely pretend otherwise. Material is both constructive and a ground — nearly all her sculptures have emanated from her drawing practice, and the objects also operate as supports for further drawing on their surfaces. Often not evident from afar, the surface patterning on her objects reveals the



Diane Simpson, *Contained Containers*, 1976, collage, mixed media, 40 × 40 inches.



Diane Simpson, *Tied Box Forms*, 1977, collaged collagraph plates, 35 × 30 inches. Installation views of Nottingham Contemporary.

<sup>11</sup> Jasmin Tsou (Host), "Diane Simpson Interview part 1: Ben Chaffee and Jasmin Tsou interview Diane Simpson." *JTT*, JTT, New York, January 22, 2021, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/diane-simpson-interview-part-1-ben-chaffee-jasmin-tsou/id1533847325?i=1000506260530>. Running inside the open cells of the cardboard are armatures of one-eighth inch wooden dowels. Not affixed, they hold the sculptures together with their friction inside the flutes of the corrugated paper.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

presence of her hand. Even her earliest sculptures have hand-drawn lines or markings over the surface in crayon, graphite, or colored pencil. Regarding her earliest works, Simpson explained, "For the surface treatment I would rub crayon over the surface, and that would bring out the pattern of the interior cardboard fluting."<sup>11</sup>

Simpson was interested in how sculpture might represent not just the surface but also the space of drawing. In her words, "I wanted these 3D versions to replicate exactly the spatial system that I had devised in the drawings. In the sculpture version, just like in the drawing, there would be two parallel planes going back into space at a 45-degree angle, and then there would be two other interlocking sections facing the frontal plane. I wanted to make a duplicate in space of the object that I was drawing."<sup>12</sup>

The five sculptures that comprised her M.F.A. Thesis presentation in 1978 were all constructed out of cardboard.



Diane Simpson's studio in the family dining room, Wilmette, Illinois, c.1978.



Diane Simpson, "M.F.A. Thesis exhibition, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1978. The sculptures no longer exist.

Later that year, Simpson exhibited her first work after graduate school, *Corrugated Drawing* (1978), at the Art Institute of Chicago in *Works on Paper: The 77th Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity*. The exhibition was focused on the medium of drawing but when Simpson queried about submitting this work for consideration, she was told that if it was dimensional, it would not be included. Simpson proceeded anyway and the work was selected for the exhibition by Esther Sparks, then the Associate Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute. The show was juried by the curator, the artist Philip Pearlstein, and Jan van der Marck, Director of the Dartmouth College Museums and Galleries. The sculpture was awarded the Eve Garrison Prize of one-hundred dollars.

In 1979 Simpson had her first solo exhibition at Artemisia Gallery, an alternative artist-run cooperative in Chicago. Titled *Diane Simpson*, the show consisted of ten sculptures, all constructed out of cardboard and all employing her personal version of axonometry. In the same year Rosalind Krauss penned her oft-cited essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" exploring the rupture from Modernism taking place in the field of sculpture. Krauss proposed that in the decade prior, modernist sculpture had done away with



Inside view of the postcard for Diane Simpson, *Constructed Drawings* (solo) exhibition at Artemisia Gallery, 1979. Image of *Corrugated Drawing #3* (1978) on the left with instructional annotations for deinstallation by the artist in pen.

"the logic of the monument," and broken from earlier traditions. Krauss writes, "The modernist period of sculptural production that operates in relation to this loss of site..." produces "the monument as abstraction."<sup>13</sup> It was Robert Smithson, one of Krauss' sculptor protagonists, who had written of monuments in an earlier essay in *Artforum* magazine, "They are not built for the ages, but rather against the ages." Concerned with the temporality expressed through alternative material choices, Smithson elaborated, "Instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future... Both past and future are placed into an objective present."<sup>14</sup>

The temporal logic of sculpture had changed its directionality from pointing to the past to negating the future. Not expressly interested in either, Simpson's choice of cardboard as the material for her sculptures nonetheless conveys a disjointed temporality. The monumental presence of her mostly large-scale works is in tension with the material—its ephemerality, sensitive surface, and ubiquity. The way the sculptures' axonometric profiles reveal themselves through the viewer's perambulation already suggests that the time of looking is an aspect of their installation. This aspect, taken together with her works' material sincerity suggests a relationship with Minimalism, but these works aren't consciously attuned to the viewer's experience—nor are they ignorant of it.

Simpson was aware of but unconcerned with how she fit within Modernism or other concurrent ideologies. I overheard another artist say to her at their introduction,

<sup>13</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October*, Vol. 8 (1979), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Smithson, "The New Monuments and Entropy," *Artforum*, Vol. 4, No. 10, 1966, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> Simpson's first solo show in a commercial gallery was at Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York in 1980. She showed again a few of the sculptures from her 1979 Artemisia exhibition and constructed a few new ones, *Fold-Up* (1980), *Chaise* (1980), and *Ribbed Kimono* (1980). All three were built out of archival acid-free cardboard, a shift in material which Simpson made for its potential longevity. *Ribbed Kimono* (1980) is in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

"I like your work because it has absolutely nothing to do with Modernism." I shared a glance with Simpson in that moment: was that a compliment? Could it possibly describe a truth? I affirmed the former though the veracity of the latter has stuck with me.

She made a conceptual shift in her work with *Winged Biwa* (1979), *Chaise* (1980), and *Ribbed Kimono* (1980), and it's a shift that continues to the present day.<sup>15</sup> Evident in the titles, each of these sculptures bears a direct relationship with a pre-existing form, shying away from the abstract formalism of her other early works. Simpson started working mostly from clothing or fashion at this point, translating their architecture into sculpture through a series of technical working drawings.<sup>16</sup> Though these works still bear her trademark axonometry and literal material presence, they differ from the early works. Simpson began using more durable materials such as medium-density fiberboard (MDF), wood, and metal instead of cardboard. Simultaneously her works developed a more explicit implication of the figure, implying bodies through their references to clothing. Perhaps because of her material shift and incorporation of new references, the works also have less of a procedural source in drawing.

Simpson objects to any association with sewing patterns in her work (and its strong associations with craft and gender). Her working drawings have always had dimensionality, and sewing patterns are flat. Simpson doesn't even recall making any preparatory drawings for her early sculptures. In retrospect it is difficult to imagine working directly with sculptural material when the works have such complex geometries. Simpson's later drawings relate to the development of her sculptures as a kind of hybrid of preparatory sketches and completed works in themselves. In the process of preparing to show these early sculptures again for the exhibition in Zilkha Gallery (2020), Simpson found a roll of papers. Thinking that they might be preparatory drawings or share some key for the development of this early work she looked further. On the outside of the roll she found an encouraging note in her own handwriting: "Good drawings for future."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Simpson has made works in series, with each focused on a particular form. Many of these are denoted on her website, <https://dianesimpson.net/>, *Samurai*, *Aprons*, *Headgear*, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Two of the enclosed drawings from the roll became the impetus for recent sculptures, *Grained Chimney* (2019) and *Two Point Enclosure* (2020), both of which were included in *Point of View*, Simpson's solo exhibition at JTT, New York, 2021.