

# DIANE SIMPSON



The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

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## FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure to present the art of Diane Simpson at the ICA/Boston. Spanning over thirty-five years of work, this exhibition is remarkably contemporary in its concerns: the fluidity of time and space, the shift between two and three dimensions, and the issues of gender, labor, history, and abstraction. Simpson slyly manipulates space and materials, moving between historical periods and costumes, and her carefully crafted objects uniquely consider the many ways bodies are covered, shaped, and defined. Her abstractions of dress cross time and cultures, with references as far-ranging as Japanese kimonos and medieval robes, while her reductive compositions evoke minimal forms and contemporary art's everyday materials. Simpson flattens, projects, rounds, and elongates these materials, layering her seemingly simple constructions with complex ideas about the figure—in the world and in the imagination.

We are grateful to Dan Byers, our Mannion Family Senior Curator, for bringing Simpson's work to the ICA for her first East Coast museum exhibition.

We offer our appreciation to the very generous lenders who have agreed to share their artworks: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; James R. Thompson Center, Chicago; Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; and the many private collectors whose sculptures and drawings have enabled us to add breadth and depth to this important exhibition.

Through her ever-evolving practice, Diane Simpson continues to influence a younger generation of artists. We extend our thanks to Vincent Fecteau, whose visual conversation with Simpson has resulted in a collaborative work that we are delighted to present in the exhibition.

Above all, I am grateful to Diane Simpson for sharing her art with our audiences and for creating a unique and inspiring body of work that encourages us to think deeply about the social and historical constructions of clothing, history, and gender.

—JILL MEDVEDOW, ELLEN MATILDA POSS DIRECTOR

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the ICA/Boston, I am grateful to Jill Medvedow, Ellen Matilda Poss Director, and Eva Respini, Barbara Lee Chief Curator, for their enthusiastic support of this exhibition and Diane's work. For their integral assistance and hard work, I'd like to single out Jack Arbaugh, assistant registrar, who ensured the proper care and transport of Diane's artworks, and Jeff De Blois, curatorial assistant, who skillfully coordinated all aspects of this publication and provided indispensable input throughout all stages of the project. Within an excellent museumwide staff, the ICA's curatorial department is an especially supportive and big-hearted group. Thank you to everyone for your collaboration: Bryan Barcena, Taylor Bayer, Ruth Erickson, Darcey Moore, Toru Nakanishi, Abby Newbold, and Tim Obez. Thanks also to honorary department member and director of retail operations Richard Gregg for his publications guidance, and to former curatorial assistant Davida Fernandez-Barkan for her early work on the project.

Editor Lucy Flint ensured the quality of each text and provided critical feedback. Thank you to Purtill Family Business—Jenelle Porter and Conny Purtill—for the catalogue design and for ten years (and counting) of counsel and friendship.

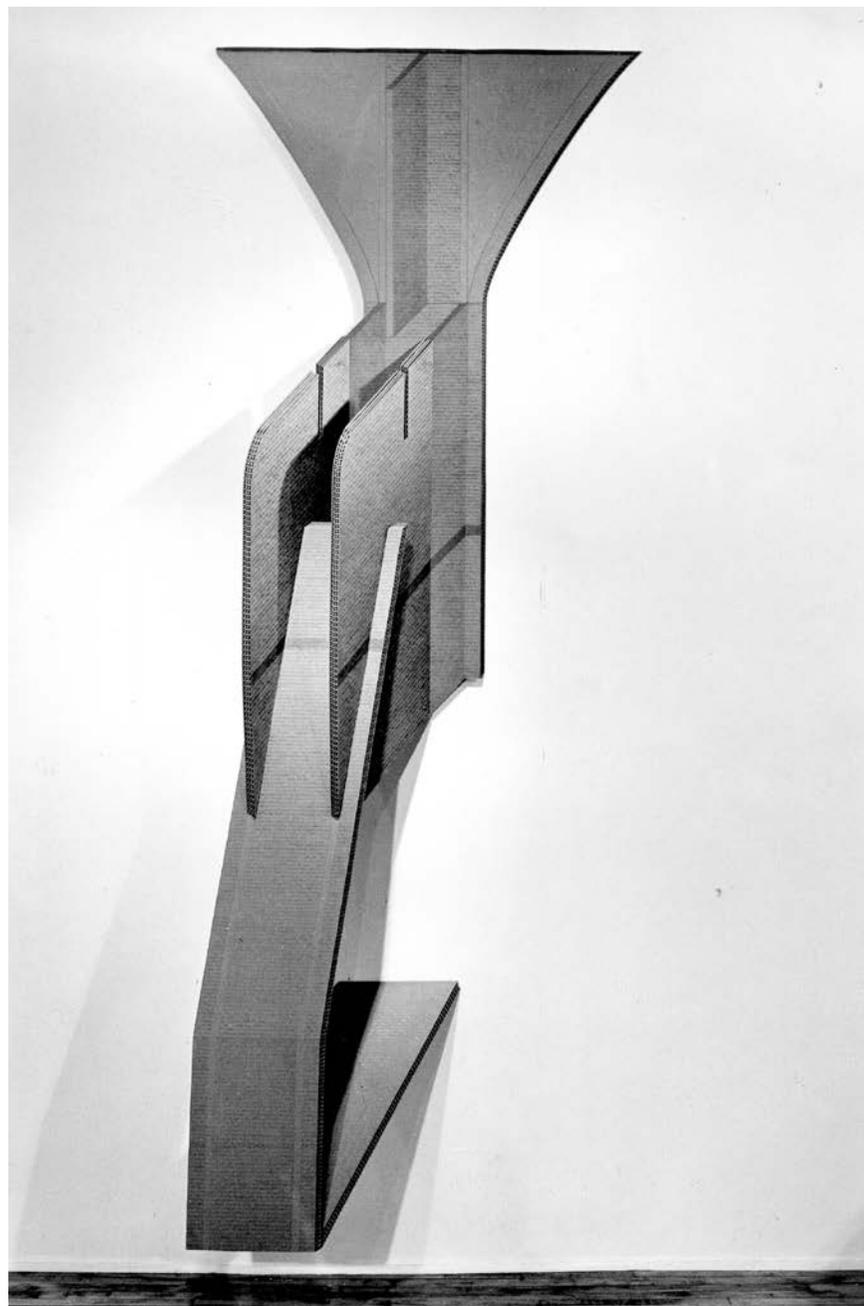
The staff at Corbett vs. Dempsey (Simpson's Chicago gallery) acted as essential collaborators, and this publication would have been impossible without their intensive involvement. A hearty thank-you to John Corbett, Jim Dempsey, Ben Chaffee, and Nicole Sachs for their knowledge, support, and love of Diane's work, and all their help along the way.

Jasmin Tsou of JTT (Simpson's New York gallery) introduced me to Diane's work in the fall of 2013. Her support on many fronts since then has been essential. Her commitment to Diane's work is singular and passionate, and I am forever grateful for it.

The generosity of the lenders, all devoted collectors of Diane's work, have made this exhibition possible.

Thank you to Ken Simpson for being such a great host during my Wilmette visits. And, finally, to Diane Simpson: Thank you for your warmth, trust, and friendship. I am grateful for the time spent with you and your inspiring work.

—DAN BYERS, MANNION FAMILY SENIOR CURATOR



Corrugated Drawing, 1978, corrugated board and graphite, 110 x 46 x 18 inches

Dan Byers

45°

Over the last thirty-five years, Diane Simpson has produced a unique body of work founded on the relationship between precise, diagrammatic drawings and the disconcerting sculptures they generate. Simpson begins by translating details she encounters both in daily life and through research—elements of clothing, parts of the body, domestic and public ornamental and architectural details—into rigorous schematic drawings. From these plans she retranslates each generative detail back again into an object in the world. In the process, the original sources become highly stylized and wholly transformed. Hers is an art of metamorphosis. Drawing inspiration from both physical facts and their social contexts, Simpson employs scale shifts to both unnerving and comical effect, creating a playful uncanny from the distortion of everyday life.

In the case of clothing, her most frequent inspiration, once Simpson identifies an element (like a sleeve, bonnet, apron, or peplum!) in the world or from printed materials or films, she exactly draws it on graph paper, representing it in a frontal, instructional rendering that unfolds and flattens the third dimension and—in the most mysterious and intuitive part of her process—offers an associative, abstracted version of itself. Simpson explains:

I use the grid of graph paper to describe the planes going back in space with parallel 45-degree angles. All frontal or back planes remain parallel to the picture plane. The frontal or back plane in the drawing is an exact

measurement of the object and the angled plane is a foreshortened measurement of the object. So I have devised my own way of figuring out the proportion of that angled measurement in relation to the frontal plane and what that measurement would be in actual space.<sup>2</sup>

What appears as the simple *representation* of three dimensions is then painstakingly made into a sculpture that often retains the forty-five-degree angles from the form's drawn proportions. With no formal training in sculpture, Simpson has employed this deceptively simple procedure since her first sculpture exhibition in 1979. It is this straightforward approach that is responsible for the elusive and pleasurable “offness” of her sculptures, the hallmark of her work for over four decades even as it has progressed through styles and series. The spatial fluctuations and tensions between image and object haunt Simpson's works with the invisible intensity of a ghost.<sup>3</sup>

For her MFA work at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Simpson made black-and-white prints and drawings that look like diagrams of geometric objects. She made her first sculptures in response to a professor's suggestion that she actually fabricate these imaginary objects. In essence, then, Simpson's sculptural practice is based on objects and spaces that were never meant to exist in the real world. Today, even her most technically accomplished, beautifully fabricated work retains that paradox, occupying the field of vision like something that should not be physically possible.

That feeling of impossibility is subverted by the exacting aesthetic and material sensitivity with which Simpson constructs her works. While the sculptures' strange angles and shifting perspectives complicate their legibility, their presence is amplified by the artist's seductive materials, assured craftsmanship, and sometimes wild color and texture. In her decisions around color, bodily proportions, and ornamental reference, socially embedded and constructed questions of taste, fashion, and style add a vernacular specificity to each sculpture's abstracted form. By exaggerating details such as sleeves and necklines, and often highlighting ancillary garments that cover and hide (aprons, bibs, bonnets), Simpson's outsize iconic forms make a big deal out of the marginal. She highlights parts of the body associated with exposure, anxiety, cleanliness, or propriety. Bonnets keep hair—that freighted locus of biological and cultural power—out of sight.

Aprons protect the body and clothing from being soiled during domestic work. And, in Simpson's hands, necks absent from necklines and hands absent from sleeves powerfully reveal these sites where bodies emerge from the openings in the forms we have made to conceal and shape them. Gender and the culturally determined roles and spheres for women imbue these concerns with a quietly political power. Simpson makes a commitment to the small, fraught details that normally function as supporting characters, and by the end of her labor-intensive process they have gained new stature. The results are abrupt and unrecognizable, with a hint of knowing awkwardness. Proportions are off—too big or too small—and the means of support can appear overly sturdy or insufficient. The common and universal human experience of awkwardness, evoked by many of her works, makes even the most alien form relatable and strangely familiar. With Simpson's attention to the overlooked (on the body and in the world) for inspiration, she creates prominent, exposed conditions for her subjects before any consensus has formed around them, before anyone else has been willing to notice them. It is a sometimes anxious process that ushers in any new form that hasn't yet a relatable place in the world.

More than thirty years after Simpson presented her first solo exhibition, an international art world has finally caught up to her. Respected and admired for many years by artists in her native Chicago, until 2008 she mostly showed her work in the Midwest.<sup>4</sup> That year, however, New York artist B. Wurtz included Simpson in the group exhibition *Begin Again Right Back Here* at the alternative space White Columns in New York. Intermingling designers and artists, including Taylor Davis, Vincent Fecteau, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Sol LeWitt, Gareth Moore, Richard Rezac, and Nancy Shaver, Wurtz explained that his inspiration came “out of a fascination with the ambitious sense of scale and open-ended interpretation offered by certain objects in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

That broad thematic and the diverse group of artists and designers in the White Columns show helped instigate a widespread interest in Simpson's work, especially among younger artists. Altering and empowering the perception of objects and bodies, her tactile, resolute art found a rich new

context with the work of these artists. This recent dialogue continues to take shape within a political and cultural climate in which Simpson's work feels increasingly urgent and singular. This climate in art is largely informed by two dominant preoccupations. On the one hand, there is a resurgent interest in gendered figuration and an expanded formal language around sexual identity and feminist engagement. Artists such as Sadie Benning and Amy Sillman (and older figures such as Simpson's peer Christina Ramberg) locate a political dimension in their worked surfaces, articulating abstracted bodies and body parts in a pared-down formal language. On the other hand, the last ten years have seen the emergence of artists newly engaged with the status of the object as a spatially and culturally contingent physical entity defined by its relationship to the body—often as a prop or ancillary article—and its status within a network of images and representations in a vastly accelerated, networked digital culture. Concurrently, many artists in all media have been seriously playing with attributes of design, decoration, artifice, taste, gesture, and modes of display and staging. In this category, we might think of artists as diverse as Nairy Baghramian, Carol Bove, Matt Keegan, and Dianna Molzan (all have shown with Simpson, and all are at least thirty years her junior). At galleries in New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, and London, Simpson has shown most frequently with artists addressing these issues, often in artist-organized exhibitions. Matthew Higgs began this contextualization of her work in his 2014 *Displayed* at Anton Kern Gallery in New York, bringing together artworks to explore the “possibilities inherent to the process of selection, arrangement, and presentation.” Matt Keegan, in his 2015 *Over & Under* at Sikkema Jenkins in New York, dealt with “material economy and modes of display.” Nairy Baghramian's *Off-Broadway*, held at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art in San Francisco, also in 2015, staged a “consideration of the nature of the prop,” looking at art's relationship to other disciplines and elements of interior design, magazines, and fashion; in the artist's innovative exhibition concept, each work was featured on a white wall for a short time before being rotated out and returned to an open storage area.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the visibility of recent exhibitions at galleries on the U.S. coasts and Europe, it is worth pointing out that two of Simpson's most important shows took place in the Midwest. In 2010, the Chicago Cultural



Collar (Connect the Dots), 2012, MDF, linen canvas, basswood, ink, and enamel, 48 1/2 x 28 x 13 1/2 inches

Center mounted an extensive retrospective of her work, providing the first opportunity for viewers to see all of Simpson's series—each inspired by a different kind of garment or mode of display—in direct conversation with one another. In 2008, the Racine Art Museum in Wisconsin invited her to engage its large expanse of street-level windows, where she created an elaborate suite of sculptural tableaux, recasting her sculptures as body/mannequin stand-ins in front of layered geometric backdrops of her design and construction. The installation (reprised in 2014 in the windows of New York University's gallery 80WSE at the invitation of artist/curator Jonathan Berger; p. 46) came out of Simpson's discovery of *Merchant Record and Show Window*, a trade journal for window designers from the 1920s and '30s. These practical guides offer beguiling and stylish designs that form an elaborate theater of Deco shapes, lines, and flourishes intended to induce consumer desire. The schematic illustrations, both banally descriptive and mysteriously abstract, resemble the stylized self-displaying sculpture Simpson had already been making for nearly thirty years. The synthesis of the window dresser's vocabulary and Simpson's clothing- and architecture-inspired language resulted in works notable for their ambitious scale and their conflation of familiarity and foreignness, display and withholding, illusion and the real.

In contemporary mass culture, the window display has ceded its power to shape materialist imagination and define ideal bodies to the smartphone and screen (in all varieties and locations). We are separated by a different kind of glass from the clothing, accessories, and products that promise to make us happy, whole, and desired. Represented bodies are flattened and distributed in a manner more tactically sophisticated and complex than that of the shop window. Many (most?) clothing items—as well as whole buildings—are designed digitally, on a screen, and bring to their embellishment and construction the logic and aesthetic of the digital image, with its emphasis on surface and seamless transitions. Today, the feedback loop between screen, image, and object defines the ways in which we select, decorate, construct, and share our worlds.

This screen-experience logic, while enacted for a wholly different agenda, is functionally not unlike Simpson's translation of drawings into sculpture. Seeing some of her sculptures in person for the first time, after knowing them only from images, is like picking up an intricately knit Nike Free

sneaker, whose patterns, colors, and liquid shifts between materials are redolent of digital's frictionless possibilities, and whose physicality is both at odds with and defined by its surface splendor. Unlike a product of lifestyle marketing and trend-forecasting, however, Simpson's sculptures are created slowly; they are the result of careful workshop problem solving in the service of an image fixed from a fleeting detail. Specific in their material honesty, each of Simpson's sculptures conjures a new character. Often these characters dwell in gendered space and the adornment of women's bodies. They straddle the public and the private. By suggesting both architecture and the body's hard and soft coverings, the sculptures approximate a vulnerable armor. Openings close and foreshorten. A retreating profile, disappearing from one perspective, explodes into space from another vantage point. Each protective exoskeleton is also a tipped hand.

## Notes

1. A peplum is a short length of fabric attached to a woman's jacket, dress, or blouse to form an overskirt.
2. E-mail to the author, September 27, 2015.
3. In this way, Simpson's work approximates both the flattened, destabilizing image that results from a two-dimensional scan of a 3D object, or the seamless modulations of a born-digital rendering actualized by 3D printing.
4. With the conspicuous exception of an important solo exhibition in 1980 at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York.
5. White Columns website, <http://www.whitecolumns.org/view.html?type=exhibitions&id=408>, accessed November 3, 2015.
6. The current exhibition features a visual conversation between Simpson and Vincent Fecteau that was conceived at the invitation of artist Matt Keegan. It originally appeared in print form in the second volume of *— = —*, a non-thematic, small-run arts publication edited by Keegan. Comprising a box containing a 96-page bound volume that features artist-to-artist interviews, texts, and transcriptions, along with six loose multiples, *— = — #2* was designed by Su Barber and published by Capricious Publishing in an edition of 500. The collaboration was presented as a slide show first in the exhibition *Off Broadway* at the Wattis Institute in 2015, and now in *Diane Simpson* at the ICA/Boston.



Installation view, *Window Dressing*, 80WSE, New York University, 2014, showing *Window 6*, *Window Dressing: Collar & Bib-Deco*, 2007–08, gatorboard, linoleum, wood, aluminum, archival cardboard, and enamel, 96 x 120 x 16 inches

Diane Simpson and Dan Byers

## INTERVIEW

DAN BYERS: First things first. I know you have your mother’s incredible 1950s stove in your kitchen. And in at least one work you’ve used linoleum quite similar to the flooring from a childhood home [*Apron III*, 2001; p. 14]. What are other early encounters with materials, patterns, or objects from growing up that have stayed with you or influenced your work?

DIANE SIMPSON: Well, the first thing that comes to mind is a sculpture called *Robe* from 1986 [p. 8]. I believe I was thinking about a graduation dress I was required to make in eighth-grade sewing class. We all had to use this ugly grayish-lavender material called dotted Swiss. Both the color and the wooden furniture “buttons” remind me of that dress. The “buttons” also make me remember a favorite candy . . . those tiny, round multicolored bumps of sugar stuck to a strip of white paper. We bought those at a little grocery near school.

DB: I know those sugar bumps on paper. Those were a favorite of mine as well. Somehow between an image and—not to get too heady about candy—a tactile, almost sculptural experience, and then finally this sweet payoff, but always with little traces of paper stuck to the back of each bump. Do you tend to work out from the details you notice to a larger form, or does it go both ways?

DS: The larger form comes first. As I'm figuring out how the form will be constructed, the details become apparent as an integral aspect of the construction. The details sort of automatically develop as I'm drawing the form, and sometimes I find the detail to be the most interesting aspect of the piece. The detail also often ends up dictating my choice of materials.

DB: Okay, so as not to get ahead of ourselves, I hope you can talk first about school. You earned both a BFA and an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Can you tell me a little bit about the timing of your schooling, and how making art at that time related to family life? You got your undergraduate degree in your thirties, and then waited seven years before getting your MFA in 1978. What were those years like?

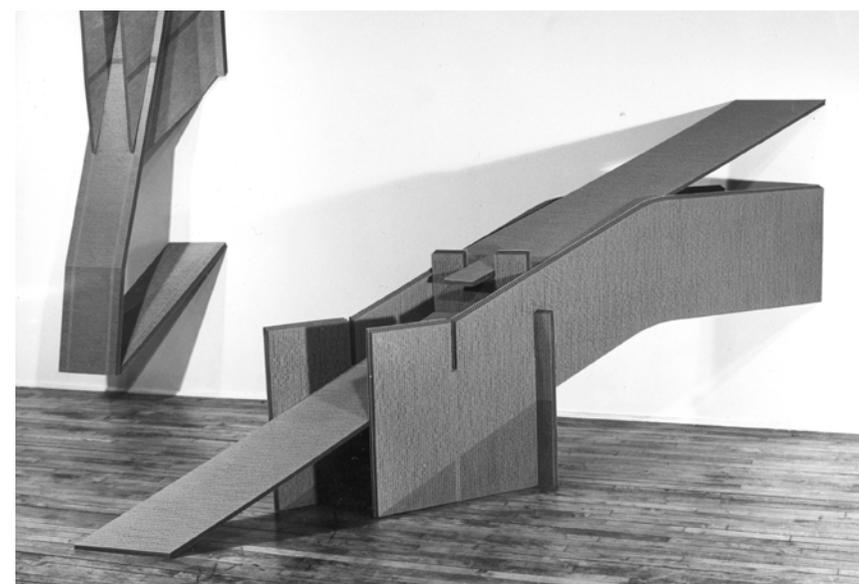
DS: I was needing one quarter's work to graduate from SAIC in 1957, but instead had my first child in May of that year. I had a deadline, to return within ten years, or I would lose all credit. So luckily, in 1967, that deadline coincided with the time my youngest of three children entered first grade. But during those ten years, I had continued to paint, using our bedroom as a studio. We slept on a hide-a-bed for six years. You know what they say . . . "It takes a village." Well, in my case it took the whole family, especially my husband, Ken, who understood this was serious stuff! I returned to SAIC, stretching out that one remaining quarter to about four years, one class at a time. During the next five years, I worked on my own, making collagraph prints in my basement, and in 1976, when I was forty, I applied to graduate school. During those school years, at crunch time, the whole family pitched in, doing whatever needed to be done. During grad school I worked mostly at home, and schlepped the work down to school every two weeks to meet with my advisors.

DB: What were some of the things your kids and Ken did to pitch in?

DS: When the kids were older, they pitched in with chores when I was writing a paper or panicking about some piece I was working on. But Ken was really the one who came through. He took a woodworking adult-school night class, and his project was making all of my studio tables, which I'm still using.

DB: Ken makes quite the studio assistant! You studied primarily printmaking and drawing. And some of your first sculptures emerged from diagrammatic drawings that suggested structures and forms that might actually be fabricated. These early sculptures often included drawings on their surfaces that subverted or confused the sculpture's physical attributes. Tensions and conversations between two and three dimensions have animated your works from early on. How did your work with drawn and printed surfaces coax you toward the frontal, almost confrontational early wall sculptures?

DS: Yes, during grad school I was making collagraph prints and large drawings on graph paper of boxlike forms and architectural structures. I was using a 45-degree perspective that I thought I had devised on my own. I didn't have a name for it. But it allowed me to create objects dimensionally without depending on observation. One of my advisors suggested I build some of these structures. At first I resisted. But then I was interested in seeing what would happen if the exact same system for creating space on a 2D surface was transferred to actual space. In these early wall pieces, the wall became the picture plane, and all of the planes extending into space were angled from



Installation view, Diane Simpson, Artemisia Gallery, Chicago, 1979, showing (left) *Corrugated Drawing* and (right) *Five Easy Pieces*, both 1978

the wall at a 45-degree angle. I carried out the illusionistic aspect further by connecting flat and extended surfaces with continuous drawn areas or by shading and shaping some planes to appear dimensional even though they were actually flat. The illusion only worked if seen at a certain view . . . the exact same view as in the drawing.

DB: When you returned to school in 1967, the Imagists must have been a big presence around the Art Institute, and Chicago in general. I know you've never really considered yourself to be in direct dialogue with most of those artists—with Christina Ramberg being an exception? And the works you were making then, as you were finishing your BFA, and then the sculptural pieces that came out of your MFA program, were not as directly related to the body as the work you began to make in the early 1980s. What was your relationship to the Imagists and the rigorous and viscerally corporeal, humorous, sometimes abject, and pop culture-related work they were doing?

DS: During the '60s, when the Imagists were in school and having their wild exhibits at the Hyde Park Art Center, I was living in my domestic world, doing a lot of diapering. Attending art openings was not part of my art or social agenda. Even when I reentered SAIC, I never knew these artists. It was only when I was in grad school in the late '70s that I made a habit of visiting the Phyllis Kind Gallery to see, in particular, the paintings of Miyoko Ito, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, and, yes, even Jim Nutt! It was the later work of Barbara Rossi and Jim Nutt that interested me. Because by then Jim had started doing his portraits, which really blew my mind. I read that he is a lover of the Flemish school of portraiture, as I am. I also loved some drawings he did with colored pencil on Kraft paper. In those drawings, it wasn't his nutty imagery that got to me, but the quality of the colored pencil and his tilted floor boards—an early non-Western perspective that I guess we were both interested in. So these particular artists had a sensibility that I responded to. I think it was their fantastic color sense, their interest in pattern, and their obsession with a fastidious finish. I also had a special relationship with Barbara Rossi and Ray Yoshida, another Phyllis Kind artist. They were my advisors in grad school and very important in my development.

DB: It's interesting that you responded to how the drawings and paintings were "put together," especially in the case of later work by Jim Nutt, where faces, and their bodies, push the two-dimensional plane into uncanny abstract play. Your observations about Ramberg, Rossi, Ito, and (even!) Nutt suggest so many questions about influences and working methods. Beyond seeing their work at the Phyllis Kind Gallery, did you visit the studios of Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, and Miyoko Ito? Did the four of you talk together? What was the conversation like between the two-dimensional works they were making and your sculptural work? And were questions around the body, as a physical and/or political fact, part of those conversations?

DS: No, there were no studio visits and no heady discussions. I was not part of their circle. Actually, I never even had a chance to speak to Miyoko Ito. To me, she was this ethereal persona that I watched from a distance. Although once I joined Phyllis Kind, I was invited to Karl Wirsum's annual Christmas party and was asked, with several others, if I wanted to see Barbara's amazing collection of Indian folk art. I got to know Christina a little better, and she was a lot of fun. But we never discussed our work. When I was planning a trip to Japan, she shared her travel notes with me. This was so important, since we were so much on the same wavelength. In grad school and even later, my relationship with Barbara and Ray remained primarily that of student and teacher.

DB: Ray Yoshida's approach to collecting work by his peers—as well as self-taught artists—and other cultural artifacts for me has always represented a kind of uniquely Chicago method of creating a personal universe of art associations and connections. I think about Roger Brown as well. I know you live with the work of other artists, and you draw from a vast array of Western and non-Western examples of clothing, architectural detail, and ornament, among other things. Did your interest in these various objects develop from a collector's impulse, or did you create a lexicon of affinities and influences through a different kind of research or habit?

DS: I'm really not much of a collector, compared to Roger Brown or Ray and Barbara. But I do have that impulse, and would probably collect more if I had more space. But how can you go to Japan or to Native-American reservations



Apron IV, 2002, aluminum, industrial fiber, vinyl mesh, and enamel, 68 x 19 x 12 1/2 inches

and not come home with some beautiful objects? I'm sure art history classes in Oceanic, African, and Japanese art, mostly taught by Whitney Halstead, fed into my appreciation for non-Western cultures and the things they produce. But who knows, really, how appreciation and discernment in relation to a beautiful object or detail of ornament can develop in the brain? I think some can be taught and some is innate.

DB: Yes, I think you're right. It's incredible the impact Halstead had through his lectures. The formal conversation between your work and Rossi's, Ramberg's, Ito's, and Nutt's later work is palpable, even if it wasn't happening as an immediate engagement with your studio life. You spoke about their perfectionism earlier. How were you learning to make your sculpture at that time, while looking at so much two-dimensional work (and not having studied sculpture formally in school)? How did you figure out how to make these things in the studio? And how has the act of fabrication, and your attention to finish, developed over time?

DS: That formal conversation—the language of form, shape, color, and finish that I acquired working all those years in 2D and that attracted me to the work of these particular artists—that conversation carried over into the 3D work. The only difference was that now I had to learn the techniques of working with various materials and dealing with the third dimension visually and structurally. I started at zero, with no 3D skills. So, with each new material the process involved much trial-and-error and lots of do-overs—and still does. But sometimes this limitation in techniques can be an advantage, leading to an original and good solution. I'm thinking of a piece called *Amish Bonnet* [p. 7]. The construction involved connecting metal tubes to form a grid pattern. My first impulse was to take a welding class. But instead, I flattened the tubes at each joint by crimping them and then tied them with waxed colored cords. The cords were important structurally, but also became important as a decorative element. I continue to fabricate all the work myself, because it's only in this trial-and-error and working-it-out process that sometimes unforeseen things happen. This also relates to my concern with finish. I'm a stickler for a fine-tuned finish, but I still want the hand to be present, so I could never be happy with a slick factory finish.

DB: Could you talk more about important decorative elements in your work? Are there other sculptures that stand out to you as decisive moments, when a detail or ornamental element in the world triggered an artwork? Or where the “finish” solutions, or joinery, resulted in an added vocabulary within the form? In your description of *Amish Bonnet*, it dawned on me that often in your work there is a relationship between labor and the decorative. In a superficial accounting of the decorative or ornamental, those terms are often applied to extra, nonessential embellishments. But your work (beyond its important conceptual and historical engagement with the language of ornament) often derives intrinsic structure through its fashioning of the decorative.

DS: There are several instances where a particular decorative or structural element observed in the world triggered a piece. Both *Samurai 6* [p. 2] and *Court Lady* [p. 4] come to mind. The surface pattern of *Samurai 6* is directly related to the slotted metal plates in Japanese armor, and the trapezoid shapes that make up the curved part of the sculpture relate to the layers of metal plates that form the armored skirt. Similarly, in *Court Lady*, those same open slots are laced together with cords to connect sections of the piece. The cords, similar in color to the red typically used in Japanese armor, become both a structural and decorative element. *Apron V* [p. 16] is another piece where I took my cue for construction from the joinery in an antique mannequin I saw at the Met’s Costume Institute. And still another piece is *Underskirt* [1986]. I was interested in the shapes and construction of the woven straps of a *pannier* from the sixteenth century. That was the starting point for the piece that directed everything else.

I’m so glad you bring up the idea of the interrelationship of structure and decoration. I feel strongly about not applying decoration arbitrarily in my work, but allowing it to develop as a direct result of the form and structure. One of my absolute favorite books is called *Anonymous Sculpture*. It’s a book of photographs by Hilla and Bernd Becher of industrial structures (water tanks, silos, kilns). These structures are designed by engineers, not architects, for functional purposes, with no ego entering the process. So, really beautiful patterns develop, not self-consciously but as a direct result of the shape and function of each structure.

DB: Before I get back to history and development questions, one follow-up question: For you, is there an ethical stake involved in that which is structural (or maybe legitimate) and that which is added, or seemingly “unnecessary” and “only” there because of an intuitive attraction?

DS: Ha! I have to admit—there is an ethical dilemma for me when, occasionally, the intuitive forces its way in. I just completed a piece that includes an important decorative element that serves no functional need. But since it was originally planned as both a functional and visual element, I think it still takes on that meaning.

DB: There was a pretty decisive shift between your first solo show at Artemisia Gallery—where the cardboard works were large, with an almost architectural relationship to the viewer’s body—and your show at the Phyllis Kind Gallery. At Phyllis Kind you showed the *Samurai* series, which extended the fabrication techniques from your last show, but took on overt bodily and historical dress connections (to the samurai). What shifted here for you in your attitude toward clothing and all the associations that go with it?

DS: Actually, there was a common influence for both bodies of work. They were both, in a way, related to Japanese art and culture. At the time I was making the large cardboard structures, I was very interested in how architecture was described in Japanese scroll paintings, like those illustrating *The Tale of Genji*. I loved the tilted birds-eye view and parallel perspective. So that’s how I started drawing the large objects that became the cardboard pieces. About that time, I also saw a film by Akira Kurosawa called *Kagemusha*. There was one scene where several samurai warriors were sitting in a formal ceremonial semicircle on the floor with their backs to the camera. The segments of their armor skirts formed arcs cascading from their waist onto the floor. That scene stuck in my head, and I started looking at diagrams of how Japanese armor is constructed. And that led to the *Samurai* series and eventually to other clothing forms.

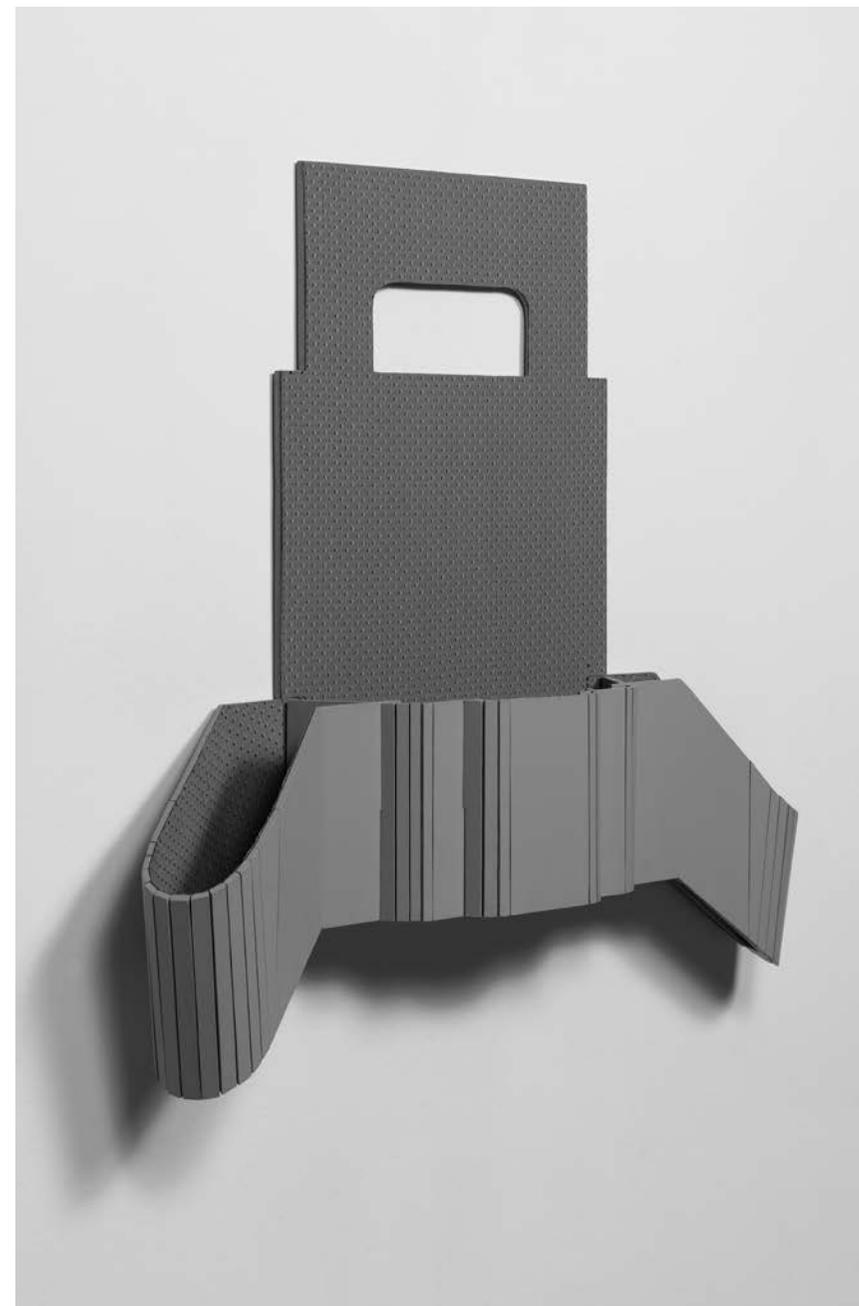
DB: Most of your work, even as it gestures toward clothing and the body it covers, presents itself with architectural authority. Often the structure is

revealed, and the exposed armature can function as an exoskeleton. From the cardboard to the MDF [medium-density fiberboard] and other materials such as copper, plywood, gatorboard, plastic, brass, aluminum, and vinyl, your works are mostly made of hard materials. When polyester, linen, or mesh is used, it's often for connective purposes, or to cover hard surfaces. Have you ever experimented with draped, wrapped, or hanging forms? Has fabric, with its soft, pliable, stretchable qualities, ever entered your vocabulary?

DS: You're right. . . Though my original sources are mostly made of soft, flowing materials, I've chosen to transform these ideas using structured materials. I think this has to do, first of all, with my drawing process. In the drawing, I want to be able to describe clearly how I will construct the piece, and it's difficult, if not impossible, for me to describe the structure clearly with an amorphous draped form. The other reason, which is even more important to me, is that there would be no transformation of the source—it would be too literal. On the other hand, I often like to counter the architectural aspect of a sculpture by introducing a material associated with the domestic world—a fabric or mesh over a wooden or metal structure, or a cloth cord—to bring it back into the context of clothing. I'm looking for that balance.

DB: So, you set yourself a problem to solve, say a problem of translation. Translation has always interested me for the possibility of equivalency being defined in various ways. I think about a bib or apron in relation to your bib and apron works. How do they equal each other? Is it a process of abstracting? Or of making something familiar unfamiliar? The way in which you almost always construct your works to skew perspective, flatten angles, and compress viewpoints seems to play a part in this process.

DS: Yes, it's an abstracting process. I simplify and keep simplifying. But it's also additive, in the sense that at some point or other, new forms enter into the drawing from that collection I think we all have of subconsciously stored forms. The drawing begins as a response to the original source image and can then morph into a form that often is far removed. Then the construction process, the scale, and the materials chosen can remove it further, especially if the construction mimics the perspective in the drawing. Many of the recent



Apron IX, 2004, birch plywood, fabric, and acrylic paint, 34 x 33 x 7 inches. Collection of John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis

pieces have not followed that special orientation of the drawings, so they appear more normal. But I sometimes return to that perspective, because I like the challenges in constructing the piece with skewed angles, and there are often visual surprises that occur that I can't foresee in the drawing.

DB: You mentioned that you like to add a material that is associated with the domestic world to bring back the suggestion of clothing. You and Ken live in a beautiful, well-loved house that seems to fit everything just right. It's hard not to think about your stove, the leaded diamond-shaped windows in your dining room, and the wonderful amalgam of art- and artifact-filled bungalow up front and open airy modernist addition in the back in relation to your sculptures. What has home—your home—meant to you for your work over the years?

DS: Wow! What a beautiful question. I really love this circular return to my stove and domestic scene. Yes, as you say, our home fits our needs just right. It's a much-loved and practical receptacle for display of both objects I've collected and objects I've made. It's also been a practical house. My work has been made at various times in my basement, in my dining room, and, presently, in my heated garage. The third-floor attic, the basement, one bedroom, and part of the studio are storing work from the past thirty-five years. So, no, I'm not planning to move anytime soon. As to the aesthetics of our home, it too fits just right. I love to be surrounded by well-made old objects, just as I'm drawn to good modern design. Our collection of favorite ethnographic and outsider art and tchotchkes up front, in the original section of the house, juxtaposed with an open modernist addition in back where I can display my latest sculpture, is perfect. And the contrast in surroundings nourishes all of my aesthetic needs.

CONDUCTED VIA E-MAIL IN LATE SEPTEMBER 2015

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*Ribbed Kimono*, 1980

Corrugated archival cardboard, colored pencil, and crayon

84 x 60 x 40 inches

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Perimeter Gallery, David A. Marcus, M.D., and Eileen and Peter Broido, 1997.71.a-o

*Samurai 6*, 1982

MDF and enamel

59 1/2 x 61 x 31 inches

*Court Lady*, 1984

MDF, linen, nylon, plastic, and oil stain

93 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 20 inches

James R. Thompson Center, State of Illinois Percent-for-Art Program

*Drawing for Court Lady*, 1984

Graphite on vellum graph paper

40 x 50 inches

*Amish Bonnet*, 1992

Brass, wax, linen thread, fabric, enamel, and wood  
66 x 43 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches

*Drawing #2 for Amish Bonnet*, 1992

Graphite on vellum graph paper

17 x 22 inches

*Sleeve-Sling*, 1997

Aluminum, wool, acrylic paint, wood, and cord  
35 x 50 x 3 inches

Collection of Annette Turow

*Study for Sleeves*, 1997

Graphite on vellum graph paper

17 x 22 inches

Collection of Irving Stenn, Chicago

*Formal Wear*, 1998

Polyester, poplar, and cotton

47 x 50 x 7 inches (webbing length variable)

*Study for Formal Wear*, 1998

Pencil on vellum graph paper

23 x 35 inches

*Muff*, 1998

Faux fur, fleece, and mahogany

49 x 28 x 13 inches

Collection of Joel Wachs

*Study for Muff*, 1997

Graphite on vellum graph paper with collage

22 x 28 inches

Collection of Victoria S. Lautman

*Vee*, 1999

Steel, wool, birch, pine, and enamel

12 x 30 x 11 inches

Collection of Susanna Hale Day

*Apron III*, 2001

MDF, basswood, vintage linoleum, and enamel  
65 x 25 x 21 inches

Collection of Christopher A. Slapak and Michael J. Robertson

*Drawing for Apron III*, 2001

Graphite on vellum graph paper

25 1/2 x 42 inches

*Apron V*, 2002

Aluminum, linen, vinyl, and enamel

69 x 20 x 11 1/2 inches

*Drawing #2 for Apron V*, 2002

Graphite on vellum graph paper

32 x 25 inches

Collection of Julia Fish and Richard Rezac, Chicago

*Drawing for Apron X*, 2005  
Graphite on vellum graph paper  
17 x 22 inches

*Bib–Brass*, 2006  
Brass  
33 x 15 x 4½ inches  
Collection of Michele Maccarone

*Drawing for Bib–Brass*, 2006  
Graphite on vellum graph paper  
18½ x 24 inches  
Collection of Michele Maccarone

*Bib (White)*, 2006  
Cotton, aluminum, paint, trunk hanger,  
and embroidery loop  
30 x 23 x 8 inches

*Pattern for Bib (White)*, 2006  
Graphite and colored pencil on vellum graph paper  
45 x 29 inches

*Tunic*, 2007  
Gatorboard, fabric, and ink  
44 x 31 x 7 inches  
Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art,  
Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-  
on-Hudson, New York

*Drawing for Tunic*, 2007  
Graphite on vellum graph paper  
27 x 28 inches

*Vest (Scalloped)*, 2010  
Copper, linoleum, steel, wood, and enamel  
56 x 22 x 14 inches

*Peplum I*, 2014  
LDF, copper, plywood, and enamel  
47½ x 29½ x 17 inches

*Drawing for Peplum I*, 2014  
Graphite on vellum graph paper  
31 x 18 inches

*Visual Conversation between Vincent Fecteau and  
Diane Simpson*, 2014  
Slide projection  
Running time variable

Unless otherwise indicated, all works are courtesy the artist;  
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; and JTT, New York.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born 1935 in Joliet, Illinois  
Lives in Wilmette, Illinois

### EDUCATION

MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1978  
BFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1971

### SOLO AND TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2015  
*Diane Simpson and Lesley Vance*, Herald St, London  
*Pared-Down: Lui Shtini and Diane Simpson*,  
SILBERKUPPE, Berlin

2014  
*Window Dressing*, 80WSE, New York University

2013  
JTT Gallery, New York  
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

2010  
*Diane Simpson: Sculpture + Drawings, 1978–2009*,  
Chicago Cultural Center

2008  
Alfedena Gallery, Chicago

2007  
*Diane Simpson: Window Dressing*, Racine Art  
Museum, Wisconsin

2006  
Herron Galleries, Herron School of Art and  
Design, Indiana University–Purdue University  
Indianapolis

2005  
I space, Chicago gallery of the College of Fine  
and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign

2003  
Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago

2001  
Sybaris Gallery, Royal Oak, Michigan

1999  
Fassbender Gallery, Chicago

1995  
Chicago Cultural Center  
Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage,  
Glen Ellyn, Illinois

1992  
Dart Gallery, Chicago

1983  
Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago

1980  
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

1979  
Artemisia Gallery, Chicago

### GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2015  
*Mommy*, Yale Union, Portland, Oregon  
*Unorthodox*, The Jewish Museum, New York  
*About Face*, Kayne Griffin Corcoran Gallery,  
Los Angeles  
*Bonsai #5*, Maccarone Gallery, New York  
*Over & Under*, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York  
*Off Broadway*, CCA Wattis Institute for  
Contemporary Art, San Francisco

2014  
*Joe Baer, Anne Neukamp, Diane Simpson*, Mitchell-  
Innes & Nash, New York

*All Summer in a Day: Matt Connors, Kristan Kennedy, Owen Kydd, Diane Simpson, Erika Verzutti*, Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland, Oregon  
*Displayed*, Anton Kern Gallery, New York  
*My Hands Are My Bite*, Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago  
*What Not to Wear: Women Sculptors*, Luther W. Brady Art Gallery, George Washington University, Washington, D.C.

2011  
*Seeing Is a Way of Thinking: A Jim Nutt Companion*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

2010  
*INside Out*, Northern Illinois University Art Museum, DeKalb

2008–10  
*Concurrent*, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; William Patterson University, Wayne, New Jersey; Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois; West Virginia University, Morgantown; Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

2008  
*Begin Again Right Back Here*, White Columns, New York

2004  
*Soft Edge*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
*Onward and Upward*, Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago  
*Black & White*, Linda Ross Contemporary/Art + Projects, Huntington Woods, Michigan

2003  
*The Art of Containment: From High Concept to High Craft: Ray Bemis, Michele Feder-Nadoff, Diane Simpson*, Rockford Art Museum, Illinois

2001  
*Threads: Contemporary Artists and Clothing*, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York  
*Sculpture in Chicago Now*, Columbia College, Chicago

2000  
*HxWxDx6*, Herron Galleries, Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis  
*aDressing the Body*, Fassbender Gallery, Chicago

1999  
*Midwest 3-D Fiber*, South Bend Regional Museum of Art, Indiana

1998  
*Chicago Subjects*, West Virginia University, Morgantown

1997  
*The Clothes Show: Objects For and About Clothing*, Center Galleries, Center for Creative Studies, Detroit

1996  
*Art in Chicago: 1945–95*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
*Constructivists*, Center Galleries, Center for Creative Studies, Detroit  
*10th Anniversary Show*, Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Illinois  
*Drawing in Chicago Now*, Columbia College, Chicago; Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota  
*Contemporary American Sculpture*, Snite Museum, Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana

1995  
*Radius: Sculpture-Video Event*, 213 W. Institute Place, Chicago

*16 Chicago Sculptors*, Cultural Center, Zalaegerszeg, Hungary  
*Adornment*, Wood Street Gallery, Chicago

1993  
*Architectural Fiber*, Textile Art Center, Chicago

1992  
*Nine Women*, Dart Gallery, Chicago  
*The Art of Development*, Chicago Title and Trust

1990  
*The Chicago Show*, Chicago Cultural Center, co-organized by City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, The Art Institute of Chicago, and Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

1989  
*Midwest–New York–Europe*, Dart Gallery, Chicago  
*Chicago Works, Art from the Windy City*, Erie Art Museum, Pennsylvania; Bruce Gallery, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

1988  
*Imagining Form*, Illinois State Museum Chicago Gallery  
*Selected Works, Illinois Collection*, Illinois State Museum, Springfield

1987  
*Works by Women*, Carnegie Arts Center, Covington, Kentucky  
*Chicago Sculpture*, C.A.G.E. Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio

1985  
*Wood: Hue or Not?*, Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago  
*Drawings: Eighty-first Chicago and Vicinity Exhibition*, The Art Institute of Chicago

1984  
*Alternative Spaces: A History in Chicago*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

1981  
*Prints + Multiples, Seventy-ninth Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity*, The Art Institute of Chicago; traveled to Lakeview Museum, Peoria, Illinois; National Academy of Design, New York; National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Illinois State Museum, Springfield; Quincy Society of Fine Arts and Quincy Art Club, Illinois; University Museum, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale; Portland Art Museum, Oregon

1980  
*Seventy-eighth Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity*, The Art Institute of Chicago

1979  
*100 Artists, 100 Years*, The Art Institute of Chicago  
*31st Invitational*, Illinois State Museum, Springfield  
*New Dimensions: Volume and Space*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
*Chicago Alternatives*, Herron Galleries, Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

1978  
*Works on Paper: Seventy-seventh Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity*, The Art Institute of Chicago

1977  
*25th National Exhibition of Prints*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition *Diane Simpson*, organized by Dan Byers, Mannion Family Senior Curator, with Jeffrey De Blois, Curatorial Assistant.



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Front cover: *Formal Wear*, 1998, polyester, poplar, and cotton,  
47 x 50 x 7 inches (webbing length variable)  
Back cover: *Study for Formal Wear* (detail), 1998, pencil on vellum  
graph paper, 23 x 35 inches