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Diane Simpson's Sculpture Finds Beauty of a Different Kind

In a world delighted and entertained by displays of material excess, Diane Simpson shows that there is another possibility.



Installation view of *Diane Simpson: Point of View* at JTT, New York (courtesy JTT, New York)

I was looking at the work in the exhibition *Diane Simpson: Point of View*, at JTT (September 9–November 13, 2021), when I realized that Diane Simpson, like Richard Hunt, who was also born in 1935, is not well known in New York, nor has either artist shown here regularly. Hunt, who had a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1971 — the first time the museum showcased sculpture by a modern Black artist — did not go on to become known in the New York art world. At present, Simpson, who earned her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1978, at the age of 43, had her first show in New York in 1980, and did not show again in the city for nearly 35 years, is not currently represented in the museum's collection.

There are many reasons for this neglect, starting with the publication of Donald Judd's "Specific Objects" (1965), the rise of Minimalism, and the reliance on fabrication and pre-made objects. Beginning in 1977, while still in graduate school, Simpson worked with planar shapes, initially using cardboard. At



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some point — I do not know exactly when — she began using fiberboard of different densities, along with other materials, including Gatorboard, plywood, and different kinds of screws, rivets, felt, and canvas, all of which become visual components in her work. She does not have assistants, nor does she depend on fabricators to make her work. Considering the singular body of sculptures and drawings she has made over the past 40-plus years, in tandem with her independence of thinking and doing, it is high time a major institution give Simpson the kind of in-depth look that her work has long deserved.

By the early 1980s, Simpson was making a series of breakthrough sculptures inspired by the suits of armor that the samurai wore in feudal Japan, and was working in a way that was unlike anyone else. Like two other Chicago sculptors that I can think of — Margaret Wharton and Richard Rezac — Simpson belongs to a school of one.

Her process is a way of making art that we do not honor enough. It starts with a photograph that she has taken. Using the photograph as a source, she translates what has captured her attention into an axonometric projection drawing on gridded paper. Basically, this enables her to make a pictorial drawing of a three-dimensional object, which is rotated on one of its axes to reveal multiple sides. In Simpson's drawings, the front and back planes of the sculpture are always parallel to the picture plane. By tilting the form in the space of the drawing, she can decide the exact angle of the planes connecting the front and back, as well as convey how the piece will look in space.



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Eleven sculptures and four drawings are in the exhibition. Three of the drawings were started in either 1980 or '81; the fourth, "Drawing for Costume #2 (Architecture in Motion)," is dated 2019. Of the other three, "Drawing for a Roof Shape" (1980–2019) was completed nearly 40 years after it was first started — though you would never know this from looking at it. In the dating, one senses that Simpson has a lot of plans for sculptures, but has not made them all, and that she circles back to earlier ideas.

In the two drawings for the sculpture "Two Point Enclosure" (2020), Simpson meticulously plots the angles and size of the fiberboard she used to make this planar work. Mathematical notations are written on one of the drawings, seemingly leaving nothing to chance. In the other drawing, which is of the work's "back view," she has described it from another angle. It is as if she had to see the entire object in a drawing before moving to the next step, which requires her to cut the fiberboard in precise geometric shapes.

The result is mystifying. I sensed that it was based on something Simpson saw, but I had no idea what, nor did it matter in the end. The fact that it eluded definition was one of the reasons I kept walking around the piece, noticing the angles, the sharp contours, the internal relationships of the forms, all in counterpoint to the fiberboard's stained tan surface and the spacing of the narrow vertical bands marking off the exterior and interior planes.



Diane Simpson, "Two Point Enclosure" (2020), LDF, canvas, stain, paint, colored pencil, 62.25 x 50.75 x 11 inches (photography by Charles Benton; courtesy the artist, JTT, New York, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, and Herald St, London)



Diane Simpson, "Roof Shape (Ise)" (2019), painted and stained LDF, perforated aluminum, canvas, crayon, 56.75 x 59.50 x 13 inches (photography by Charles Benton; courtesy the artist, JTT, New York, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, and Herald St, London)

"Two Point Enclosure" exists on a continuum between a three-dimensional form made of sharp-edged geometric shapes and a two-dimensional shape made of intersecting planes. It evokes an unnamable architectural object that one might see on the exterior of a building or inside a factory, and never notice. I imagine it serves as some kind of protection, but beyond that I am lost and, more importantly, I don't mind. As you walk around the piece, the view changes radically, almost as if it exists in a slightly elongated angular space, which seems on the verge of flattening into a two dimensional form. That connection between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional animates "Two Point Enclosure" by making viewers realize that, for all its planarity, many of the views of it are poised precisely between form and flatness.

In other works, such as "Gridded Window" (2020), "Roof Shape (Ise)" (2019), "Portico" (2020), and "Three Windows (NYC)" (2020), the architectural reference may be more direct, but something always happens in Simpson's translation of it into a sculpture. The title of "Roof Shape (Ise)" suggests that the work was inspired by the time Simpson spent in Ise, Japan, which is the site of the Ise Grand Shrine, a complex of Shinto shrines, as well as many other Shinto shrines. In many cases, the public is denied entry and can only see the rooftops of these large temples made of joined wood, in which no nails are used.

And yet, even if this is the source, I never felt that Simpson was being either literal or metaphorical. Based on a photograph and then a drawing, the result is a transformation that stirs up associations while resisting any reductive reading. On some level, the processes and humble materials she uses (fiber-

board, perforated aluminum, canvas, crayon, paint, and stain) honor the original builders of the Ise Grand Shrine without devolving into imitation. I find her decisions deeply moving. Her work conjures a world in which seeing something does not mean you can possess it. She commemorates the anonymous labor that went into many of the things that have inspired her, while making formally commanding and inventive artwork. Simpson's spare work and ingenuity with her plain materials share something with the Shakers. In a world delighted and entertained by displays of material excess, she shows us that there is another possibility.