

# ARTFORUM

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Review



Diane Simpson, *Roof Shape (Ise)*, 2019, painted and stained LDF, perforated aluminum, canvas, crayon, 56 3/4 × 59 1/2 × 13".

# Diane Simpson

## JTT

Conventional relationships between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, between drawn forms and their volumetric realization, are deranged in fascinating, supremely elegant ways in Diane Simpson's sculptures. The eighty-six-year-old Chicagoan, who began studying art in her mid-thirties and really only started showing in earnest outside of her hometown about a decade ago, has developed a trademark approach to creating work across her forty-year career. Starting with photographs typically depicting elements of architecture, she produces detailed isometric drawings that home in on particular aspects of shape or patterning. These renderings then become the basis for highly idiosyncratic objects—primarily constructed from precisely cut particleboard or plywood and then painted and augmented with other workaday materials—that recapitulate the sharply perspectival character of the illustrations in an uncannily hybrid mode of spatiality. Though they are fully "realized" figures, they nevertheless always keep a foot in the flat world of pencil and graph paper. Taken together, the dozen-odd works in her recent show at JTT formed into an eccentric sculptural Potemkin village, their daring unexpected organizations of planes, edges, and corners oscillating between formally sophisticated geometric abstractions and rogue bits of cityscape, at once familiar and deeply strange, erupting piecemeal from another universe into our own.

Simpson continues to have an active studio practice, and all the pieces here were from the past two or three years. However, in a demonstration of the extraordinary consistency of the artist's procedures, several were actually newly realized sculptural versions of drawings from the years immediately after she completed her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1979. *Roof Shape (Ise)*, 2019, for example, had long only appeared in a drawing begun in 1980, which was also on view. The title nods to the elegantly sloping roofs and crowning wooden crossbeams of the Japanese Shinto temples that inspired its ramp-like form, but the work distills those details into a fragment that is not so much a miniaturized representation of the structure but is somehow a translation of it into an entity with its own formal language. The effect is as if the essence of the building had been initially streamlined and condensed through the rationalizing protocols of Simpson's drafting methods and then reduplicated; a

thing first flattened and ordered, then unfolded into a newly evocative dimensionality.

Though her works are occasionally literal in a way that stops at simple stage-set technical proficiency—as in *Bannister (Vienna)*, 2021, whose nearly one-to-one relationship with the titular object feels more like exposition than the usual idiosyncratic poetry radiated by the work—Simpson much more frequently probes the neither/nor imbrications between her subjects and her imaginings of them. The (almost) matching paired forms of *Entry*, 2020, for example, with their Art Deco curves and careful linear decoration, do form a door-like figure, but are certainly no door, just as the gorgeously weird *Grained Chimney*, 2019 (another work that started off as a drawing made in 1980 and was exhibited in sculptural form for the first time here), is poised somewhere between the smokestack of its title and the kinds of clothing- or costume-inspired forms the artist produced in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Five of the sculptures on view were wall based rather than freestanding and, while more retiring than their floor-based companions, often produced odder and more compelling tensions between the things that inspired them and their representations. *Portico*, 2020, was set in a corner of one of the galleries at eye level, its foamcore substrate stained mint green and encased in a smooth sheath of painted MDF like a hunk of a gingerbread house's facade, while *Three Windows (NYC)*, 2020, translates what is presumably a kind of oriel bay on a Gilded Age Manhattan edifice into a virtually unidentifiable object whose curved aluminum frame; trio of flat, splint-like panels; and connective cotton webbing lend it an almost prosthetic cast. Simpson's signature project of taking bits of the world and boiling them down into the planes and angles of the page before returning them to multidimensional life in a newly enchanted form is in works such as these at its most potent and persuasive.

— Jeffrey Kastner