

## UNIVERSAL BOXES Essay

Corrugated cardboard surrounds us in modern daily life. We use cardboard boxes to store and transport every kind of physical object. We buy them flat and assemble them; we break them down and recycle them. Easily cut, firm, and durable, cardboard lends itself to manifold other uses, both practical and creative. Pablo Picasso, the first great artist to use the medium, fashioned a cubist guitar out of cardboard and other materials in 1912. In the early 1970s, Robert Rauschenberg made wall sculptures from found cardboard boxes. Rauschenberg's contemporary, architect Frank Gehry, designed chairs made of composite cardboard. Now, artist May Tveit offers a distinctive contribution to that tradition with her new sculptural works, Universal Boxes.

Tveit titled her series after a chapter in a book on packaging design. "Universal boxes" denotes the templates – single sheets of corrugated cardboard cut into precise configurations and scored for folding – that form a variety of standard box types known as regular slotted containers. Tveit used as the base layer of each of her sculptures a standard template that, if folded up, would actually create a box. Adding two more identical templates to create a firm foundation, she then glued down layer after layer of cardboard sheets of the same configuration but of increasingly smaller dimensions. Employing a serial approach, she decreased the size of each successive sheet by a standard amount (1", 1/2", 1/4", etc.) or by 5%. She continued this process until arriving at the smallest nested version of the original base template or a rectangular strip of cardboard as the top layer.

Tveit's sculptures may be enjoyed purely as aesthetically satisfying geometric abstractions fashioned from a mundane material, but a fuller appreciation of them requires knowledge of their specific origins. For the last two years, Tveit has worked as an unofficial artist-in-residence at the Lawrence Paper Company, a 130-year old business in Lawrence, Kansas that designs and manufactures corrugated cardboard boxes and retail-ready packaging and displays. An associate professor of design at the University of Kansas, trained in both fine art and industrial design, Tveit has since 1999 been bringing her students to the Lawrence Paper Company factory to learn about materials and processes and to do class projects in collaboration with its designers. Several of her former students have gone on to work for the company. In appreciation of this productive relationship, the Lawrence Paper Company has supported Tveit's creative endeavor by giving her full access to its facilities and by freely providing the materials she has used for these sculptures.

Tveit says that she gains "information, affirmation, and inspiration" from the Lawrence Paper Company. The mammoth stacks of new cardboard sheets on the factory floor gave her the idea of building her sculptures up in layers. She collaborated with the company's designers to create the digital files guiding the machine that cuts the sheets from which she assembles her sculptures.

The white polymer emulsion glue she uses to bind each layer to the next is same adhesive the company employs in the manufacturing facility. However, Tveit's works, while inspired by the factory and based on its products (i.e., universal box templates), are not functional objects but works of art, aesthetically rich and metaphorically loaded.

In formal and technical terms, Tveit's sculptures share a strong relationship to minimalism, the avant-garde American art movement of the 1960s defined by an aesthetic of repeated geometric units, clean surfaces, and impersonal facture, often achieved through industrial fabrication. At the same time, Tveit's sculptures possess a strong architectonic quality, suggestive of ancient Mesopotamian ziggurats or the step pyramids of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.

While Tveit acknowledges these affinities, she was thinking of neither minimalism nor architecture while composing these works. What was on her mind – and at odds with a solely minimalist reading – was her strong personal connection to this project, which she signaled by giving most of the sculptures the maximum dimension of sixty-eight inches, her own height. Although the cardboard sheets were machine cut, Tveit handcrafted each sculpture, applying the glue herself and hand rubbing every surface. Also highly meaningful to Tveit are the metaphorical resonances of boxes and layering. Potent psychological and emotional associations attach to such box-functions as hiding, compartmentalizing, and protecting. Layering is a common trope for the accumulation of memories. And Tveit's short poetic titles – You and me (you), Say Yes, The Road (to name three) – evoke memories and longing.

Perhaps what Tveit and most of us ultimately long for is the perfect order and ideal balance so marvelously manifested in her sculptures – something we find in manufactured products and finely crafted works of art, but rarely, if ever, in our lives. Perhaps that perfection is what makes her sculptures universal.

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