

DIANE SIMPSON: FORM OVER FORM

Paul Krainak

Diane Simpson's compressed sculpture, drawings, and installations are intelligent, meticulous, and charismatic. Content is suspended seamlessly between abstraction and allegory, object and image, clothing and architecture. It is simultaneously indebted to a theorist's critique of ceremony, a tradesman's respect for materials, and a designer's observance of ornamentation. However, her project is more about improvisation and morphological prediction rather than it is a resolution of divergent sources. Such concerns are not uncommon to Simpson's generation that proceeded from the Chicago Imagists. They apprehended a more comprehensive visual history — one that asserted independence from the dead ends and misconceptions of regional vs. national art discourses. Despite numerous historical references Simpson never strayed too far from a signature hybridization of forms. What she amassed are forms that merge a standard graphic convention with another zone of perspectival destinations. Her project releases cultural objects from occupying typical dimensions and ordinary materials.

Diane Simpson
Cape
1990
oil stain, acrylic paint, MDF
37 x 45 x 13½ inches

Much of the artist's work is prefigured by elaborate drawings on graph paper. The renderings are easily as significant as her sculpture and present unique insights into the artist's thinking as pre-modern designs and spaces are reconfigured. Graphite marks and erasures document all the energy and pleasure of production, establishing the artist's particular devotion to detail, process and tools. Similarly, her complicated three-dimensional works reveal equal dexterity and patience, merging the various disciplines of both fine furniture and industrial construction. The adoption of the flattened perspective of Persian miniatures and Japanese scroll painting then further invigorate the physical characteristics of her sculpture.



Simpson's "multi-spatial" mission captures the periphery between two and three dimensions and between the linguistic and phenomenological arenas in which all artists labor and which meaning is probed. This pivotal zone is represented in the figurative model of the atlas, forecasting territory that cannot or does not yet exist. With information embedded in layers and folds, traces of reality are accessed from different vantage points. Form and material is asserted as not only the vehicle for content but as the surrogate map of an altered path or site. Simpson's physical document is not for resting our gaze but serves as a springboard for apprehending probable spaces and grasping virtual objects.

Consider the fluid and layered geometry of *Cape* (1990). Here the artist presents an axonometric drawing in three dimensions. While this slender wooden structure is an incarnation of her architectural drawing on graph paper, it also replicates the virtual quality of the projected diagram. By constructing the image/concept in partial profile she uncannily relates the flat space of drawing even as completing the three-dimensional totality. We see the full front and the side of the structure, just as we do in the diagram which rejects recessional space. This tense dimensionality is a dramatic visual enigma that is apparent in most of her work. Since there is no skin stretched across *Cape's* chassis, we also see the interior and the back. A negation of traditional vantage points approximates the fractured and displaced spaces of Cubism and Constructivism as well as the planar features of historic non-Western art.

This is not to say that more traditional content is immaterial to Simpson, but it is staged to reveal its ambiguity and instability. To complicate our reading, *Cape* interprets a flowing, high-collared piece of clothing that's been starched and set upright. As a garment its nature has been hollowed out and stiffened to render it as pure shape or elemental sign. Simpson prods art's syntactical plane, manipulating visual grammar and sequencing of design, rather than tinkering with features of metonymy. Beneath the free play and illogical narrative of history and memory she de-classifies and reconstructs a silent and constant material world.

Simpson simply dislodges form and space. She cites the relationships between intuition and mediated experience and explores artists' desire to produce a freer alternative to either, based on regular observation, record keeping, and improvisation. Her steady calculation of surface, contour, and dimension, rather than narrative is a conceit drawn from Minimalism and earlier reductivist art language. But Simpson also deflects the traditional or paradigmatic design of objects like the Dadaists, who produced many uncanny disassociations between form and function. However, within exotic forms such as hers lie critical structures and fundamental compositions that actually steady our grasp of the world and see it afresh. While *Boshi* (1995), a wide shallow dome of thin perforated metal connotes a high-tech piece of telecommunications equipment more than it does traditional Japanese headwear, it is more importantly an elegant amalgam that is stable, present and self-contained. And as *Shaker Bonnet* (1990), Simpson's striking basswood and fabric sculpture might be confused with a work of visionary architecture or an extraordinary piece of Samurai armor, it too flirts with autonomy.

Simpson's hybrid design traditions with which she contrives certain objects eludes seductive readings and leads us back to idealized forms. The works are so formally inventive that no matter how exotic her sources they become little more than fodder for the mission of re-defining space. Her Asian spatial perspective, Shaker design elements, textured surfaces and Constructivist silhouettes all become radical fusions of form. She anticipated the geometry and space of post-modern and contemporary architecture. Her early cardboard abstractions and geometric folds were analogous to computer-generated models of leading designers such as Frank O. Gehry, Peter Eisenman, and Bernard Tschumi and others. It is no secret that architecture has been revitalized by the visibility of decades of formal experimentation by artists and designers in contiguous disciplines in which Diane Simpson has contributed a critical mass.

With Simpson's mathematic logic and vernacular sensitivity, she responds to the observance of formal modernism's expanding influence on popular culture via landscape design, architecture and

even fashion, each of which shows an endless balancing of details in which Simpson's observations and reformulations are embedded. Her work asks us to observe, differentiate, select, and accept the utopian notion that forms do beget forms and that even projects abstracted from arcane studio rituals are a vital historical link to our larger cultural identities.

Diane Simpson
Drawing for Cape (B)
1990
pencil, colored pencil on
vellum graph paper
16 x 22 inches

