

## Constructing Domesticity: Diane Simpson

by Victor M. Cassidy

Diane Simpson's suspended and shelf-mounted sculptures look like clothing transformed into architecture. Even though she works in wood, aluminum, fiberboard, and other industrial materials, she softens her constructions with materials that have domestic associations such as linen, faux fur, linoleum, and plastic or cotton needlepoint mesh.

*Apron III* (2001), in basswood, fiberboard, and found linoleum, is a box-like form made from flat planes that the artist has joined together. A deep V-cut articulates the neck, a shelf at waist level looks like a serving tray, and a tall triangle on the lower half suggests legs. Painted in cream and green enamel, *Apron III* evokes the kitchens of an earlier time—and sweet, settled domes-

ticity. The artist has childhood memories of such a kitchen with very similar linoleum.

In *Sleeve-Cradle* (1997), Simpson transforms the ample sleeve of an antique dress into a suspended cocoon that references a Native American cradle board. Made of wood covered with beige linen, *Sleeve-Cradle* has a purple nylon cord running along its edges that outlines and softens it. As this work suggests, nurturing and protection are key Simpson themes.

Born in Chicago, the artist was trained in drawing, painting, and printmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving her BFA in 1971 and her MFA in 1978. She assembled her first sculptures from sheets of triple-ply corrugated cardboard, which she cut and slotted with a jigsaw. Cardboard was easy to work with. As her ambitions expanded, she taught herself how to use the router, table saw, and band saw.

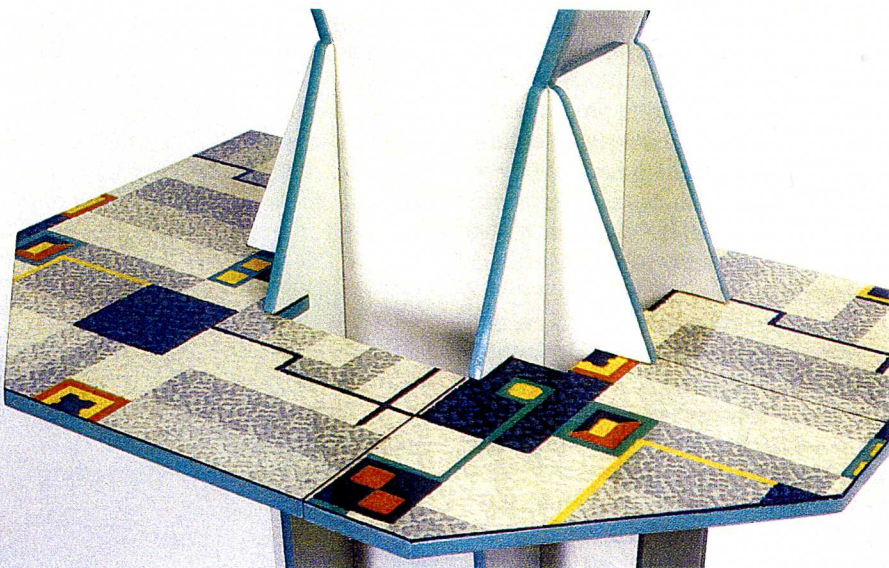
Simpson's lack of formal training has sometimes been a blessing. She consid-

ered welding brass tubing for one piece, but lacking the necessary skill, she crimped the tubes where they crossed, fitted them together, and joined them with waxed thread. The resulting pattern of colorful triangles emphasized and explained structural connections rather than hiding them. Simpson's innovative procedure led to a fresher piece with much more visual interest.

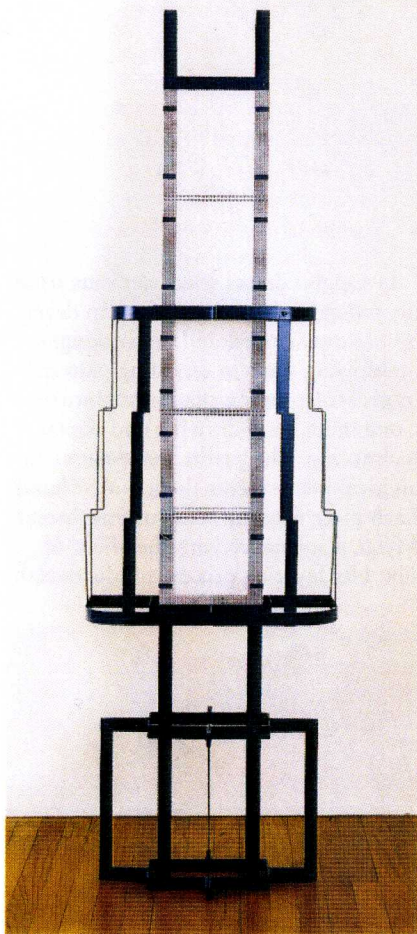
Found images serve as Simpson's source material. She keeps an old German costume encyclopedia in her studio, as well as magazines clippings, industrial catalogues, and print-outs from Internet sites that sell vintage aprons. She favors antique clothing—17th-century formal dresses, Derby hats, and 1930s servants' garments.

Simpson's sculptures begin with drawings. She persists in two-dimensional ways of thinking and working, moving into three-dimensional space only after making key decisions on paper. After selecting an image, she redraws it, often on graph paper, reinventing it as an architectonic construction. A completed drawing shows the piece as Simpson plans to build and install it. "I work pieces out as I draw," she states. "I make most of my decisions at that stage." She has frequently

Left and detail: *Apron III*, 2001. Enamel on medium-density fiberboard and basswood and found linoleum, 65 x 25 x 21 in.





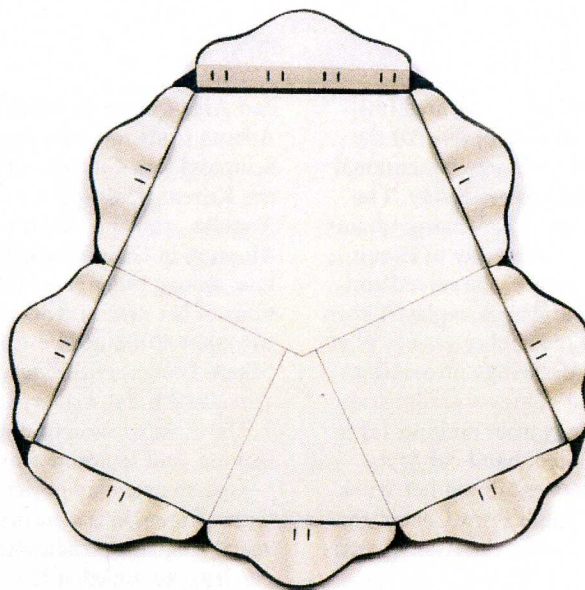


**Left: *Apron V*, 2002. Painted aluminum and linen and plastic mesh, 69 x 20 x 11.5 in. Right: *Apron VII*, 2003. Wood, ragboard, and Victorian paper cuff protectors, 28 x 28 x 2 in.**

exhibited her working drawings with the original source images affixed to them. These delicate creations are taken just as seriously as her sculptures.

Vernacular architecture, Shaker design, and traditional Japanese crafts have all influenced Simpson's vision. She acknowledges a major debt to Bernd and Hilla Becher, the German couple who photograph cooling towers, outdoor gas tanks, and industrial silos. *Apron V* (2002), which is one of Simpson's most explicitly architectonic constructions, demonstrates the Becher influence. *Apron V* could be called "Woman as Ziggurat" considering its stepped, pyramid-like form. Made from painted aluminum, linen, and plastic mesh, *Apron V* is a framework, a forceful formal exploration that suggests none of the comforts of the hearth.

Simpson wants viewers to associate her sculptures with their sources, but never in a literal way. To distinguish her work, she distills and reinvents the orig-



inal image, creating a hybrid form that incorporates many influences. Other distancing devices include scale (slightly larger than the artist's body) and materials that contradict the subject's traditional role. "Once I have the form," says Simpson, "I work out the structural needs and choose appropriate materials. It's all interdependent." She selects fiberglass screen, Lexan, and perforated metals for specific visual, structural, or conceptual reasons. Her surfaces, which may be patterned or grid-like, are always inherent to the materials she chooses. She purchases some materials on impulse and keeps them until she has a use for them. Sometimes these finds inspire new work.

Influences on Simpson's sculpture include Martin Puryear, Jackie Winsor, and Eva Hesse. She shares a passion for craftsmanship with Puryear, which is evident in the seemingly effortless way that she works with wood and in her skillful joins. Simpson and Winsor both favor pale colors and often use textiles in veil-like presentations. Like Hesse, Simpson likes mundane materials and straightforward ways of building.

Simpson continues to experiment and challenge herself. *Apron VII* (2003) is

an irregular hexagon-shape that hangs on the wall. The interior of its scalloped outline, which is devoid of volume, gives no suggestion of a woman's form. Surfing the Internet one day, the artist found and purchased a box of Victorian cuff protectors. These long-forgotten accessories resemble doilies, the small ornamental pieces of lace or paper that are placed beneath glasses or cups to protect wooden surfaces. Intrigued with their shape, Simpson arranged the cuff protectors into the outline of an apron and made them dimensional by affixing them to the wavy redwood forms used to support corrugated greenhouse roofs. The resulting piece—a charming, slightly nutty adventure in the territory between two dimensions and three—could suggest where she might go next.

Simpson won't say if she has big changes in mind: "I've learned not to talk about works-in-progress. If I ask someone for advice, I begin to doubt myself and lose track of my intentions." Whatever she does, we can be sure that it will be fresh in conception, beautifully crafted, and filled with life.

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