

## 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-

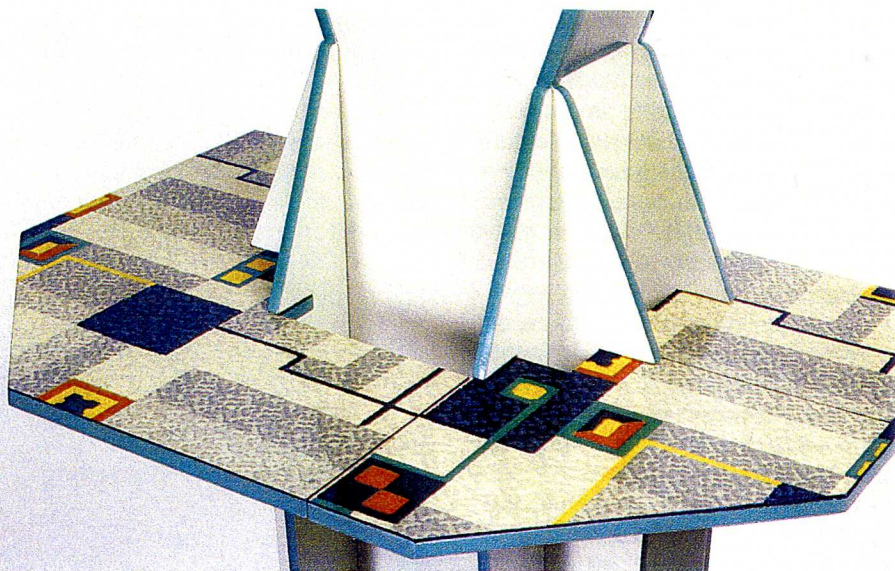
ered welding brass tubing for one piece, but lacking the necessary skill, she crimped the tubes where they crossed, fitted them together, and joined them with waxed thread. The resulting pattern of colorful triangles emphasized and explained structural connections rather than hiding them. Simpson's innovative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



TOM VAN EYNDE

