



DIANE SIMPSON

SCULPTURE, DRAWING, PRINTS 1976–2014

8 Feb – 3 May 2020

There is a carefully considered balance in the sculptures of the Chicago-based artist Diane Simpson. Fluidity meets rigidity; flat forms create a complex sense of depth. Assembling sculptures, drawings and rarely-seen early collages and prints, this exhibition signals key moments in her 40-year-long career and is her first museum presentation in Europe.

Simpson's artistic process enacts a series of translations: from flatness to volume, from image to material, from representation to abstraction. Her sculptures typically have their origin in printed images of what she calls "clothing structures", collected from old encyclopaedias, magazines and catalogues. With only a ruler and pencil, she transposes details of her source images onto graph paper, rotating them at 45-degree angles using techniques borrowed from engineering as well as Chinese and Japanese art. These enigmatic drawings are dotted with calculations and notations, not unlike garment patterns or architectural plans.

Simpson's drawings are then brought into three dimensions as sculptures that are as reminiscent of buildings as they are of the body. Meticulously handcrafted, each finds its form through further processes of abstraction, material selection, and construction method. The supple folds of clothing are displaced by a rigid armature of tough materials, constructed from components of fibreboard, plywood and other everyday materials that seamlessly interlock. Often hollow, their internal construction is laid bare, inviting us to appreciate the economy of their structure. Any ornamental patterning or embellishment only serves to bring emphasis to form.

For 40 years, Simpson has methodically focused on a category of clothing at a time, elaborating a range of formal, structural and decorative variations. This exhibition brings together examples from her seminal *Samurai* series (1981–83), alongside later bodies of work including *Historical* (1984–90), *Headgear* (1990–96), *Sleeves* (1996–2000), *Apron* (2000–05), *Bibs, Vests, Collars* (2006–11) and *Peplum* (2014–16). The exhibition is also a journey through materials, as well as a study of the changing relationship between Simpson's sculptures and their drawn counterparts.

All works courtesy the artist; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; JTT, New York; and Herald St, London unless otherwise stated.

Early Prints & Collages, 1976–77

These early prints and collages were made while Simpson was a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she primarily studied drawing and printmaking. They represent an important transition in her artistic practice, when she first began to experiment with surfaces, folded forms and the tensions between two and three dimensions. It was through such experiments that Simpson devised the unique perspectival system that would eventually underpin her later work. She made her first sculptures in corrugated cardboard the following year, after a professor encouraged her to fabricate some of these drawn objects.

Samurai 10, 1983

"I was very moved by a particular scene in the film *Kagemusha* (1980) by Akira Kurosawa. There was one scene where several samurai warriors were sitting in a formal ceremonial semicircle on the floor with their backs to the camera. The segments of their armour skirts formed arcs cascading from their waist onto the floor. That scene stuck in my head, and I started looking at diagrams of how Japanese armour is constructed. And that led to the *Samurai* series and eventually to other clothing forms."

– Diane Simpson

Court Lady, 1985

Collection of the State of Illinois

Court Lady marked the beginning of a new series of work, *Historical* (1984–90), which was inspired by depictions of archaic European clothing found in an illustrated encyclopaedia of costume. Referring to a mid-17th-century English court dress, *Court Lady* also represents the first time Simpson successfully realised a three-dimensional curve. Plastic fasteners help secure the work's most extreme curvatures, while sections of the sculpture are laced together with red nylon cords. As she describes, "The cords, similar in colour to the red typically used in Japanese armour, become both a structural and decorative element [...] I feel strongly about not applying decoration arbitrarily in my work, but allowing it to develop as a direct result of the form and structure."

Boshi, 1995

In the 1990s, Simpson began to draw on an expanded repertoire of materials after having used MDF almost exclusively throughout the 1980s. These material explorations also led to changes in the relationship between the spatial systems of her drawings and sculptures. While her earlier sculptures had typically replicated the 45-degree angles of her drawings in real space, here the perspective is straight-on. As she explains, "Eventually, as I started using materials that were incompatible with this angled method of construction, or where the requirements became too complex, I had to replace the 45-degree angle with a more conventional 90-degree one."

Sleeve-Sling, 1997

Collection of Annette Turow

Sleeve-Sling foregrounds Simpson's interest in questions of display. While its form is derived from an abstracted translation of an Elizabethan dress sleeve, its method of presentation alludes to the functional role of a sling: to support a hanging weight. Here the display mechanism plays both a sculptural and structural role, as well as evoking the aesthetic of shop-window displays – a subject that Simpson later explored in her *Window Dressing* series (2007–08), which pays homage to the window-dressers of 1920s Art Deco.

Apron III, 2001

Collection of Michael J. Robertson and Christopher A. Slapak

Apron III is connected to the artist's memories of her childhood kitchen of the late 1940s. Its colour scheme and surface embellishment recall the domestic vernacular of arcadian suburban towns of postwar America. *Apron III*, along with *Neckline (extended)*, take the most recognisably body-like shapes of this selection. A shelf at waist height, suggestive of a serving tray, is adorned with linoleum that Simpson found in the attic of her 1920s-era home.

"I guess you could say that my subjects (aprons, uniforms, bibs) are feminist to the extent that they relate to my personal experience as a woman growing up in a particular era. I think they are connected to my childhood memories of crisp white nurses' uniforms, women's large full-length aprons, my children's bibs, or even the catcher's chest protector from my grandson's baseball games."

– Diane Simpson

Neckline (extended), 2011

"[Simpson] highlights parts of the body associated with exposure, anxiety, cleanliness, or propriety [...] In Simpson's hands, necks absent from necklines and hands absent from sleeves powerfully reveal these sites where bodies emerge from the openings in the forms we have made to conceal and shape them. Gender and the culturally determined roles and spheres for women imbue these concerns with a quietly political power."

– Dan Byers, Director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University

Peplum I, 2014

The *Peplum* series (2014–16) isolates a detail of women's clothing that was traditionally used to accent the waist: a decorative flare of fabric that embellishes the hem of a skirt or jacket. In *Peplum I*, Simpson reimagines this sartorial element in curved plywood, twisted at an unusual 30-degree angle. A series of shelves that acts as a base relates it to a piece of furniture and extends the curved shapes of the peplum form.

Related Events

We offer free events related to our exhibitions and research strands. Book your place by visiting nottinghamcontemporary.org or calling 0115 948 9750.

Artist Talk

Sat 8 Feb, 3–5pm

Our exhibiting artist, Diane Simpson, discusses her 40-year art practice in this special event.

Exhibition Walkthrough

Wed 29 Apr, 6pm

Nicole Yip, Chief Curator at Nottingham Contemporary, expands on Diane Simpson's sculptures and drawings, reflecting on her process, references and enduring engagement with flatness, volume and dimensionality.

Exhibition curated by Nicole Yip with Olivia Aherne
Public Programme by Sofia Lemos with Ryan Kearney