DAN BYERS: First things first. I know you have your mother’s incredible 1950s stove in your kitchen. And in at least one work you’ve used linoleum quite similar to the flooring from a childhood home [Apron III, 2001: p. 14]. What are other early encounters with materials, patterns, or objects from growing up that have stayed with you or influenced your work?

DIANE SIMPSON: Well, the first thing that comes to mind is a sculpture called Robe from 1986 [p. 8]. I believe I was thinking about a graduation dress I was required to make in eighth-grade sewing class. We all had to use this ugly grayish-lavender material called dotted Swiss. Both the color and the wooden furniture “buttons” remind me of that dress. The “buttons” also make me remember a favorite candy... those tiny, round multicolored bumps of sugar stuck to a strip of white paper. We bought those at a little grocery near school.

DB: I know those sugar bumps on paper. Those were a favorite of mine as well. Somehow between an image and—not to get too heady about candy—a tactile, almost sculptural experience, and then finally this sweet payoff, but always with little traces of paper stuck to the back of each bump. Do you tend to work out from the details you notice to a larger form, or does it go both ways?
DS: The larger form comes first. As I’m figuring out how the form will be constructed, the details become apparent as an integral aspect of the construction. The details sort of automatically develop as I’m drawing the form, and sometimes I find the detail to be the most interesting aspect of the piece. The detail also often ends up dictating my choice of materials.

DB: Okay, so as not to get ahead of ourselves, I hope you can talk first about school. You earned both a BFA and an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Can you tell me a little bit about the timing of your schooling, and how making art at that time related to family life? You got your undergraduate degree in your thirties, and then waited seven years before getting your MFA in 1978. What were those years like?

DS: I was needing one quarter’s work to graduate from SAIC in 1957, but instead had my first child in May of that year. I had a deadline, to return within ten years, or I would lose all credit. So luckily, in 1967, that deadline coincided with the time my youngest of three children entered first grade. But during those ten years, I had continued to paint, using our bedroom as a studio. We slept on a hide-a-bed for six years. You know what they say . . . “It takes a village.” Well, in my case it took the whole family, especially my husband, Ken, who understood this was serious stuff! I returned to SAIC, stretching out that one remaining quarter to about four years, one class at a time. During the next five years, I worked on my own, making collagraph prints in my basement, and in 1976, when I was forty, I applied to graduate school. During those school years, at crunch time, the whole family pitched in, doing whatever needed to be done. During grad school I worked mostly at home, and schlepped the work down to school every two weeks to meet with my advisors.

DB: What were some of the things your kids and Ken did to pitch in?

DS: When the kids were older, they pitched in with chores when I was writing a paper or panicking about some piece I was working on. But Ken was really the one who came through. He took a woodworking adult-school night class, and his project was making all of my studio tables, which I’m still using.

DB: Ken makes quite the studio assistant! You studied primarily printmaking and drawing. And some of your first sculptures emerged from diagrammatic drawings that suggested structures and forms that might actually be fabricated. These early sculptures often included drawings on their surfaces that subverted or confused the sculpture’s physical attributes. Tensions and conversations between two and three dimensions have animated your works from early on. How did your work with drawn and printed surfaces coax you toward the frontal, almost confrontational early wall sculptures?

DS: Yes, during grad school I was making collagraph prints and large drawings on graph paper of boxlike forms and architectural structures. I was using a 45-degree perspective that I thought I had devised on my own. I didn’t have a name for it. But it allowed me to create objects dimensionally without depending on observation. One of my advisors suggested I build some of these structures. At first I resisted. But then I was interested in seeing what would happen if the exact same system for creating space on a 2D surface was transferred to actual space. In these early wall pieces, the wall became the picture plane, and all of the planes extending into space were angled from...
the wall at a 45-degree angle. I carried out the illusionistic aspect further by connecting flat and extended surfaces with continuous drawn areas or by shading and shaping some planes to appear dimensional even though they were actually flat. The illusion only worked if seen at a certain view... the exact same view as in the drawing.

DB: When you returned to school in 1967, the Imagists must have been a big presence around the Art Institute, and Chicago in general. I know you've never really considered yourself to be in direct dialogue with most of those artists—with Christina Ramberg being an exception? And the works you were making then, as you were finishing your BFA, and then the sculptural pieces that came out of your MFA program, were not as directly related to the body as the work you began to make in the early 1980s. What was your relationship to the Imagists and the rigorous and viscerally corporeal, humorous, sometimes abject, and pop culture–related work they were doing?

DS: During the ’60s, when the Imagists were in school and having their wild exhibits at the Hyde Park Art Center, I was living in my domestic world, doing a lot of diapering. Attending art openings was not part of my art or social agenda. Even when I reentered SAIC, I never knew these artists. It was only when I was in grad school in the late ’70s that I made a habit of visiting the Phyllis Kind Gallery to see, in particular, the paintings of Miyoko Ito, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, and, yes, even Jim Nutt! It was the later work of Barbara Rossi and Jim Nutt that interested me. Because by then Jim had started doing his portraits, which really blew my mind. I read that he is a lover of the Flemish school of portraiture, as I am. I also loved some drawings he did with colored pencil on Kraft paper. In those drawings, it wasn’t his nutty imagery that got to me, but the quality of the colored pencil and his tilted floor boards—an early non-Western perspective that I guess we were both interested in. So these particular artists had a sensibility that I responded to. I think it was their fantastic color sense, their interest in pattern, and their obsession with a fastidious finish. I also had a special relationship with Barbara Rossi and Ray Yoshida, another Phyllis Kind artist. They were my advisors in grad school and very important in my development.

DB: It’s interesting that you responded to how the drawings and paintings were “put together,” especially in the case of later work by Jim Nutt, where faces, and their bodies, push the two-dimensional plane into uncanny abstract play. Your observations about Ramberg, Rossi, Ito, and (even!) Nutt suggest so many questions about influences and working methods. Beyond seeing their work at the Phyllis Kind Gallery, did you visit the studios of Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, and Miyoko Ito? Did the four of you talk together? What was the conversation like between the two-dimensional works they were making and your sculptural work? And were questions around the body, as a physical and/or political fact, part of those conversations?

DS: No, there were no studio visits and no heady discussions. I was not part of their circle. Actually, I never even had a chance to speak to Miyoko Ito. To me, she was this ethereal persona that I watched from a distance. Although once I joined Phyllis Kind, I was invited to Karl Wirsum’s annual Christmas party and was asked, with several others, if I wanted to see Barbara’s amazing collection of Indian folk art. I got to know Christina a little better, and she was a lot of fun. But we never discussed our work. When I was planning a trip to Japan, she shared her travel notes with me. This was so important, since we were so much on the same wavelength. In grad school and even later, my relationship with Barbara and Ray remained primarily that of student and teacher.

DB: Ray Yoshida’s approach to collecting work by his peers—as well as self-taught artists—and other cultural artifacts for me has always represented a kind of uniquely Chicago method of creating a personal universe of art associations and connections. I think about Roger Brown as well. I know you live with the work of other artists, and you draw from a vast array of Western and non-Western examples of clothing, architectural detail, and ornament, among other things. Did your interest in these various objects develop from a collector’s impulse, or did you create a lexicon of affinities and influences through a different kind of research or habit?

DS: I’m really not much of a collector, compared to Roger Brown or Ray and Barbara. But I do have that impulse, and would probably collect more if I had more space. But how can you go to Japan or to Native-American reservations
and not come home with some beautiful objects? I’m sure art history classes in Oceanic, African, and Japanese art, mostly taught by Whitney Halstead, fed into my appreciation for non-Western cultures and the things they produce. But who knows, really, how appreciation and discernment in relation to a beautiful object or detail of ornament can develop in the brain? I think some can be taught and some is innate.

DB: Yes, I think you’re right. It’s incredible the impact Halstead had through his lectures. The formal conversation between your work and Rossi’s, Ramberg’s, Ito’s, and Nutt’s later work is palpable, even if it wasn’t happening as an immediate engagement with your studio life. You spoke about their perfectionism earlier. How were you learning to make your sculpture at that time, while looking at so much two-dimensional work (and not having studied sculpture formally in school)? How did you figure out how to make these things in the studio? And how has the act of fabrication, and your attention to finish, developed over time?

DS: That formal conversation—the language of form, shape, color, and finish that I acquired working all those years in 2D and that attracted me to the work of these particular artists—that conversation carried over into the 3D work. The only difference was that now I had to learn the techniques of working with various materials and dealing with the third dimension visually and structurally. I started at zero, with no 3D skills. So, with each new material the process involved much trial-and-error and lots of do-overs—and still does. But sometimes this limitation in techniques can be an advantage, leading to an original and good solution. I’m thinking of a piece called Amish Bonnet [p. 7]. The construction involved connecting metal tubes to form a grid pattern. My first impulse was to take a welding class. But instead, I flattened the tubes at each joint by crimping them and then tied them with waxed colored cords. The cords were important structurally, but also became important as a decorative element. I continue to fabricate all the work myself, because it’s only in this trial-and-error and working-it-out process that sometimes unforeseen things happen. This also relates to my concern with finish. I’m a stickler for a fine-tuned finish, but I still want the hand to be present, so I could never be happy with a slick factory finish.
DB: Could you talk more about important decorative elements in your work? Are there other sculptures that stand out to you as decisive moments, when a detail or ornamental element in the world triggered an artwork? Or where the “finish” solutions, or joinery, resulted in an added vocabulary within the form? In your description of *Amish Bonnet*, it dawned on me that often in your work there is a relationship between labor and the decorative. In a superficial accounting of the decorative or ornamental, those terms are often applied to extra, nonessential embellishments. But your work (beyond its important conceptual and historical engagement with the language of ornament) often derives intrinsic structure through its fashioning of the decorative.

DS: There are several instances where a particular decorative or structural element observed in the world triggered a piece. Both *Samurai 6* [p. 2] and *Court Lady* [p. 4] come to mind. The surface pattern of *Samurai 6* is directly related to the slotted metal plates in Japanese armor, and the trapezoid shapes that make up the curved part of the sculpture relate to the layers of metal plates that form the armored skirt. Similarly, in *Court Lady*, those same open slots are laced together with cords to connect sections of the piece. The cords, similar in color to the red typically used in Japanese armor, become both a structural and decorative element.

*Apron V* [p. 16] is another piece where I took my cue for construction from the joinery in an antique mannequin I saw at the Met’s Costume Institute. And still another piece is *Underskirt* [1986]. I was interested in the shapes and construction of the woven straps of a *pannier* from the sixteenth century. That was the starting point for the piece that directed everything else.

I’m so glad you bring up the idea of the interrelationship of structure and decoration. 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. One of my absolute favorite books is called *Anonymous Sculpture*. It’s a book of photographs by Hilla and Bernd Becher of industrial structures (water tanks, silos, kilns). These structures are designed by engineers, not architects, for functional purposes, with no ego entering the process. So, really beautiful patterns develop, not self-consciously but as a direct result of the shape and function of each structure.

DB: Before I get back to history and development questions, one follow-up question: For you, is there an ethical stake involved in that which is structural (or maybe legitimate) and that which is added, or seemingly “unnecessary” and “only” there because of an intuitive attraction?

DS: Ha! I have to admit—there is an ethical dilemma for me when, occasionally, the intuitive forces its way in. I just completed a piece that includes an important decorative element that serves no functional need. But since it was originally planned as both a functional and visual element, I think it still takes on that meaning.

DB: There was a pretty decisive shift between your first solo show at Artemisia Gallery—where the cardboard works were large, with an almost architectural relationship to the viewer’s body—and your show at the Phyllis Kind Gallery. At Phyllis Kind you showed the *Samurai* series, which extended the fabrication techniques from your last show, but took on overt bodily and historical dress connections (to the samurai). What shifted here for you in your attitude toward clothing and all the associations that go with it?

DS: Actually, there was a common influence for both bodies of work. They were both, in a way, related to Japanese art and culture. At the time I was making the large cardboard structures, I was very interested in how architecture was described in Japanese scroll paintings, like those illustrating *The Tale of Genji*. I loved the tilted birds-eye view and parallel perspective. So that’s how I started drawing the large objects that became the cardboard pieces. About that time, I also saw a film by Akira Kurosawa called *Kagemusha*. 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 armor 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 armor is constructed. And that led to the *Samurai* series and eventually to other clothing forms.

DB: Most of your work, even as it gestures toward clothing and the body it covers, presents itself with architectural authority. Often the structure is
revealed, and the exposed armature can function as an exoskeleton. From the cardboard to the MDF [medium-density fiberboard] and other materials such as copper, plywood, gatorboard, plastic, brass, aluminum, and vinyl, your works are mostly made of hard materials. When polyester, linen, or mesh is used, it’s often for connective purposes, or to cover hard surfaces. Have you ever experimented with draped, wrapped, or hanging forms? Has fabric, with its soft, pliable, stretchable qualities, ever entered your vocabulary?

DS: You’re right… Though my original sources are mostly made of soft, flowing materials, I’ve chosen to transform these ideas using structured materials. I think this has to do, first of all, with my drawing process. In the drawing, I want to be able to describe clearly how I will construct the piece, and it’s difficult, if not impossible, for me to describe the structure clearly with an amorphous draped form. The other reason, which is even more important to me, is that there would be no transformation of the source—it would be too literal. On the other hand, I often like to counter the architectural aspect of a sculpture by introducing a material associated with the domestic world—a fabric or mesh over a wooden or metal structure, or a cloth cord—to bring it back into the context of clothing. I’m looking for that balance.

DB: So, you set yourself a problem to solve, say a problem of translation. Translation has always interested me for the possibility of equivalency being defined in various ways. I think about a bib or apron in relation to your bib and apron works. How do they equal each other? Is it a process of abstracting? Or of making something familiar unfamiliar? The way in which you almost always construct your works to skew perspective, flatten angles, and compress viewpoints seems to play a part in this process.

DS: Yes, it’s an abstracting process. I simplify and keep simplifying. But it’s also additive, in the sense that at some point or other, new forms enter into the drawing from that collection I think we all have of subconsciously stored forms. The drawing begins as a response to the original source image and can then morph into a form that often is far removed. Then the construction process, the scale, and the materials chosen can remove it further, especially if the construction mimics the perspective in the drawing. Many of the recent...
The pieces have not followed that special orientation of the drawings, so they appear more normal. But I sometimes return to that perspective, because I like the challenges in constructing the piece with skewed angles, and there are often visual surprises that occur that I can’t foresee in the drawing.

DB: You mentioned that you like to add a material that is associated with the domestic world to bring back the suggestion of clothing. You and Ken live in a beautiful, well-loved house that seems to fit everything just right. It’s hard not to think about your stove, the leaded diamond-shaped windows in your dining room, and the wonderful amalgam of art- and artifact-filled bungalow up front and open airy modernist addition in the back in relation to your sculptures. What has home—your home—meant to you for your work over the years?

DS: Wow! What a beautiful question. I really love this circular return to my stove and domestic scene. Yes, as you say, our home fits our needs just right. It’s a much-loved and practical receptacle for display of both objects I’ve collected and objects I’ve made. It’s also been a practical house. My work has been made at various times in my basement, in my dining room, and, presently, in my heated garage. The third-floor attic, the basement, one bedroom, and part of the studio are storing work from the past thirty-five years. So, no, I’m not planning to move anytime soon. As to the aesthetics of our home, it too fits just right. I love to be surrounded by well-made old objects, just as I’m drawn to good modern design. Our collection of favorite ethnographic and outsider art and tchotchkes up front, in the original section of the house, juxtaposed with an open modernist addition in back where I can display my latest sculpture, is perfect. And the contrast in surroundings nourishes all of my aesthetic needs.

Conducted via e-mail in late September 2015

---

**EXHIBITION CHECKLIST**

**Ribbed Kimono, 1980**
Corrugated archival cardboard, colored pencil, and crayon
84 x 60 x 40 inches
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Perimeter Gallery, David A. Marcus, M.D., and Eileen and Peter Brodho, 1997.71.a-o

**Samurai 6, 1982**
MDF and enamel
59 1/2 x 61 x 31 inches

**Court Lady, 1984**
MDF, linen, nylon, plastic, and oil stain
93 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 20 inches
James R. Thompson Center, State of Illinois Percent-for-Art Program

**Drawing for Court Lady, 1984**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
40 x 50 inches

**Amish Bonnet, 1992**
Brass, wax, linen thread, fabric, enamel, and wood
66 x 43 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches

**Drawing #2 for Amish Bonnet, 1992**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
17 x 22 inches

**Sleeve–Sling, 1997**
Aluminum, wool, acrylic paint, wood, and cord
35 x 50 x 3 inches
Collection of Annette Turow

**Study for Sleeves, 1997**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
17 x 22 inches
Collection of Irving Stenn, Chicago

**Formal Wear, 1998**
Polyester, poplar, and cotton
47 x 50 x 7 inches (webbing length variable)

**Study for Formal Wear, 1998**
Pencil on vellum graph paper
23 x 35 inches

**Muff, 1998**
Faux fur, fleece, and mahogany
49 x 28 x 13 inches
Collection of Joel Wachs

**Study for Muff, 1997**
Graphite on vellum graph paper with collage
22 x 28 inches
Collection of Victoria S. Lautman

**Vee, 1999**
Steel, wool, birch, pine, and enamel
12 x 30 x 11 inches
Collection of Susanna Hale Day

**Apron III, 2001**
MDF, basswood, vintage linoleum, and enamel
65 x 25 x 21 inches
Collection of Christopher A. Slapak and Michael J. Robertson

**Drawing for Apron III, 2001**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
25 1/2 x 42 inches

**Apron V, 2002**
Aluminum, linen, vinyl, and enamel
69 x 20 x 11 1/2 inches

**Drawing #2 for Apron V, 2002**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
32 x 25 inches
Collection of Julia Fish and Richard Rezac, Chicago
**BIOGRAPHY**

Born 1935 in Joliet, Illinois
Lives in Wilmette, Illinois

**EDUCATION**
MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1978
BFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 1971

**SOLO AND TWO-PERSON EXHIBITIONS**

2015
Diane Simpson and Lesley Vance, Herald St, London
Pared-Down: Lui Shtini and Diane Simpson, SILBERKUPPE, Berlin

2014
Window Dressing, 80WSE, New York University

2013
JTT Gallery, New York
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

2010

2008
Alfredena Gallery, Chicago

2007
Diane Simpson: Window Dressing, Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin

2006
Herron Galleries, Herron School of Art and Design, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

2005
I space, Chicago gallery of the College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

2003
Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago

2001
Sybaris Gallery, Royal Oak, Michigan

1999
Fassbender Gallery, Chicago

1995
Chicago Cultural Center
Gahlberg Gallery, College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, Illinois

1992
Dart Gallery, Chicago

1983
Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago

1980
Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York

1979
Artemisia Gallery, Chicago

**GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

2015
Mommy, Yale Union, Portland, Oregon
Unorthodox, The Jewish Museum, New York

About Face, Kayne Griffin Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles
Bonsai #5, Macarone Gallery, New York

Off Broadway, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco

2014
Joe Bar, Anne Neukamp, Diane Simpson, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

---

**Drawing for Apron X, 2005**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
17 x 22 inches

**Bib-Brass, 2006**
Brass
33 x 15 x 4 1/2 inches
Collection of Michele Maccarone

**Drawing for Bib–Brass, 2006**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
18 1/2 x 24 inches
Collection of Michele Maccarone

**Bib (White), 2006**
Cotton, aluminum, paint, trunk hanger, and embroidery loop
30 x 23 x 9 inches

**Pattern for Bib (White), 2006**
Graphite and colored pencil on vellum graph paper
45 x 29 inches

**Tunic, 2007**
Gatorboard, fabric, and ink
44 x 31 x 7 inches
Marilou Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

**Drawing for Tunic, 2007**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
27 x 28 inches

**Veil (Scalloped), 2010**
Copper, linoleum, steel, wood, and enamel
56 x 22 x 14 inches

**Peplum I, 2014**
LDF, copper, plywood, and enamel
47 1/2 x 29 1/2 x 17 inches

---

**Drawing for Peplum I, 2014**
Graphite on vellum graph paper
31 x 18 inches

**Visual Conversation between Vincent Fecteau and Diane Simpson, 2014**
Slide projection
Running time variable

Unless otherwise indicated, all works are courtesy the artist; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; and JTT, New York.