

From floating on water to suspended above the earth

By Jori Finkel

LOS ANGELES

Nancy Rubins is not much for seafaring. The California artist lives just a few miles from Malibu, but she does not care to go rowing or boating. When she sails, she needs to take anti-seasickness medication. And she would rather swim in a pool than an ocean.

Nonetheless, Rubins is sure to become known as "the boat artist." Beginning late Monday, from midnight to sunrise, she will be directing the assembly of a voluminous sculpture that will arc over the plaza at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York. The work,

which will remain through **Contemporary Art** Sept. 4, consists of more than 60 colorful vessels that she has spent the past year accumulating: kayaks, canoes, rowboats, surfboards, windsurfing boards, motorboats, sailboats and even a few paddle boats.

She calls the sculpture "Big Pleasure Point," after the name printed on a small fleet of aluminum rowboats in her inventory. Suspended well out of reach, the various pieces will be strung with steel cables to a 28-foot-high, or 8.5-meter-high, steel armature and wired to one another as well, fixed in place by the tension of the cables. Although the piece will frame the fountain at the plaza, Rubins said that having a body of water nearby was not a concern.

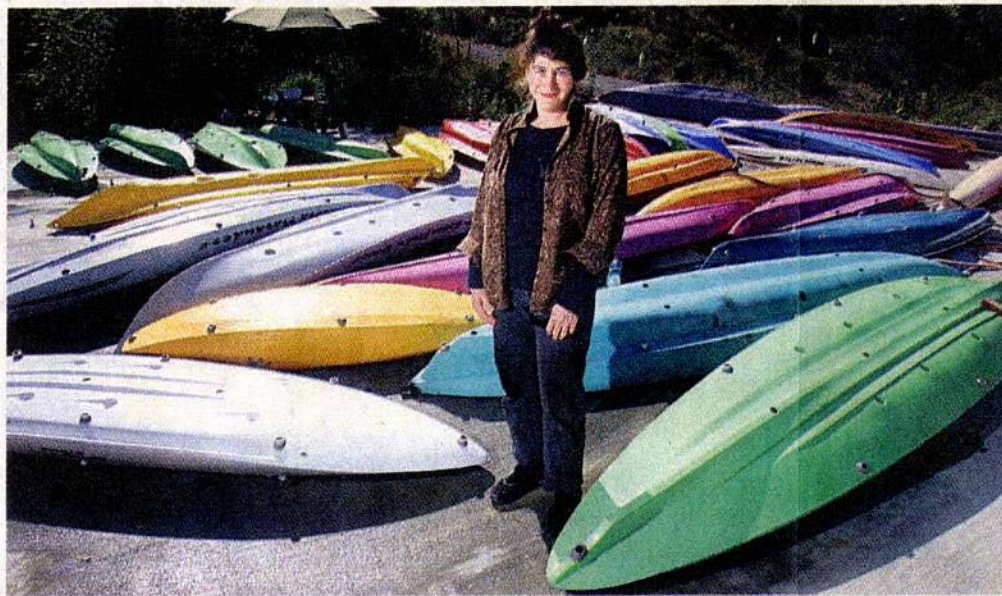
"I don't think of them as boats anymore but as shapes for me to work with," she said. "I want to give them a life and energy beyond their original purpose." She expects the final assemblage to resemble a bouquet from one angle, and she compares her on-the-spot composition process — a yellow boat here, a blue one there — to flower arranging.

Rubins has a long history of using found objects on an epic scale. Her towering, hanging and cantilevered sculptures, made out of everything from a bunch of mattresses to a pile of water heaters, often seem to defy gravity. (Her first public sculpture in New York, a tower of appliances set in concrete at the Battery Park landfill in 1980, defied the artist instead, slumping to the ground before its official debut.)

"She can imagine holding in her hands things that are so big that most of us can hardly hold them in our minds," said Rochelle Steiner of the Public Art Fund, the nonprofit organization working with the project.

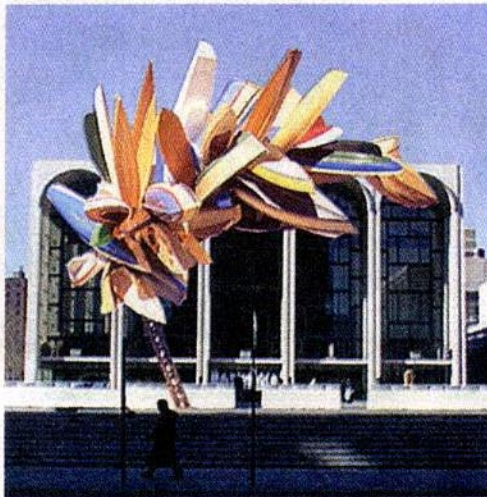
Rubins is perhaps most famously known for building sculptures out of salvaged airplane parts, such as a 1995 installation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that weighed nearly 10,000 pounds, or about 4,500 kilograms. (An even heavier airplane piece is to fill the Sculpture Center in Long Island City, Queens, in September.) This summer, though, the focus is overwhelmingly boats.

"The boats are much more agile and mobile than I thought," she said. "They behave beautifully in the air. And they have the same aerody-



J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times

Nancy Rubins uses old boats, kayaks and surfboards for her sculptures. Below, an illustration of her piece to be installed at New York's Lincoln Center.



Courtesy of Nancy Rubins, Public Art Fund and Lincoln Center

amic shape as some airplane parts."

She talked about the beauty of boats while walking around her property, an orchard she shares with her artist husband, Chris Burden, and three dogs. Her outdoor workplace is a huge concrete pad, big enough to hold a mess of airplane parts or dozens of brightly colored kayaks, surfboards and the like.

Rubins bought most of the vessels from local shops, with an occasional contribution from a neighbor. For durability, she chose aluminum, fiberglass and composites over wood. Several boats arrived with large holes punched in them, branded as unseaworthy or defective. She went on to drill holes of her own as well, at least six holes per boat to run the steel cable and sometimes steel supports through, plus others for rain drainage.

Otherwise she made few alterations. She stripped cushions, washed surfaces and rubbed

on a protective coating to prevent fading.

"I love the colors," she said, nodding toward a few blue and green kayaks. "They are such weird colors, and they tell me something about what I'm accumulating."

She started thinking of boats about seven years ago, she said, when the San Diego Port Authority asked her to propose a sculpture near the city's convention center. Inspired by the idea of a beach community, she drew up a plan for suspending boats over a four-lane road in front of the center. The commission never came to pass, but she couldn't stop thinking about boats, as both vehicles for culture and as pure forms.

"They are the great connectors, connecting one land to another," Rubins said. "And we all have some history with boats, whether our grandparents came over that way or whether we used them as kids."

But most of all she is drawn to their shapes. "The canoe, for example, is such a simple form, an ancient form," she said. "And it's 100 percent figurative, designed around the human figure."

She began talking a couple years ago to the Public Art Fund about doing a large boat sculpture in New York. And last year the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego invited her to do a smaller permanent piece for its waterfront site in La Jolla. She called that piece, which was installed in January, a rehearsal for the Lincoln Center extravaganza.

She began by experimenting with small-scale models made from toys and hobby kits. The models were not meant to be blueprints, but they provided some direction.

"Boats were such a new material for me," she said. "I know how a mattress behaves or a water heater, but I wasn't sure how boats would work



Pablo Mason for the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

Rubins's piece at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego juts from the building "like an explosion."

structurally or aesthetically." She soon latched on to small vessels rather than large boats, because "it's visually more rewarding to have smaller pieces you can cluster. That gives you a multiplicity, complexity and denseness so you can get lost in the piece."

Her pieces are designed to change shape depending on a viewer's vantage point. The sculpture in La Jolla — about 30 boats jutting out from the museum like fingers reaching for the ocean — goes from looking vaguely calm, classical and symmetrical to being rough, uneven and jagged.

"From one view it looks like a rose or peony, a flower with many petals, a still life," said Hugh Davies, director of the museum. "But from the

side it's incredibly aggressive, thrusting out from the building like an explosion."

Everyone involved with the Lincoln Center project is more intent on meeting deadlines than on generating metaphors. It is an ambitious schedule: While the La Jolla sculpture went up over three weeks in January, the installation in New York must be completed within five nights by a crew of eight, plus a crane operator who positions the boats.

"We will have day-for-night lighting, so that's not a problem, but there is the issue of staying awake," Rubins said. "I'm sure the adrenaline will help."

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