

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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ARTS:

# CityCenter's crown jewel

Vivid, boat-centric sculpture in roundabout is complete



STEVE MARCUS

Workers install a sculpture by Nancy Rubins at MGM Mirage's City Center project Thursday.

By **Kristen Peterson**

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Artist Nancy Rubins stands in the middle of the CityCenter construction site — a vast valley of gravel, concrete and machinery surrounded by towering glass architecture.

She secures her hard hat in 50 mph winds and directs crew members who are installing a canoe onto “Big Pleasure Point.”

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More than 200 aluminum boats — canoes, rowboats and flat-bottomed boats — make up the wild bouquet of color and shape juxtaposed against surrounding monochromatic glass buildings. Attached to an armature and to one another, the boats shoot upward and outward and are supported by cantilevers. It looks as if they were tossed into the air and captured in a freeze frame.

Her crew members climb the sculpture as if in trees, connecting the boats, weblike, with steel wires.

There are no blueprints to follow, no sketches to examine, no three-dimensional models to consider. Rubins is essentially flower arranging with more than 200 boats, weighing 60 to 125 pounds.

“You have to put it together in your brain,” she says. “It’s hard to grasp it all at once. But it comes quickly for me.”

Rubins walks the construction site, examining the work from various angles. Wearing red lipstick and dark glasses, she stands out amid the earth-moving machines and dust.

She has made several large sculptures during her career. This is one of her largest, larger even than a similar temporary boat sculpture at Lincoln Center in New York that measured 45 feet high and 55 feet long.

It’s been tested for earthquakes, windloads, weight, snow, sandstorms and flash floods. Holes were drilled for rain drainage.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, looking upward. “What I really love is the stainless steel wires because you’re kind of getting an engineering and physics lesson, and in the light, you see this really beautiful web work.”

It’s hard to believe that 10 years ago the San Diego Convention Center Authority shot down a similar boat sculpture as too controversial to be built with public money. Rubins was upset and outspoken. She was not too surprised, she was quoted as saying at the time, given the unsophistication of San Diego when it comes to art. But this is Las Vegas — the funding is private, the collection is private and so is its location. “Big Pleasure Point” likely will be plastered all over magazines, postcards, the Internet.

It’s not her first boat sculpture. Others have been installed outside the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego and Lincoln Center. A 1,000-pound sculpture of airplane parts stands outside the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles for visitors to contemplate while walking around and under the work. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including in France, Germany and Italy.

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Rubins lives in Topanga Canyon, Calif., and is married to artist Chris Burden. She has created sculptures from water heaters, mattresses and recreational vehicles and considers the materials to be more medium than a message. Boats in the Mojave Desert are not making any kind of point, she says.

“I’m not really a message artist,” she says. “That’s not my job. My job is to make it so people can bring to it whatever they have got going, for the viewer to have their own interpretation.”

The boats, which came from across the United States, some used, have a human scale that Rubins appreciates.

“They’re vehicles for humans. They all refer to us,” she says. “Structurally there is something quite beautiful about them. Everything we make is figurative. I really love the boats that came from the Russian River (in California). They have an essence of the life they’ve led. There’s this odd scarring.”

Industrial silver canoes form the bulk of the sculpture. Slender shoots of color burst out via orange, blue, yellow, black, green and red canoes. The sculpture’s proportions and color composition change, depending on vantage point. A yellow canoe, jutting upward and lit by the sun, looks like a delicate petal.

Rubins has grimaced over the years at references to explosiveness or violence in her work. The piece outside of Los Angeles MOCA, “Chas’ Stainless Steel, Mark Thompson’s Airplane Parts,” was acquired in 2001 and, after the 9/11 attacks, horrified some viewers who thought it looked like a crash.

But standing under that airplane sculpture and then standing under “Big Pleasure Point” at CityCenter, there is the sense not of violence, but of vulnerability and beauty at witnessing gravity-defying, large-scale vehicles and appliances in a new context.

“We’re living in a vulnerable world,” Rubins says when asked about that. “Look at all of these buildings. I always think of my escape route. In hotels I stay on the fourth floor, not the 34th floor.”

Pointing to “Big Pleasure Point,” which is now complete, she says, “nothing is hidden. Everything is exposed. What’s keeping it together is exposed. There is tremendous honesty in that.”