

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Los Angeles Times

Whatever floats Nancy Rubins' boats

The artist, who incorporates small watercraft in her work, steps away from colorful kayaks toward aluminum canoes at Gagosian Gallery.



Nancy Rubins sculpture. (Erich Koyoma, Gagosian Gallery / June 2, 2010)

By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times

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For the last five years, artist Nancy Rubins has been working with boats the way the late Nam June Paik used to work with television sets — using the not-so-raw materials as the main elements of her sculpture.

456 NORTH CAMDEN DRIVE BEVERLY HILLS CA 90210 T. 310.271.9400 F. 310.271.9420

LOSANGELES@GAGOSIAN.COM WWW.GAGOSIAN.COM

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Only in Rubins' case, the resulting sculptures are dynamic in form, as if they might take flight. She strings assorted kayaks, rowboats, canoes and other small water vessels to each other and to an armature with steel cable, so they look like branches scraping the sky.

Her newest sculptures, built over the last two weeks at [Gagosian Beverly Hills for a show opening Thursday night](#), extend so high that her construction crew kept setting off a motion-sensitive fire alarm near the gallery ceiling by mistake.

The work compares to Rubins' [temporary installation four years ago in the plaza of New York's Lincoln Center](#), which was a profusion of bright pinks, greens, yellows and other sunny colors thanks in large part to plastic kayaks. But this time the artist, who is known for using materials such as electrical appliances and airplane parts in the name of sculpture, went minimal in her palette. She decided to work with only aluminum vessels such as canoes.

"I was getting more and more colorful in the work," Rubins said last week, while guiding installation at the gallery. "But instead of going in a painterly direction, I really wanted to do something more sculptural."

She says she likes aluminum because it is industrial but also natural. "It came out of the Earth and carries a certain energy."

The boats carry cultural baggage too. A few canoes still have shiny patches as though their owners kept them in the garage a bit longer than usual. Others have the patina of rugged or reckless use — scuffed on the bottom after being dragged along a riverbed, or dented from hitting rocks.

The artist, who gets her boats from outfitters along the Russian River, likes it that way. "All the marks make me think about time," said Rubins, inspecting a sculpture-in-progress. "We had boats when people were still trying to get from continent to continent to avoid the ice sheets."

Upstairs, a smaller room at Gagosian features photo collages the artist has made with boat images. Downstairs, the north gallery, adjacent to the space with the boats, has large-scale drawings. Completely and vigorously covered with graphite, these works on paper look like metal shards.

Most are recent, but one dates back 35 years to her graduate-student days at UC Davis. "When I was in graduate school, I was trying to figure out if a drawing was of something, or *was* something," she said. "Clay was the first material I worked with, so I think that's also in the work."

The Gagosian show marks the first time that Rubins' boats will be publicly displayed in Los Angeles, but there are others on view within driving distance. She made [an early boat sculpture in 2006 for the La Jolla location of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego](#), still standing, in which the boats jut from the museum toward the ocean. And last year a high-flying cluster of boats went up as part of [Las Vegas' public art plan for CityCenter](#).

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The CityCenter developers "reached out after they saw the Lincoln Center piece," Rubins said. "They loved all the gaudy colors.

calendar@latimes.com

<http://www.jorifinkel.com/twitter>

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