

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Flash Art

New York Tales... Nancy Rubins

Katy Diamond Hamer



Nancy Rubins, Our Friend Fluid Metal, Installation view at Gagosian Gallery, NY. Image courtesy of the gallery, 2014. © Nancy Rubins. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photography by Robert McKeever

Nancy Rubins' exhibition *Our Friend Fluid Metal*, opened to the public July 17th and is on view at the Gagosian Gallery on 21st Street in Manhattan until September 13th, 2014. She is a California based artist.

KATY DIAMOND HAMER: The last time you exhibited in New York was in 2006 (*Big Pleasure Point*) at Lincoln Center sponsored by the Public Art Fund. You made a large outdoor sculpture using canoes. This current body of work is made with discarded playground toys – the kind that children rock back and forth on – what brought you to this material and the biomorphic sculptures currently on view at Gagosian Gallery?

NANCY RUBINS: I've used many different materials to build sculptures over the duration of my career including TV's, household appliances and even larger objects such as mobile homes and airplane parts. For several years, I've worked with monochrome objects, specifically boats. After being scraped by rocks and other materials their appearance has been altered and a particular sense of history is revealed in the patina of the surface.

After the installation at Lincoln Center, each sculpture became increasingly painterly and I worked monochromatically for many years. I came across the cast animals I'm currently working with from a supplier who knows I work with metals. They are most likely from the 1940s, 50s and 60s.

KDH: So they were used in playgrounds?

NR: Yes, they've all been used. These objects reignited my interest in color. Through these unique shapes I started thinking about [Willem] de Kooning and early works by [Philip] Guston. The playground animals, or doodads as I like to call them, become squiggles and marks of color as they knock into each other. That being said, I've come to look at these new sculptures as paintings. I remember as a young child looking at certain paintings and in my imagination they had huge depth. I see my work as resolving that depth.

Years earlier I worked with a supplier in the Mojave Desert who had airplane parts from World War II. When I first met him, he showed me a picture of himself from an issue of National Geographic, with his smelter and fleets of planes. Fast forward to today and in my contemplation of this particular aluminum (animal casts), I came to realize it is very likely, they were repurposed from World War II planes. Playgrounds were made to satisfy the next generation, the children who were born as a result of soldiers coming home after the war. The title of the show, *Our Friend Fluid Metal*, emerged from this contemplation.

KDH: That makes sense. I love how you talk about the sculptures concerning abstract painting. Maybe you can talk a little bit more about that? I also look at the work of John Chamberlain as dimensional painting.

NR: Absolutely. I have much respect for John Chamberlain's work but it's not necessarily where my thought process comes from. Chamberlain was about compression and this is compression, contention and then...

KDH: Expansion.

NR: Exactly. I've often felt more of a relationship to the work of Kenneth Snelson (b. 1927) and *Tensegrity* (tensional integrity or floating compression) since what I'm making is held together by tension. This piece, (pointing to the largest work in the gallery, which extends from a wall and floats half the length of the interior) has a cable throughout it like a bridge, that is held together with tension at the back of the wall. We have an engineer who comes and is able to create just the right balance for suspension.

KDH: Thinking about tension and precariousness, it could be said that a certain amount of life is installed in this show, a malleability if you will, in the physical interaction with space, air and gravity.

NR: Throughout my practice, much of the work has been built in such a way that it can be taken apart and reassembled in another situation. Each time a sculpture is reinstalled there can be variants of how it is configured. Years ago I saw a Russian Constructivist painting show in Montreal where I was giving a talk at a university. There was a piece on view, I don't even remember who made it, that was in a vitrine, all globs of brightly colored ceramic stripes. Also nearby were a series of photographs taken over time, from when it was originally made, after it was in storage, broke and was glued back together and then a second time it broke and was reassembled. Each time the piece changed and yet was still the same sculpture. This made me think about sculpture and realize that it is not static. Nothing is static, even a table has minuscule atoms jumping around which contribute to it being a physical object.

KDH: Your work seems to be much more about materiality than the nostalgia people might

project or associate with the objects.

NR: Nostalgia doesn't interest me. When people grind up minerals to make paint there is history in that but we don't necessarily connect to it through nostalgia. People will always project, we can't stop that, I can only talk about how I approach each body of work and the joy in the discovery of how they function.

KDH: What is the process that you need to go through to determine the intricate balance and weight of the individual material to arrive at the final sculpture?

NR: I make a balsa wood model to show my engineer how I want the sculpture to work in space. We work together to figure out how many individual objects I want to work with and then he crunches numbers to see what is necessary for the sculptures to be made and withstand any natural elements. All the sculptures can be exhibited indoors or outdoors. At a certain point I came to understand the materials well including the strength of each cable (used to hold the work together) and how much weight it can bear. I work extensively with a crew that I adore.

KDH: The way your sculptures function in space, you almost wouldn't equate them with weight.

NR: They are all quite dense. That piece (motioning to a large sculpture in the gallery) is 10 tons or 20,000 pounds. The counter weight is 36,000 pounds or 18 tons so we're looking at 28 tons total.

KDH: Incredible. Do you see your work as having a relationship to other artists who have come out of California or are California based? As an example, looking at the body of work in *Our Friend Fluid Metal* I'm thinking of Jason Rhoades. Even though there is a materiality difference, your work has an explosive nature that I've also felt walking into one of his installations; a dispersion of shapes and color.

NR: That's interesting, what I like about California is the space and the sense of time. Everything is at a distance. In contrast to New York where I run into friends on almost every corner in Chelsea, LA has miles in between things and I can make a mess and no one complains because no one sees it.

KDH: Can you talk a bit about the wires and how they are used to combine multiple objects into one sculptural conglomerate?

NR: Each cable is form fit, stainless steel that is made specifically for each sculpture. I tend to think of the negative shapes inform the viewer and offer a way to enter the work unexpectedly. Bunkminster Fuller (1895-1983) described it best when he coined the term Tensegrity to describe a specific tension used to hold things in place. As a whole, I like thinking of the work in comparison to a sculpture, a painting and a grotto. There is space you can walk underneath and observe, as tendrils poke out, and contemplate the strangeness.