

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

NEWS & RECORD

Sculptor Nancy Rubins goes big with her work at Weatherspoon

Dawn Decwikiel-Kane



Courtesy of Heather Moore. Installation of Nancy Rubins' "Drawings & Hot Water Heaters", 1991-95, hot water heaters, black tie-wire cable and graphite pencil on paper at Weatherspoon Art Museum

GREENSBORO — Check out the towering installation in UNCG's Weatherspoon Art Museum, and one reaction comes to mind.

Whoa.

A pile of 18 old, empty hot water heaters, secured with tie-wire cable, rises 9 feet toward the gallery ceiling.

Draped across the top are sheets of what, at a distance, look like dark metal. It's paper, covered with layers of graphite pencil markings.

It might look haphazard. But it has been carefully designed and arranged by renowned California sculptor Nancy Rubins.

"Drawings & Hot Water Heaters" is the central piece in "Nancy Rubins: Drawing, Sculpture, Studies," an exhibition that opens after a talk on Friday by the artist herself.

Two years in the making, the exhibition and its 168-page catalog of Rubins' work make it among the largest projects that the Weatherspoon Art Museum has undertaken.

Rubins, 61, has gained international fame for her massive sculptures constructed from appliances, airplane parts, boats, trailers, televisions, hot water heaters, even mattresses rolled together with cakes.

“I have really been interested in putting materials together that are not really meant to be together,” Rubins said.

Weatherspoon director Nancy Doll calls it “among the smartest, most adventurous and provocative art of the last 20 years.”

Since 2005, a Rubins’ sculpture has made a permanent home in Greensboro.

A piece constructed of old airplane parts towers above the wooded yard at the home of Jane and Richard Levy, on Granville Road at West Cornwallis Drive.

Pull onto Granville Road, and it can be seen from the street — about 3,000 pounds, measuring 37 feet long by 18 feet high, cantilevered from one side, its parts held in place with stainless-steel wire.

Some visitors like it, some don’t, Richard Levy said. The Levys love it.

“It’s quite extraordinary at night when it’s lit up,” Richard Levy said.

Doll first saw a major Rubins’ piece in 1992, in the “Helter Skelter” show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The installation of trailers and hot water heaters was “the most ambitious piece in the entire show,” Doll said.

A few years ago, Doll and Weatherspoon curator of exhibitions Xandra Eden wanted to show the work of a female artist who they thought hadn’t received due attention. They thought of Rubins.

They wanted to show the relationship between Rubins’ drawings and her sculpture.

One of her graphite drawings displayed on the Weatherspoon gallery wall measures about 32 feet.

“In her sculptures, she cantilevers and floats these full-size boats and chunks of airplanes in space, so these heavy objects look like they are flying,” Doll said. “There is a paradox between how heavy they are and how light and buoyant they appear.”

“The drawings are opposite,” Doll added. “She applies graphite over and over to the point where they look like sheets of lead. So paper that is light looks so much heavier.”

* * *

Last week, Rubins came from her Topanga, Calif., home to the Weatherspoon, where her assistant Colin Cook and a museum crew installed “Drawings & Hot Water Heaters.”

The gallery also will display five studies or models that she created for other projects, five collages, 12 graphite drawings on paper and three bronzes.

Most have been borrowed from famous museums, galleries and collectors. “Drawings & Hot Water Heaters” came from the renowned collection of Martin Z. Margulies in Miami, Fla.

One study is a small-scale version of a work of aluminum boats, installed outside the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, N.Y. Another shows the boat sculpture that cantilevers from the roof of the La Jolla location of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

Parts for her art are not difficult to find, Rubins said.

“Hot water heaters all go somewhere when they’re not working anymore,” she said. “So I find those places where they go. You go to plumbers and make friends with them. For airplane parts, you find places that recycle airplanes. It took about three years to find the guy who sold me airplane parts. He was in the Mojave Desert.”

Rubins said she first used multiple appliances in her art in 1976, after finishing graduate school at the University of California, Davis.

Her friends scouted Goodwill and Salvation Army stores for clothing, but Rubins found a console television for 25 cents.

She collected nearly 300 TVs for a planned sculpture for her building’s roof. But her landlord nixed the idea.

So she made a smaller piece in her studio, one in which she packed concrete around an assemblage of TVs and painted it fluorescent orange.

She didn’t like it. But it led to her creating other, more satisfying works.

Rubins often creates a study or model first. She works with an engineer to ensure that towering sculptures will hold up safely.

“You need an engineer if you are going to be cantilevering over people’s heads in public places,” she said.

She began working with hot water heaters in 1988, while installing a work of mobile home and appliance parts in Pittsburgh.

Her helpers there collected appliances, including a couple of hot water heaters.

“I thought, ‘Those hot water heaters are so heavy and so ugly, what am I going to do with them?’” Rubins recalled.

“We put them up in the sculpture, and when they got up in the air, they were great. They really worked in a way I never expected.

“A lot of what I do as an artist is experimentation,” Rubins said. “And a lot of things are happy failures.

“The happy failure is something that you are able to risk failure and feel comfortable risking failure, and finding something that is better than you can ever imagine finding in a planned success.”