

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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VOICE

▼ Art

War Animals

Nancy Rubins goes
once more unto
the playground

BY JESSICA DAWSON

You can hardly pass a toy store these days without thinking of Jeff Koons. Mr. Porcelain Smile has so deeply incorporated children's playthings into his massive Whitney survey — those riffs on inflatable bunnies and dolphins; that storied balloon dog — that, for an art-aware New Yorker, a trip to FAO Schwarz now brings Koons to mind. (Let's not even mention *Split-Rocker*, which presides over Rockefeller Center like a gargantuan testament to toddlerhood.)

All of which means that when you enter Nancy Rubins's Gagosian exhibition, where each monumental work is made from found playground animals, you'll hear echoes of Koons — “King Toys R Us,” himself.

Lucky for Rubins, the resulting compare-and-contrast tilts resoundingly in her favor. A quick peek into Rubins's show and you might assume Koons had her beat — his balloon dogs outshine her scrap animals, some a bit worse for the wear, culled from postwar American playgrounds. But time spent looking at Rubins's eccentric assemblages and their remarkable engineering will reward in ways that a Koons cannot.

Koons and Rubins are around the same age, and both passed through undergrad at Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art. Koons, class of '76, became a bauble-maker for the wealthy. Rubins, class of '74, is less well-known (well, compared to Koons) and her large-scale works are not as well manicured. Born in Texas and now based in California, she's been in the Venice and Whitney biennials and is collected by many museums. Past works, many massive, brought together airplane parts or boats that Rubins tethered with metal wire, as she does here, to make bulky, unwieldy objects.

The Gagosian show is called “Our Friend Fluid Metal,” but the four works on view are brutish and imposing. To make them, Rubins collected hundreds of postwar-era, aluminum playground animals, the kinds with springy bases that always seem to be

rusting. There are ducks, skunks, hippos and eagles; horses (of course); and at least one turtle. (A motorcycle and spaceship are thrown in, too.) Rubins drilled holes in eyes, snouts, and knees and laced stainless-steel cables through and around them; tethering hooves and necks to other hooves and necks — some upside down, others sideways, and still others right side up. Most are contained within the confines of the wire as if caught in an enormous spiderweb.

The resulting sculptures are massive, the size (seemingly) of space debris. The largest stretches out 42 feet long and 24 feet wide. From a certain angle, its form echoes the images of that barbell-shaped comet the Rosetta space probe is studying. That the work appears to defy gravity makes the outer space metaphor all the more fitting. The piece is orbited by a trio of smaller satellite sculptures anchored to steel bases. In and of themselves, that threesome — with goofy names like *Chunkus Majoris* and *Spiral Ragusso* — is most interesting when considered as studies for their massive cousin. They also lend it a much-deserved audience.

For the major work, Rubins installed the animals around a system of compound steel trusses that cantilever out from the wall. The thing weighs 20 tons, and you can walk under it if you like. But the prospect is daunting, in the way a Richard Serra torqued ellipse pricks up your neck



Courtesy of the artist/Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Erich Koyama

Pilots flew them, then children rode them. Now they're hanging on a wall.

hairs. At the artwork's lowest point, a pink horse head seemingly skirts the floor. The sensation is controlled catastrophe.

Rubins chose these decommissioned playthings for their unusual provenance. After World War II, retired airplanes were sometimes melted and cast into animals like these. In one way, their path traces American aspiration: Fight the battle so the kids can grow up safe. But to see instruments of war find new life in public parks also speaks to an abrupt about-face; the transition from wartime to peacetime is never so clear-cut. But the intersection of war and innocence, like that of restraint and chaos, is a place Rubins likes to travel.

Nancy Rubins: Our Friend Fluid Metal

Gagosian Gallery
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