

GAGOSIAN

**Border Crossings
Spring, 2018**

BORDER CROSSINGS



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ISSUE NO. 145 \$9.95



The Fitter

An Interview with Nancy Rubins

by Robert Enright





In July of 2014 the American artist Nancy Rubins opened an exhibition of sculptures at Gagosian in New York with the name “Our Friend Fluid Metal.” The naming was accurate because in an art practice now spanning over four decades, she has been able to get by with a little help from a lot of her friends, which have included small appliances, television consoles, mattresses, playground animals, airplane parts, canoes, sailboats and kayaks, various kinds of cake and dense layers of graphite. Her material friendship has allowed her to find that “little speck of territory that nobody has really looked at before,” which is how she defines “originality,” a quality she seeks out. Her practice has never been predictable, and the large-scale sculptures and drawings that have emerged from it have captivated and vexed viewers from the beginning.

Rubins already had a significant reputation when she included *Trailers and Hot Water Heaters*, 1992, in “Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s,” the controversial exhibition that marked Paul Schimmel’s debut as chief curator at LA’s Museum of Contemporary Art. The components of her monumental sculpture—dozens of tubular water heaters and a jumble of campers and trailers—made clear that she was intimidated by neither number nor scale; she referred to mobile homes as “swollen appliances” and incorporated them as effortlessly into her large sculptures as she had toasters and vacuum cleaners into her smaller ones.

Her practice has been a carnival of objects, aggregations of things that she has combined in ways that are as surprising as they seem inevitable. Her explanation of what she does is straightforward. “It’s in the fit,” she says, “you find how certain elements work together and fit together in a way that they need to.” Her skill at this kind of fitting assemblage is unequalled among contemporary sculptors.

Hers has always been assemblage of a different order and scale. It has reached an apotheosis in the four sculptures on exhibition in “Diversifolia” at Gagosian in London from early February to mid-April 2018, her first solo show in that city. The sculptures, which are improbably beautiful, are uber-baroque—a profusion of crocodile tails, deer antlers, hog tusks and cloven hooves, all held in a delicate balance by tension wires that operate like drawn lines. (Somewhere in these works is a refinement of David Smith’s recognition that sculpture is “drawing in space.”) The animals are yet another collaboration with her metallic friends; the menagerie includes giraffes, crocodiles, wolves, tortoises, storks and zebras, cast in bronze, iron, brass or aluminum. Individually, the animals retain a sense of their original integrity, but when a group of them are conjoined they read as abstractions. Altogether, the sculptures should be overwhelmed by the quantity and weight of their materiality, but the opposite happens: they reach out and up into a turbulent and weightless airiness.

Rubins has done this before; in a work like *Table & Airplane Parts*, 2005, she constructed a sculpture that is as much about line as mass. (In this area she matches the liquid line that Lee

Bontecou achieved in her suspended sculptures.) Rubins is aware of the rhythm created by compression and expansion in making a sculpture; in comparing the way John Chamberlain uses compression with her own practice, she says, “His work is much more pulled in and my work is going out in certain directions.”

In a sculpture like *Table & Airplane Parts*, she still employs compression as a structural principle, but the look of the piece is visually liberating; rather than exuding a feeling of gravity, the sculpture looks as if it could float away. She admires Alexander Calder for “a certain sense of lumbering grace.” In her own best work, Rubins approximates something closer to a certain sense of luminescent grace.

When asked how she knows a piece is finished, her response is characteristically direct and guileless. “You don’t know, but you do. I know that in my imagination the pieces could keep going and going and going.” They may do that in her imagination, but that’s also exactly what the work is doing in reality. Nancy Rubins shows no signs of not keeping going. She is infinitely inventive, and her work continues its surprising and delightful performance. Her engagement, as she says, is simply a calling.

The following interview was conducted by phone to Nancy Rubins’s studio in Topanga Canyon, California, on February 20, 2018.

BORDER CROSSINGS: I’m interested in how anyone becomes an artist. Was there anything in your upbringing that would have made that a sensible choice?

NANCY RUBINS: I don’t know if “sensible choice” is ever in the same sentence as choosing to be an artist. But I grew up around people who encouraged creative thinking and I always loved making things. I wasn’t a particularly good student, but my folks encouraged me to do what I was good at and that was making things and exploring ways to articulate my imagination. So, was it a sensible choice? I think art isn’t a choice; it’s a calling.

Your father was a scientist. What did he do?

He was an aerospace scientist who was doing research on the supersonic combustion engine, which is what they called it at that time. I think presently it is called the hypersonic combustion engine.

You have said that he was more interested in process than in product, and I wonder if some of that has rubbed off on you in your notion of seat-of-the-pants engineering.

It’s not always seat-of-the-pants because I often bring in proper engineers. But, yes, I do think that my dad’s curiosity to explore what was before him did rub off.

You do drawings or maquettes, don’t you?

I’ve learned how. When I was very young I had no clue why people made models. As I got older and needed to have a conversation



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Nancy Rubins, *Crocodylius Philodendrus*, 2016–17, cast iron, brass, bronze, aluminum, stainless steel armature and stainless steel wire cable, 170.5 x 216 x 192.5 inches. © Nancy Rubins. All images courtesy the artist and Gagosian. Photo: Brian Guido.

1. *Another Kind of Growth*, 1988, trailers, large appliances and steel, approximate height 30 feet. Installation at the Three Rivers Festival, Pittsburgh, PA. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Howard P Nuernberger.
2. *Trailers and Water Heaters*, 1992, trailers, hot-water heaters, steel and steel wire, approximately 65 x 35 feet. Installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Chris Burden.

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Mattresses and Cakes, 1993, cakes, mattresses, steel and steel wire, 23 x 18 x 18 feet. © Nancy Rubins. Courtesy Kunstverein Lingen.

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1. *Drawings & Hot Water Heaters*, 1991–95, hot-water heaters, black tie-wire cable and graphite pencil on paper, 18 x 11 x 10 feet. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Michael Tropea.

2. *Drawing*, 1975/2010, graphite on paper, 152 x 124 inches. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Erich Koyama.

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Monochrome for Paris, 2012, aluminum boats, stainless steel armature, stainless steel wire cable, 228 x 408 x 432 inches. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Erich Koyama.



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with other people about how the sculpture would work in space, I learned the use of models. I think the first time I made one that was really useful was when I built the piece that cantilevers off the building at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego. It was originally Mrs Scripps's house in La Jolla. My assistant and I had never really worked with these elements before, and we built a steel structure for our use and then pretended that our hands were cranes. We made the model to a certain scale—the scale I am stuck with, which is one and a half inches equal a foot—and it worked beautifully. It was also the first time that we used an actual crane. We were both rather stunned that our pretend hand crane and the way the elements were placed in the work were pretty close to what happened.

You do that piece in 1994 called *Airplane Parts & Building, A Large Growth for San Diego*, and it is a very specific kind of site-specificity because it does cantilever off the building. Does that make it different from other of your pieces that are free-standing and not tied to architecture?

I built two pieces for San Diego that related to buildings. One was *Airplane Parts & Building* in 1994 and then *Pleasure Point* in 2006. Actually, there have been a lot of pieces that have played off buildings: the piece in "Helter Skelter" with the trailers and hot-water heaters used the building as part of the armature for the sculpture, or *MoMA and Plane Parts* (1995) or *Table & Airplane Parts* (1994) that used the table like a building. So the sculptures have responded to the environment they were built in for a long time.

You have said that you never undo anything. Once you've made a decision, that's the one you're going to go with?
Occasionally I'll change something but it is rare.

Why did you choose Maryland to do your undergraduate degree?

I spent my first two years in college in Nashville at Peabody College, which had a pretty strong art program. It was a nice, small school, but then it shifted its focus, the art program started changing and they let go some of the more interesting professors. I had heard that the school in Baltimore had a really terrific ceramic department and a good relationship with New York in that a lot of the artists who taught there were New Yorkers who would take the train in. So I transferred up there.

Did you go there because you wanted to work with clay?

Initially that is why I went there, and then I learned that Salvatore Scarpitta was teaching painting and I became a painting major so that I could work with him. My two focuses of interest were these paintings, which were actually three-dimensional things, and the clay. But I wasn't really a ceramic artist because I didn't fire anything. I was just using clay to make sculptures.

One of your attractions to clay as a material was generated by your interest in the physics of collapse and integrity. What was it about that notion that was so interesting to you?

I loved clay because as a material it was incredibly generous and forgiving and flexible and available and economic. Basically, it was free. If you made something that was not very good, you could throw it back into the slip bucket and use it again. So, for me, it was a wonderful tool of transience and a marvellous tool to learn by. It was a great way for me to figure out the three-dimensional world but not have the problem of making more junk that needed to be thrown away.

In the history of sculpture the question of the base or the pedestal is a critical one. In your early work you solved the base problem because when your material collapsed and fell to the floor, it established your base. What emerges is an accidental aesthetic and system of problem solving.

It's true. In those early cement wall pieces with appliances, or the *Big Urn* (1978), that indeed was what happened.

When did you first discover Robert Arneson and the ceramic funk tradition?

When I was at Baltimore, really interesting artists from the West Coast were brought in to give talks, including a lot of funk artists from northern California. Arneson was one of them; so was Wayne Thiebaud; Bob Hudson and Jim Shaw were a team at that time; Clayton Bailey, the ceramicist, came out and spoke to us; so did the painter Roy de Forest. It was interesting because the students of my generation went to New York and that was what I was being educated to do. I was pretty young and relatively immature even for my age and I wasn't ready to take on New York at that point in my life. So I figured that going to graduate school in California would be a good thing to do. I'd never been there and I was curious to see what northern California had to offer. It turned out that I was lucky enough to get accepted into that program. They had a different approach to pop. I really loved the intimacy of Oldenburg's early plaster work, and then he took the hand out of it. It was also the hand that I liked in Arneson's work. It was an odd bridge of painting and cartoon and sculpture, and there was a real humanism to it that was interesting to me. He was a marvellous person to work with and very generous when he worked with younger students.

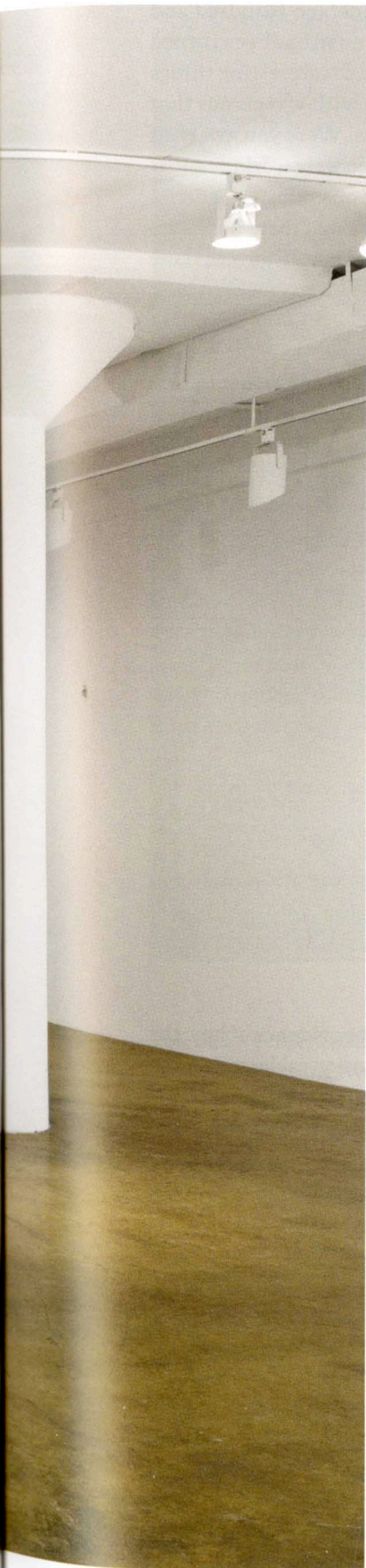
But you never really fired anything, did you? You and the kiln were strangers.

I fired a couple of things. I have a raku piece and I made one mug.

When I look at those tall concrete sculptures you made, I would have thought that an artist like Peter Voulkos would have made more sense to you than Arneson, especially with your idea of "trowelling up the expanded metal with your







hands.” That’s more of a Voulkos gesture than an Arneson one.

I was aware of Voulkos’s work but I wasn’t really thinking of either of them at that point. I was just making my own work. I was living in a cast concrete building, and when a big earthquake went through, I saw how flexible the building was. That experience embraced huge contradictions; this rigid, static, concrete building, under the right circumstances, behaved like a wave. As a result I became fascinated by cement. I started trowelling with my hands onto this expanded metal and I trowelled it on to a plywood wall. So on one side you would see the residue of the plywood wall and on the other side you saw the momentary gestures of the hand trowelling the cement up the expanded metal. The walls were about a quarter of an inch thick, maybe three-quarters of an inch at the thickest. As you said, all the stuff would fall to the base and make the anchor, so it was slightly heavier at the bottom. I could push these things and they would waver back and forth and not crack. I really loved this odd and elegant contradiction that was embraced in the work, which was this great flexibility with a material that I had understood to be brittle and rigid.

Those visiting artists in Baltimore and the faculty at UC Davis weren’t from New York. Was there already in your mind an idea emerging that there was something that was West Coast as opposed to what was New York and that it was an altogether different aesthetic?

I knew it was a different environment and that was interesting to me. I liked the spaciousness, and because of the distance there was a sense of time that was more conducive to my being able to work. I did live in New York for a few years right after living in the Bay Area and I really loved it. It seemed to me that the city was an integral part of being an artist. However, because I like to work with stuff, I never had enough room, and neither could I afford enough room, to put in all the stuff I had. I wouldn’t mind living in New York if I could have the kind of space and quiet that I need.

When did you first realize that TVs could be material for sculpture?

I had just gotten out of graduate school, I was waitressing and I also had a job teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. I was anxious about paying rent and taking care of myself when I got out of



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school, so I didn’t have any time in the studio. But on my days off I would sometimes go with friends who liked to get clothes at Goodwill—hipster, hippie clothes. I didn’t like wearing other people’s clothes but I’d go along and look at stuff, and I was impressed that in the As Is Department you could get a big, old, colour console television for 25 cents. In the early ’60s people paid a lot for them, and they took up a lot of room in the house. I was impressed that I was buying items that didn’t work particularly well, or at all, but they would sell for 25 cents. I was getting good material; I was getting good bang for my buck. So I collected a massive quantity of these things, close to 300 of them, and my intent was to build a sculpture on my roof. The sculpture was to silhouette the skyline so that when you stood at a certain place, it would completely block it out.

When I look at a piece like *Big Orange* (1976), except for the Day-Glo paint, I think of Louise Nevelson.

Yes, and I realized that was not the direction in which I wanted to go. I saw the work I was doing as problematic in that way. I realized that even if I turned the TVs upside-down, packed them with cement and painted them fluorescent orange, they were still TVs. They didn’t really transcend their TV-ness. My landlord wouldn’t let me build the piece

on the roof, so I ended up building with only a small number of the televisions. That's when I realized I wanted to get rid of the object. As a result I never worked with those TVs again and I started making those very thin cement walls.

But then you end up using smaller objects in your sculptures?

Yes. I was in Richmond, Virginia, doing a waitressing job and I ended up in the Goodwill again, looking around. That's when I started seeing these smaller electrical appliances that somehow seemed like they might work for me because their scale was sized down and they were irregular sizes—you know, a hair dryer, a toaster, a vacuum, an iron, a hair curler. Everything about the shapes and colours and buttons was different, and they were small enough that they could become diffuse little blobs of abstract colour. I could find a way that they could become an abstraction, which I was never able to do with the TVs. I was choosing them structurally, the way people build rock walls and they pick a rock that fits better: that place needs an iron rather than a particular colour. It worked like that.

The other artist who comes to mind when I look at some of your early work, like the *Green Roses* (1973) slumped in the corner, is Lynda Benglis.

I wasn't conscious of her work until later, but certainly that sensibility was in the air.

What about Nam June Paik? He's using television as early as 1963, and by 1964 he's living in New York. His are sculptural installations but the television was a major component in his work.

And also in 1975 Ant Farm made the video *Media Burn*, where they drove through a wall of flaming TVs. All those reasons made me realize why I shouldn't muck anymore with those items. It was like being a scientist where you wanted to find a little speck of territory that nobody had looked at before.

What about Arman and his *Accumulations* and his *poubelles*—his trash bins—which are terms he coins in the late '50s and early '60s? Were you aware of his work when you were coming out of graduate school?

I became aware of his work only in 1980 when I met him.

When you began to use the playground animals, you said so much had been done with them that you didn't know where to go. Did you have a sense that their aesthetic utility had been used up?

I meant that so much had been done with pop cartoon culture. I let them sit for a bit while I accumulated a lot of them. When I had enough to feel comfortable mucking about, I started figuring out the best and most useful approach.

There is a great line in WB Yeats's "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" where he laments that "no cannon had been turned into a ploughshare." Of course, one of the interesting things about your sculpture is that you work with warplanes that had been turned into carousel animals. Were you aware of the transformative nature of the stuff you were working with? I am super-aware of that but it's not just one transformation. I recently produced a body of work and I realized these things are probably made out of things that have been transformed quite a few times. Aluminum, for example, is less expensive to melt down than to mine.

How much does the object-integrity of the component parts matter? If you place a duck or a turtle, does it matter that its initial formation gets preserved, or does it become part of the overall composition?

Its initial integrity is important to the extent that it's structurally sound and that it comes with whatever it comes with. Then, at some point, it changes into something else. Now, what that is, I couldn't tell you, but there is a transformation and it does become something else. It's in the fit; you find how certain elements work together and fit together in a way that they need to.

The complexity and compression that your drawings embody are quite extraordinary. You can handle the compression if you choose to.

Well, that's what tensegrity is: it's compression with tension, and that's what holds those works together.

How much does visual rhythm matter to you and how do you go about orchestrating it?

It is probably something that matters a lot, but it's not something that I approach in a conscious way.

Did you decide that there would always be evidence of how the work was made, so that your welds and tension cables are always visible? That's almost a Pre-Raphaelite idea. William Morris argued there was beauty in the visibility of how something functioned.

I never thought of it that way, but I love the making of something being exposed because you see how it comes together in time and you're also getting a math or a physics education as you look at that thing.

I want to pick up on the question of rhythm, because one sculptor who found ways to get rhythm through a sense of equilibrium was Alexander Calder. Was he interesting to you?

I've always loved seeing Calder's work, but is he someone I think about consciously? No. But I do love those great dense plates floating above one's head and the sense of lumbering grace in his work.



You had a remarkable sense of scale almost from the get-go. Where did it come from?

Scale became important to me when I saw all the stuff I had. The material gave me the idea that it was ridiculous to make the work in any scale other than huge because I was stunned by the quantity that I could amass. It overwhelmed me and I needed to be able to articulate that in the work.

Artists working in large scale are people like Mark di Suvero, who was at Santa Barbara in the mid '50s, and, of course, Richard Serra. You must have been aware of what they were doing.

Oh, sure. That's the marvellous thing that artists do. They open up doors for each other. They can say, "Look, if I can go through here, you can go through there."

You start drawing at UC Davis early on. Were they dense and visceral right from the start?

Yes, they were. I started drawing when I was in Nashville in my first two years in college, and at that time you did figure drawing. We drew the figure all day, every day, for hours and hours. You did it very fast, you did it very slow, you drew, drew, drew, drew. And I developed a certain confidence. Before going to graduate school I spent the summer waitressing in a community in California called Morro Bay where there was a large volcanic hill. It was a mound in the ocean that had been a volcanic eruption eons ago. It was a boring job, and I would stare at that thing a lot. I had a sketchbook and I would make these very dense little enigmatic drawings, and I thought that when I got to graduate school I would build whatever it was that was enigmatic about that old volcanic mound. When I got to graduate school I made these sculptures out of adobe clay and cement and straw. I had never seen adobe before so this was my own version, and they ended up being quite a bit heavier than I had intended. They crushed the wheels I built them on, I threw out my back and they were kind of terrible. So I had to rethink this enigmatic blob that I

was trying to build sculptures of. I started making what had been three-inch drawings into larger and larger drawings, and they became these very dense things on paper. What I found was that I was basically building up layers of nothing, but it seemed like I was making this very dense and deep space. I loved making them, but they weren't a puddle on the ground, or a picture of something, and I didn't know what to do with them. So I started hanging them over things, like a rope or a sawhorse. It seemed like they somehow needed to be three-dimensional. I wasn't so sure about the rope and sawhorse, but I knew the material itself was interesting. So I decided to start making what I considered to be a conventional sculptor's drawing and sketches for ideas of sculpture and then drawings of completed sculptures as a documentary tool. They were like a still life drawing using the sculpture as a model.

It is interesting how quickly you realized that the drawings could become component parts of a sculpture. You already seemed to be thinking about them in three dimensions.

But I didn't see them and I still don't see them as component parts of a sculpture. I see them as drawings. I'm just pushing the edge of the nature of what a drawing is.

Your description of drawing is wonderful; I think you call them "batteries containing and storing the energy of their production." Is that the way they feel to you? When you look at them, do they bring back the electric, visceral method of their making?

I definitely see them as a storage place for a certain energy and for a certain time. Years ago I was in Vienna for a group show of Los Angeles artists, and a curator at the Albertina Museum took me into this storage place and showed me these fabulous Dürer drawings: the bunny rabbit, the hands, the chunk of earth. It was amazing to see them because here was this thing that was made in 1512, or whenever it was, and the hands looked like they were still praying; the bunny is still ready to hop; the chunk of earth is alive. It was stunning to see that. Then the curator pulled out another drawing that was the subject of debate among art historians as to whether it was a true Dürer by one of his students, or a fake. You look at it and you immediately know that it's not a Dürer. You can see the difference. With Dürer the bunny is still alive and the weeds are still growing and everything is still moving in space. There is an energy. There was no boundary on those elements; all those lines were just going out there. On this chunk of earth that I am positive wasn't of his hand, there was a containment line around it, like when you make a cartoon of something, and then it was shadowed and drawn inside. That was the exact opposite of what Dürer was doing.

Are your large drawings pieced together?

The paper is a very high-quality Arches rag paper that I get in thirty-foot rolls, and then I can use archival glue to seam that together and make larger pieces. I draw on the floor and then when it is complete I push-pin it to the wall.

The drawing that is in MoCA LA's collection from 1996 is an example of a remarkable kind of compression and complexity. Would you work for hours and hours on the application of the graphite?

Yeah, I work over a long period of time, and I'll work for a short period of time each day, turn on the radio, listen to jazz, and for an hour or two or three, whatever feels comfortable, and then I'll go back the next day. So it's a buildup, it's an accumulation, and once I'm satisfied with the drawing it goes right on the wall.

You have a drawing that you started in 1975 that carries a completion date 30 years later.

That particular drawing was one I made in graduate school, and a friend who is an art conservator at UC Davis saved it for me and then 30 years later sent it back, and I redrew it and made it into a new drawing.

How do you see your drawings in relation to Richard Serra? I know early on you expressed your admiration for what you called "the thin Richard Serra's."

His drawings are beautiful but are such a different animal. I don't think of them in relation to my drawings. Richard is building these exquisite walls with those drawings; he is making these thin, flat forms on the paper. The way the material rests on the paper is like a sculpture, or like his sculptures. Even though I'm doing layers of graphite, what you're seeing is this odd depth because of the layers building up.

How do you know when a drawing is finished or how do you know when any one of your works is finished?

That's a good question, and you don't know, but you do. I know that in my imagination the pieces could keep going and going and going.

Have you always been on the lookout for new material? When you start using the airplane parts, that opens up a whole set of possibilities; the same thing happens with mattresses and canoes. Is the world just this potential material studio for you?

It could be. I look for stuff and then I don't look for stuff. When I see things that are interesting to me, I go back and I look at them again and again. I often think about things a long time before I start using them.



Pleasure Point, 2006, stainless steel, aluminum and fiberglass boats, dimensions variable. Installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Erich Koyama.

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Agrifolia Major, 2017, cast aluminum, brass, bronze, stainless steel armature and stainless steel wire cable, 171 x 249 x 264 inches. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Joel Searles.

Was there a eureka moment for you with the airplane parts when you got together with Mr Huffman that this material could work?

I'd been looking for someone willing to sell me airplane parts for three or four years before I met Mr Huffman. It took me that much time to find him. I was looking at parts in the Mojave where a lot of stuff is Air Force, and they would say, "Yeah, you can have that but in three years," or, "We're going to hold on to that." Finally, someone pointed me in the direction of Mr Huffman.

When I saw the animals you are using in your sculptures, I was put in mind of Bruce Nauman's *Animal Pyramids* and *Carousels*.

I just saw one of those pieces in London and I love that work. I was keenly aware of what he was doing with animals, but his are taxidermied and the things

I have been using are found—I think they're likely yard decorations. I realized that the direction I was going in with them and his approach to materials were so far from each other that I felt comfortable working with them.

I know you've resisted a gendered reading of your work, but I have to say that there are times with the mattresses that I thought of Hans Bellmer and his *poupées*. It's the only time where I found a certain sexual reading.

I think sex is in everything. It's just part of life.

Table & Airplane Parts (2005) seems to be more about line than mass. It makes me think of Lee Bontecou.

I love Lee Bontecou and I have always thought about her a lot. That early work is amazing.

The mess-up that happens with the cakes puts me in mind of Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley.

I was asked to be part of an exhibition in Vienna. I had been working with the mattresses and needed a new element, and when I started to think about Vienna, I thought about the beautiful cakes they make there. The gallerist who had invited me told me, when I asked, that the cakes were not available, and I was surprised, even more so because she told me it was because of the war that was in Yugoslavia. I thought, how weird. So I get to Vienna and meet the curator and she likes me and realizes I'm not going to do wrong by her cakes. So she gave me some cakes and I made a small multiple with them. Then I went to a town in northern Germany called Lingen where there was a Kunstverein. I said, I would like 250 mattresses and 250 cakes. This was to be the first mattresses and cakes piece. I had already built a smaller version in my studio, which I was getting ready to show in New York. We had gotten the mattresses and used Entenmann's day-old cake that you could get for 50 cents each, and that worked fine. We could build them up like strata. So I get to this town in northern Germany and the person who is the director of the Kunstverein takes me into his office. He is very anxious and he sighs and says, "Miss Rubins, we have a problem with the cakes. We can't get them. It's the war." I'm thinking, what war? The war that's going on now in the former Yugoslavia, World War I, World War II? Which war is he talking about? I realized he was talking about all the wars, about war in general. Then he

said, "It's the children." I said, "I didn't realize you had an issue with my work," and he said, "It's not your work, it's the cakes." I said, "Well, the cakes are my work." So he said, "Okay, you'll have the cakes but they won't be very nice." The next day these cakes come and they are the most beautiful cakes you have ever seen. They have whipped crème on them; they have strawberries; some of them are dipped in chocolate. They were beautiful, and I thought, there's something else going on; cakes are a serious symbol of something. You have a cake only when things are good, when you're celebrating a birthday, or when you feel fat and rich and it's a lovely Sunday afternoon and you're going to have tea and a stack of cakes. I realized there was a certain shame in having so many cakes and part of the shame was the acknowledgement that there were so many and that you could use them.

People stumble over themselves to find metaphors to describe your works. They are schools of fish, or cosmic phenomena, or floral arrangements. Once you've made a piece, do those kinds of associations occur to you?

I think they're abstract. I appreciate that people are interested in finding ways to talk about whatever it is that goes on in the work, but I'm not interested in that.

When you go to monochromes as opposed to a work like *Big Pleasure Point* (2006), a significant shift in colour occurs. How do you think of colour? I think of colour as a wonderful tool, as a wonderful thing to work with. Then I can really enjoy the absence of colour because it makes colour that much stronger when it does appear.

In your most recent exhibition at Gagosian in London called "Diversifolia," you said you've been thinking about those pieces for 15 years now. That is a lengthy gestation period. Is that characteristic of the way you work?

No, that is probably the longest anything has hung around. But I did enjoy using those things.

Often critics talk about the Baroque in connection with your work, but in this exhibition, that naming seems right. It's as if you're using your Flemish namesake, and when Rubens paints *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, you sculpt "The Rise of the Rebar Animals." There is an extraordinary lift in this







exhibition. Does this new work seem different to you in any way?

I do think that the shapes of all those elements, the tubes with things coming off them, the paws, the tails, the ears, the legs, the necks and the shapes of their bodies, all make for these wonderful curly things in space. I can see how someone would look to the Baroque with them.

If one of those wires were cut, would the piece collapse?

Doubtful. There is a lot of redundancy with the wires. For every piece there are two or three more and they're all pulling in different directions. You could throw off the balance of something but nothing would come down.

In *Another Kind of Growth* (1988) you combine nature and manufacture in a dramatic way. Was

there a critique of consumer culture built into that piece?

It could also be a celebration of the stuff that I could get so inexpensively. When I lived in New York people would say that when nature isn't here, the thing that replaces it is culture.

I mentioned the Yeats poem early on and it opens with the lines, "Many ingenious lovely things are gone / That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude." You seem set on continuing to make miraculous and ingenious things.

I'm an optimist. What can I say? I don't know what keeps me going. I guess it's how I'm wired.

Or how you're tension-wired.
That's it. ■

Tables & Airplane Parts, 2011. © Nancy Rubins. Photo: Remi Villaggi-Metz.