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The dystopian vision of Nancy Rubins' junkyard zoo

The artist's latest sculptures give kitsch scrapheap animals new life

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Rubins' 'Crocodylius Philodendrus' (2016-17)

It's easy to pick out Nancy Rubins as she installs her latest exhibition in the King's Cross arm of Gagosian Gallery in London. Other than me, she is the only woman in a room busy with men dressed like construction workers. A slight figure with thick dark hair piled in an unceremonious topknot, she is wearing a black shirt and trousers, denim jacket and delicate gold earrings, with a slash of crimson lipstick. Her voice is beguiling: a light, husky drawl so kind to the ear it's easy to lose track of her words.

But it's worth paying attention. Born in 1952, the American sculptor has shown all over the world. Her permanent works have homes in museums such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York. Yet this is her first major British exhibition. Little wonder she is quietly determined that I should understand its origins.

Gently waving away my request that we sit at a table so I can type, she steers me through her sculptures in their nascent state of becoming. If you can imagine a safari park dreamt up by an engineer on laudanum, you will have a sense of the mesmerising dystopian zoo that has invaded Britannia Street's dignified volumes.

Elk, giraffes, wolves, turtles, crocodile and deer, cast in various metals and held together with industrial wire, writhe through each other's bodies in mammoth arboreal profusions. Many, still on trolleys waiting to be hoisted into their final incarnations, bear labels such as "Dense Bambi

Chunk", "Croc Chunk" and, rather spookily, "Sophie's Choice". (These ludic legends, Rubins tells me later with a giggle, are her team's way of keeping track of animal parts.)

Given what I know of Rubins' previous oeuvre, these sculptures are a surprise. In her 40-year career, her gigantic cats' cradles of industrial materials have blossomed out of TVs, heating appliances, construction trailers, aircraft parts and kayak and surfboards. Nothing, in other words, with a face.

Then, in 2014, also at Gagosian in New York, Rubins unveiled sculptures made from playground animals. The creatures in her London iteration, however, are less fanciful. Probably intended for ornamental purposes, they are kitsch, crude and brutally figurative.

Nancy Rubins © Gagosian/Brian Guido

How did she come to be working with them? "These works started a few years ago," she explains as she pauses in the shadow of a lofty tangle of limbs, tails and snouts. "Originally, I started with the wolves and turtles," she adds, pointing to a few examples, their hides gritty with a rough, timeworn patina. Rubins found them "at the place of a fella I'd been working with for years. When he saw me working with them, he said: 'Do you want some pigs?' And I said: 'Sure, bring me some pigs!'"

The next step came when the dealer presented her with a Sears catalogue. "Now I could buy in quantity!" she says, excited as a child at the thought of a gift-piled Christmas tree.

Rubins had been intrigued by the possibilities of the jolie laide, metallic fauna ever since she spied the heap of deer that filled an empty swimming pool in the same supplier's yard. "I thought they were odd. And interesting."

But she was scared. "I thought about [the animals] for years and years," she tells me after we have relocated to a pristine meeting room in Gagosian's upper storey. "I was fascinated by them but I didn't have the nerve to touch because they were so figurative."

What was she frightened of? "The specificity. A water heater is an abstract form — a cylinder. A mobile home is a big cube. But people have such specific responses to any type of figures. So it was important to pass through that for me . . . "

Does she ever weary of being asked what her work means? “Oh boy,” she sighs, drawing out the syllables with theatrical charisma. “I find it problematic to make a proclamation about what this work is about because the truth is, I . . . like to look at it again and again, and if it still holds interest and mystery . . . then I know that it works. But each time I always think something different.”

She takes a deep breath. “If I were to say what the work is about, the viewer would cling to that. You need to give the viewer space to come to their conclusions. Because there is no conclusion.”

Rubins’ innate abstract formalism is rooted in a history of US sculpture that stretches back to David Smith by way of Richard Serra. Yet its seeds lie closer to home.

As a child, she grew up near Huntsville, Alabama. Her father worked as an engineer for Nasa. “It was secret, what he did,” she whispers, and the shift in tone implies that her passion for mystery might have been born out of her love for a man who always told her “that you could do anything with your imagination. You just had to think it through.”

The young Rubins had “a little bit too much energy and a big imagination”, she remembers with a grin. She “loved making things” because it was a way to focus all that surplus feeling into “something that became marvellous before your very eyes”.

At art school she majored in painting. Yet when she talks of her influences then such as Cézanne, de Kooning and early Philip Guston, she pounces on their “physicality” and the way they brought “a body to the material” as the sources of her excitement.

‘Worlds Apart’ (1982) © Irv Tepper

Inspired partly by the late 1960s Italian movement Arte Povera, whose exponents were fearless in their appropriation of, for example, coal sacks and mirrors, Rubins started scavenging thrift stores for components. In 1982, she received her first public commission to make a piece that would grace a highway near Washington’s Watergate building. The result, entitled “Worlds Apart”, was a colossal 40ft-high tornado whose teeming bulk was meticulously constructed out of electrical appliances.

It proved controversial, kicking off an “is it really art?” debate in The New York Times, but its gravity-defying buoyancy marked her as an artist who had more in common with the spatial

explorations of painter Lucio Fontana than with the thumping, ferrous pawprints of, say, Richard Serra. Since then her exuberant trash-based treasures have bloomed in public spaces from Las Vegas to Paris. Yet Rubins' creative feeding grounds are far from such urban jungles.

Home is Topanga Canyon in California and just the memory of this fecund paradise moves her nearly to tears. "It smells so good!" she says, closing her eyes at the memory.

"I wish I could paint. I keep seeing Cézanne's landscapes in my head. But I don't have the motor skills. We see bobcats, hooded owls. I've even seen a mountain lion a couple of times. Since I've lived there, I've seen oak trees grow from seedling to huge trees . . . "

Her voice trails off, perhaps because she shared all this loveliness with her husband, the sculptor and performance artist Chris Burden, until his death in 2015. I had thought to ask her how their work impacted on each other but such is her emotion it would be insensitive. Instead, we steer the conversation back to Rubins' interior peregrinations.

"I like my work to have the sense that it is drifting out the skylight and down the sidewalk," she tells me with a shy smile. But as I look at those cloud-light crocodiles, I fancy her sculptures will fly higher than that.