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ARTSY

Nancy Rubins's Monumental Sculptures Vibrate with Wild Intensity

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Nancy Rubins, Our Friend Fluid Metal, 2014. Photo by Erich Ansel Koyama. Courtesy of the artist.. Portrait of Nancy Rubins by Joel Searles. Courtesy of the artist.

Heading up the long driveway to Nancy Rubins's Topanga Canyon studio, I saw heaps of crumpled airplane parts and accumulations of rusted-out playground equipment before I saw the artist herself. The metal scraps piled up under persimmon trees and next to constellations of purple and chartreuse cacti. Some idled, waiting and untouched, but others had been bound together in ecstatic masses that resembled gnarled asteroids or colossal mold spores. The forms existed in that liminal, mesmerizing place between grotesque and gorgeous, primordial and futuristic.

Rubins's studio is about 40 miles northwest of Downtown Los Angeles, set in a rugged cut of mountain where she's lived and worked since 1984. When I visited in early March, she emerged from a building tucked into the remote landscape, then led me under a massive cantilevered sculpture that hovered just above our heads. Made from an uncountable number of vintage metal playground elements (those cartoonish animals affixed to heavy-duty springs), it measured around 42 feet long and 30 feet tall. "I'm really, really comfortable working huge," Rubins said, smiling.

Since the late 1970s, Rubins has assembled the mass-produced flotsam and jetsam of America—defunct appliances, junked mobile homes, crumpled airplane parts, cast-off boats, deadstock

metal decorations—into soaring sculptures that look as precarious and frightening as they are rhapsodic. In a 1995 review, Roberta Smith described Rubins’s first show at the Museum of Modern Art as a balancing act between the “massiveness and violence of her materials” and the “deliberation, almost amounting to a delicacy, with which they are composed.” More recently, *The New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl praised *Big Pleasure Point* (2006), a soaring bouquet of discarded boats installed at Lincoln Center, as an “orchestral crescendo in which each instrument shines.” And in 2016, cultural critic Dave Hickey compared her sculptures’ “catastrophic glamour” to creatures “floating in the atmosphere, contiguous but unattached, like the gods and icons that float on Tiepolo’s ceiling in Würzburg.”



Nancy Rubins, Big Pleasure Point, 2006, Gagosian

In other words, while Rubins’s work is defined by dramatic mass and volume, it also radiates a propulsive sense of buoyancy, tension, and bottled, ready-to-burst movement. “It’s important to embrace contradictions,” she explained, highlighting a through line of her nearly five-decade practice.

Rubins was born in Texas and raised between Ohio, Tennessee, and Connecticut, following her father’s job as a research scientist. She spent her formative years in the town of Tullahoma, Tennessee, where she channeled her own unbridled energy into roaming the rural landscape, drawing, and a host of other activities—baton twirling, piano, and synchronized swimming—encouraged by her mother.

By Rubins’s admission, school wasn’t her strong suit; she was more interested in the inner workings of the world around her—especially those of large-scale structures. “I have really vivid memories of growing up, visiting our grandmother in New York, and taking tours of the Statue of Liberty,” she explained. “The seams and structures [on the inside] told a different story than that nice lady on the outside. So often we see the skin—the veneer—and it’s a mystery what goes on behind it. It’s a different truth when you see how the thing is made—you see the hands [that made it], and you see time in it.”



Nancy Rubins, installation view of Chas' Stainless Steel, Mark Thomson's Airplane Parts, about 1,000 lbs. of Stainless Steel Wire & Gagosian's Beverly Hills Space at MOCA, 2002. Photo by Brian Guido. Courtesy of the artist.

In art school, Rubins gravitated toward media that conveyed time and transformation. As an undergraduate at the Maryland Institute College of Art, she worked with clay, a “wet, gunky material that kept changing,” she explained. “It could be leather-hard and you could make slabs; you could carve into it, pour it as a liquid and make a mold, make very wet coils, or you could throw it back into water and start all over again.” Early works such as *Self-Portrait as a Birthday Cake* (1973)—a huge, drippy pile of clay adorned with a mask—built on Bob Arneson’s funky, self-deprecating busts and Peter Voulkos’s messy, gargantuan vessels. But figuration wasn’t for Rubins, and she began slathering tarps with slip, or liquified clay, and embedding used coffee cups (pulled from the school’s trash cans) into the sludgy surface, letting them slide down as the clay dried.

After graduating with her master’s degree from the University of California, Davis, in 1976 (where she studied with Arneson), Rubins moved into a loft in San Francisco’s Mission District. She made work when she wasn’t waitressing at the Starlight Room or teaching night classes at the San Francisco Art Institute. On her one day off each week, she accompanied friends to Goodwill, where she was drawn to stacks of old box TVs, which sold for 25–50 cents a piece. She amassed over 250 of them in her studio, dousing a number of them in neon orange paint in an attempt to abstract their “TV-ness.” It didn’t work. “I felt like Louise Nevelson was sitting on me,” Rubins laughed. But she liked the volume of these big, cheap materials.

In the same loft, Rubins also experienced her first earthquake, which inspired another important development: the use of concrete. “I looked up and the ceiling of my big, poured concrete building just undulated,” she remembered. “I thought, ‘Who knew that something big and rigid and solid, in the right circumstances, could behave like water—like a liquid—and still remain intact?’”



Nancy Rubins, installation view of Big Bil-Bored, 1980, at Cermack Plaza Shopping Center, Berwyn, Illinois. Courtesy of the artist.

In the late 1970s, Rubins moved between California, Virginia, New York, and Florida, trailing teaching gigs and early opportunities to show her work. She layered globs of concrete and hundreds of small electric appliances, as if she was constructing DIY stone walls with post-apocalyptic detritus. While seemingly solid, the sculptures would waver (but not crack or fall) if pushed. Rubins's first solo show, at San Francisco's 80 Langton Street in 1977, featured a 45-foot-long, 14-foot-tall, 1-foot-wide bulwark of knobby hair dryers, window fans, and toasters embedded in gunky, hardened cement.

From there, public commissions and exhibition offers began to stream in. So did a request, from Charles Ray, for Rubins to teach in his sculpture program at UCLA. It was there, in 1982, that Rubins met fellow artist Chris Burden, who would become her husband and occasional collaborator. The pair moved to Topanga Canyon in 1984, where they lived in a tent, and took showers at UCLA for their first four years on the property. Over time, they bought more contiguous land and added a home with plumbing, a smattering of studio buildings, and piles of bulky, found objects stacked under oak and persimmon groves.

Walking around the swathe of mountain where Rubins has been living since the 1980s is a lesson in her artistic development since she settled in Los Angeles. The swell of crushed airplane parts heaped under one stand of trees, which we passed on my tour of the property, are remnants of a sculpture she made between 1987 and 1989, called *Topanga Tree and Mr. Huffman's Airplane Parts*.



Nancy Rubins, Topanga Tree & Mr. Huffman's Airplane Parts, 1987-89. Courtesy of the artist. Nancy Rubins, installation view of Mattresses & Cakes, 1993, at Arsenale, Venice, Italy. Courtesy of the artist.

In the mid-1980s, during drives with Burden through the Mojave desert, Rubins spotted mountains of scrapped airplanes, many of which had been laid to rest after World War II. “They were just beautiful,” she remembered, “but nobody would sell them.” After digging for the right contact, she met Bill Huffman, who was known in the area as a go-to scrap metal source and master smelter. He proudly showed Rubins a *National Geographic* article documenting his days melting down fleets of planes after World War II. Rubins began buying airplane parts from him for 10 cents a pound. They became her newest material.

In 1986, Rubins made her first sculpture from Huffman's cache. Called *4,000 Pounds of Smashed and Filleted Airplane Parts*, she showed the piece in a one-night-only group exhibition at Los Angeles's Alexandria Hotel. She also began working on *Topanga Tree and Mr. Huffman's Airplane Parts*, a hulking, riotous accretion that grew from the negative space of a crooked oak not far from her studio. When completed, it contained around 16,000 pounds of airplane wings, fuselage, engine bits, and more. “You can walk under it, which provokes strange sensations: fear, amazement, exhilaration,” wrote Dodie Kazanjian in a 1995 *Vogue* profile of Rubins, after experiencing the piece in person. “The tree and the metal seem to have bonded, and both are thriving,” she continued.

“The tree was really part of the sculpture,” Rubins told me, as we looked at what's left of *Topanga Tree*. The work collapsed several years ago, after the oak it was built around uprooted and cracked during a bad California drought. “Now they're here,” she said, matter-of-factly, about the parts that once made the whole. “I mean, it wasn't going to be there forever.”



Nancy Rubins, installation view of MoMA & Airplane Parts at Forte Belvedere Florence, Italy, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

Rubins is comfortable seeing her works collapse and change shape: Made from past-their-prime materials, the sculptures embrace entropy. Often, the artist disassembles a piece only to remake it years later in a different form that responds to a new context. *MoMA and Airplane Parts*, a teetering, explosive artwork she made for her MoMA debut in 1995, was later reconstituted at Fondation Cartier, Forte Belvedere, and finally the SculptureCenter, where its title revealed its shape-shifting history: *MoMA and Airplane Parts that visited Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain 2002/2003 then visited Forte Belvedere in 2003 and is now at SculptureCenter* (2006).

The independent elements of *MoMA and Airplane Parts*, like the majority of sculptures Rubins has made since the 1980s, are held together with a web of tensile cables and T-bars—“like a suspension bridge,” she told me, “with tension cables holding the structure in its cantilever.” Using this system, she and her team (Rubins works with several assistants when constructing large-scale work) build on her clusters organically, adding one object at a time until achieving the precarious balance and lurching form she desires. The artist calls this process “seat of the pants engineering.”

The tension in Rubins’s work aligns her with minimalist sculptors of large-scale forms, such as Kenneth Snelson and Richard Serra. “If I walk by a huge, magnificent Richard Serra piece, I truly get a physical sensation that I can’t explain. For me, some of his pieces are so powerful that I literally cannot go near them,” Rubins explained of Serra’s work in the 1995 catalog for *MoMA and Airplane Parts*. “There is a kinship [between our work]—I think it may have to do with a certain kind of precariousness.”



Nancy Rubins, *Trailers & Hot Water Heaters*, 1992. Courtesy of the artist.

Yet unlike Serra's solid steel forms, Rubins's work reveals the artist's process as it embraces exposed wires and cables—echoes of the Statue of Liberty innards that awed her as a child. In *Trailers and Hot Water Heaters* (1992), a hulking piece that became the juggernaut of curator Paul Schimmel's iconic exhibition "Helter Skelter: L.A. Art in the 1990s," wires connecting each individual trailer and water heater acknowledge precisely how the tumble was secured.

While Rubins's contribution to the show was praised by many critics, it also received less enthusiastic and, in at least one case, borderline sexist feedback. "The few contributions by women artists are conspicuously weak," Michael Kimmelman wrote in the *New York Times*, referring to Rubins's piece as a "mountainous pile of trailers and water heaters, a humorless imitation of something Vito Acconci might concoct."

In contrast, I see a sense of energy and vitality in Rubins's sculptures, amplified by her complex rigging systems. Cables often accentuate the vertiginous arcs, swoops, and tilts of each work, which can conjure gestures in space. "It's kind of painterly in a way, how I approach things," she said as we looked at *Our Friend Fluid Metal* (2014), the gargantuan, surging cloud of animal-shaped playground equipment I'd passed on my way in.



When Rubins began working with cartoonish forms that made up this sculpture and others from the “Our Friend Fluid Metal” series (2012–17), she didn’t know quite what to make of them. (By then, she had a new scrap source; Mr. Huffman died years before.) “I thought they were the weirdest things,” she laughed. They weren’t as easy to abstract as airplane shards or hulls of boats, but if she clumped enough of them together and cantilevered them into space, “they became these little wiggly things of color,” she explained. “I kept thinking of really early Philip Guston, when it was pure abstraction, or even de Kooning.”

Rubins’s massive creations do indeed embrace fluidity. In addition to the “Our Friend Fluid Metal” group, she is also developing “Diversifolia” (2016–17) and “Fluid Space” (2019), constellations of animal-shaped lawn ornaments (or parts of lawn ornaments) in aluminum, bronze, and cast iron. The unpainted metals gleam with their own natural hues. “I thought of [arranging the different metals] in terms of marbleizing, so that sooner or later, the different elements would disappear and it became this kind of abstracted gesture—this abstracted swirl of stuff,” she explained.

As we walked around a group of several new works, metal tails careened into the air and accretions of shells, hooves, and haunches spiraled past our heads. Strung together, they resembled gigantic, metal-plated molecules poised to hurtle towards each other, or scintillating masses of post-apocalyptic debris on the verge of regenerating new worlds.



Nancy Rubins, detail of Chas’ Stainless Steel, Mark Thomson’s Airplane Parts, about 1,000 lbs. of Stainless Steel Wire & Gagosian’s Beverly Hills Space at MOCA, 2002. Photo by Brian Guido. Courtesy of the artist.

These days, Rubins thinks a lot about the history of her materials—elements such as aluminum and iron that have been recycled over and over again, assuming new forms over time. Several years ago, she came to the realization that the 1950s playground equipment in “Fluid Metal” was likely made (at least in part) from melted World War II airplane parts, just like the ones she gathered from Mr. Huffman’s mountains of scrap. The same might be said of the aluminum lawn ornaments that make up “Diversifolia” and “Fluid Space.”

“I realized that this stuff has been around a long time, and it’s passed through this odd transition,” Rubins smiled, looking out past her sculptures and up into the craggy Topanga mountains and cloudless California sky. “Before it was in the earth, it was floating as a molecule in outer space—it was part of somebody’s star, or part of somebody’s exploding planet.”