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Nancy Rubins on Objects in the In-Between

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Nancy Rubins, "Agrifolia Majoris" (2017), on-site installation view in Chicago (2022) (photo Brian Guido, image courtesy Nancy Rubins's studio and EXPO Chicago)

CHICAGO — On loan to the City of Chicago through a collaboration between the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE), EXPO Chicago's IN/SITU program, and Chicago's Park District Offices, two Nancy Rubins sculptures can now be found along Lake Michigan's shoreline. Bright glints of silvers from "Agrifolia Majoris" (2017), and matte, warm bronzes from "Dense Bud" (2016) contrast shades of aquamarine. One site, nestled within a tree line skirting Promontory Point, lies in Hyde Park while the other, slightly more secluded, sits between the newly inaugurated AIDS Memorial Park and Foster Beach. Both provide for an unusual encounter; a tempest of clockwise-counter clockwise life-sized metal *animalia* — hovering, whipping tails, and tousling antlers, until their primitivities liquece.

Harking back to Dadaism and Surrealism in the Bay Area, Rubins masterfully topples conventions of material, discipline and style. Her work concentrates on the experience of the enigmatic, as she recalls leaving "drippy sandcastles" at campsites on family vacations off the coast of Santa Rosa Island, Florida. In summers, prior to pursuing her MFA at the University of California Davis, Rubins worked as a waitress at Morro Bay. "Between tables, I'd stare at this enigmatic lump of rock in the ocean ... I was really drawn to it," she told *Hyperallergic* in an interview. "One summer, I made many, very small drawings in dense pencil, filling tiny sketchbooks with this enigmatic 'lump.' I wanted to build it once I got to graduate school."

Attempting to parse between "what drawing is" in contrast to the dexterity of sculpture, Rubins extended these tiny pieces of paper into "Pile of Clay, Concrete, Straw & Tar on Pallet" in 1974.

“I wanted to invent my own adobe and roll it out on a pallet with wheels (that could take 500 lbs each) ... but the lump weighed 2700 pounds and the wheels were just crushed!” she said. Unsatisfied, she returned to her drawings to consider what they captured that the sculpture could not. “Is it an illustration or a thing itself? I realized I was able to capture the enigma of the rock better in drawing, where there was no physicality other than the piece of paper,” she explained.



On-site installation view of Nancy Rubins, “Agrifolia Majoris” (2017) in Chicago (2022) (photo Brian Guido, image courtesy Nancy Rubins’s studio and EXPO Chicago)

Testing dualities further, Rubins’s “Big Orange” (1976), a wall of painted fluorescent orange TVs laid in concrete, and variations of “Thin Concrete Wall and Rebar” (1977), point to her propensity for fluid verticality. This too is rooted in the artist’s lived experience. During an earthquake at her loft studio in New York, “The ceiling began to behave like water,” she points overhead, “Later, a pork chop bone and cigar stub fell out from a hole in the wall!” Rubins’s wit and proclivity for objects in the in-between speak to her oeuvre in ways that the formality of figurative does not. “I prefer to stay as far away as possible from the figurative ... at the end of the day the work is about us.”

Rubins’s precise search for the point of abstraction amidst amassed objects and saturated graphite drawings pokes at sacrosanct binaries. Employing hard-edge, post-World War material, by 1980 the artist was commissioned to present her first-ever public sculpture in the Midwest. “Big Bil-Bored,” a tidal wave of domestic appliances set in concrete, was placed in Cermak Plaza, in Berwyn, Illinois, upsetting the local residents. “It was never received well and got me a lot of negative criticism.” Undervalued and overlooked, the sculpture fell into disrepair and was removed approximately ten years later. But Rubins knew she had touched on something. Seeking larger objects — mobile homes, hot water heaters, and decommissioned airplanes —

Rubins began to cantilever forms with cables and wound steel wire, employing principles from earthquake-proof architecture and tensegrity to engineer large-scale sculptures in space. Turning enormous forms with rigs and lifts, Rubins reconfigures objects to expose their “earnest workmanship,” bringing mold seams and pilot holes into arrangements based on their interaction with one another. In Rubins’s world, there is no detritus and everything (everyone) is charged with potential.



On-site installation view of Nancy Rubins, "Dense Bud" (2016) in Chicago (2022) (photo Brian Guido, image courtesy Nancy Rubins's studio and EXPO Chicago)



Nancy Rubins, "Dense Bud" (2016), detail (photo Brian Guido, image courtesy Nancy Rubins's studio and EXPO Chicago)

Closing a year-long exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2022 that presented two sculptures composed of scores of brightly colored *démodé* coin-operated rides connected through armatures and wires, Rubins's *Our Friend Fluid Metal* series was set against Chicago's winter gray cityscape. Simultaneously, "Agrifolia Majoris" and "Dense Bud" were installed in city parks, forming a momentous presence of the artist's life in a city engaged in years of protest against historic monuments. How do Rubins's sculptures become a reminder of what lies beyond the symbolism of prestige associated with public sculpture?

While Chicago's Monuments Project seeks to rethink which histories should be memorialized, the commissioner of DCASE, Erin Harkey, recently announced "Public Art Reimagining Tour with You" (P.A.R.T.Y.), an initiative that invites communities to guide a 12 million dollar investment for public art in the South and West neighborhoods. Speaking with one of the artist teams invited into a phased collaboration, Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spofford of Floating Museum says P.A.R.T.Y. seeks to create a more collaborative commissioning process towards more 'integrated forms of public art'.

For now, Rubins's public sculptures stand as reminders of the strength that lies in improvisation, surmounting exploitative processes of production and systems of labor that once led to the desolate lives of these cast-offs, that now crisscross and knot in a towering frame, directly supporting one another.



Installation view of Nancy Rubins: Our Friend Fluid Metal at the Bluhm Family Terrace, the Art Institute of Chicago (2022); left to right: "Paquito" (2013) and "Paquito's Cluster" (2017) (photo Brian Guido, courtesy Nancy Rubins's studio)