



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: All images **Rachel Foullon**.
Cluster II, 2012, dyed canvas, dyed linen aprons, garden hose,
 cedar peg, molding, 72 x 23 x 10 in. *Cruel Radiance (Seed*

Sower), 2012, antique seed sower, polished nickel-plated
 brass, dyed canvas, hardware, 35 x 28 x 7 in. *Threshold*
(Braid), 2014, polished nickel-plated brass, western red cedar,

cotton drawcord, stain, dye, hardware, 48 x 20.5 x 5 in. *Cruel
 Radiance (Washboard)*, 2012, antique washboard, polished
 nickel-plated brass, dyed canvas, hardware, 27 x 27 x 4.5 in.

RACHEL FOULLON + DIANE SIMPSON =

RACHEL: When I look at your work, it feels so clear to me that you have a set of *terms*—a framework, within which certain things are allowed and other things are not allowed in any particular piece. I don't want to call them boundaries because that sounds limiting, but there seems to be a set of nonoppressive rules in place: like a game. As though there's a space that you've determined to work within.

DIANE: I think maybe this is what you're talking about: In all of my work I feel like I shouldn't make arbitrary decisions. I start by working on drawings that develop a shape, a form that interests me. And that form directs everything, so that when I'm thinking about how to construct the piece—how to go from the drawing stage to the building stage, and what materials to use, or how a surface pattern might develop—everything is interrelated. The pattern wouldn't be applied—it's part of the material that I choose, and it's related to the shape and structure. That's kind of my standard. It's not like, "Oh, let's see, maybe I'll try this to see if it works." It's all pinned down to that initial form that I first put on paper and then put into space.

RACHEL: Can that change in the middle of the process? Can a piece sort of switch gears?

DIANE: Not a lot. As I'm working—as I'm really starting to build a piece, I will find that a material I thought would work may not. I'm always trying new materials, so I may have to experiment with materials and change my thoughts on that as I'm going along. But I'd also like to respond to another question you had before we started recording. You had mentioned that you thought that I never worked in series.

RACHEL: I should clarify. Obviously, there are large series I could identify, but each work seems so freshly approached, again, with a new set of terms, invented very recently.

DIANE: Thank you. I'm happy to hear that. [*Laughs*] I sometimes wonder if it's good to have each work be so independent, but I think the reason for that is my process of

how I begin a piece. I start from a specific source, a two-dimensional image of some sort that I've collected. I work on drawings from that particular source. I'm working with different images for each piece, so that's maybe why they each have such a different form.

RACHEL: Right—as though the DNA of each piece is unique.

DIANE: But, for instance, I may be looking at different types of neckwear and there is, by necessity, a certain construction common within neckwear. So within that diverse series of forms, there might be some similarities.

RACHEL: Do you think that's the heart of your interest in working from a source image? That you will hunt for something specific, e.g., neckwear, but you don't know exactly what you'll find, so that's when variation and chance are allowed for—perhaps unexpectedly encountering neckwear in an unusual context or from a surprising era, or something? I think that's the joy for me of working with source imagery—there's the serendipity of it, and what you find yourself falling in love with again and again helps you to know yourself better. Part of being an artist in general is the endless process of self-knowledge, right? The meditation on the source involves the discovery of what it is in there that is connected to the larger body of work, what new thing becomes imported into your work, what new kind of aberration or sparkle. I always feel like that's the great back and forth with the world. I know that's something we really share.

DIANE: Well, that was what I was going to ask you: about the importance of sources, and how you begin. Where do you get your ideas? Do you work on more than one piece at a time?

RACHEL: I do. Not only for the purpose of formulating an exhibition, but it's important to me that the works support each other in some way, as though they are characters or actors within a larger narrative. My intent is that the works balance each other out, almost temperamentally, and they

may actually communicate, maybe even argue with each other, and then, of course, operate on their own as well because they're not necessarily always going to be bound to that group. It's fruitful for me to determine the body of work's overall terms by working on more than one piece at a time—the range of scale, and especially the palette. And something's always in the dye bath, or I'm waiting on a material. I have to work on more than one piece at a time because there are so many logistical *lags* in the process!

DIANE: That's interesting, because that explains why your work seems more like it happens in a series than mine. I'm just the opposite, and I think the reason I work on one at a time is that each piece gets to be *very*, very complex in terms of their construction. And if I left it to work on something else, I would forget where I was. [*Laughs*] I have to keep at it. Also, there are always so many problems to solve. It's almost like a puzzle; I have to keep at it until I solve it, and I can't get distracted. But then, for the next piece, I usually hope that I have a drawing waiting for me from the initial—

RACHEL: So there's some overlap, momentum.

DIANE: Exactly, otherwise it's kind of a scary feeling. If I don't have a drawing that interests me, then I have to start from scratch. Usually, though, when I'm drawing, I'll do several. I'll pick one drawing that I feel is the strongest to start my sculpture. And then those other drawings that are waiting in the wings are there for me when I finish that one piece. And maybe they'll still be interesting, or maybe they won't. It's always nice to have that one drawing that still interests me to get going again.

RACHEL: I know. It's always scary to *land* at point zero.

DIANE: Yeah, but what you're doing, working the way *you* do, you have a continuum that's always going.

RACHEL: I do, but sometimes I get to the end of the scene or reach the exterior of the bubble. I want to get back to process. I'd like to illustrate this interview with one of your drawings and one of mine. [*Laughs*] Because mine are usually drawn on the back of a check stub. Your drawings are very architectural; they're gorgeous maps toward how the work is going to get constructed. And they're just so beautiful and are clearly very integral to your whole way of working. While I do make purely functional technical drawings in order to have certain custom elements made by other craftspeople, my work entirely develops through handling the material. I usually only make thumbnail sketches, which I've learned to trust more than anything because of how frequently a large-scale piece ends up looking uncannily like the thumbnail—the gesture, where the weight is, the mood—it clings on throughout the process almost every time. And then there is also the culling from images I've collected. Recently, I've been looking for bodies—human or animal—getting pushed or pulled on, somehow, getting physically manipulated doing everyday things. I wasn't

looking for violence, but that energy was certainly latent in many of the images. I was also thinking about the extensions that hang off a body and leave it vulnerable—ears, tails, braided hair. I was reading about the rabbit drives held in the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl era, corralling as many rabbits as possible, shooting them dead and throwing them in mass graves. And I was thinking about holding on to the rabbit ears—as handles. I was thinking about various types of collars on garments—neckwear jinx!—and thought about how a collar allows you to manipulate yourself and it's also a handle for others. So then I made a long list of other body “handles,” and the imagery helped me expand the thinking. I'm laying out an emotional landscape here, which is often where my ideas begin. I know my work appears precise and logical, so perhaps viewers wouldn't immediately think of it as psychologically driven, but the core is rooted in that abstract space.

DIANE: This is really interesting because, for me anyway, I was not aware of this sort of very important background psychology and all the emotional kinds of connections that the work has. And maybe it's because I don't look for those things in my work, but somebody else who is on the same wavelength as you are would see more of that in the work, perhaps. But that's important. The important thing is what gets you going.

RACHEL: Exactly—the engine for the work.

DIANE: When you were talking about the pull, say, of a braid, or the pull of the tail, I can understand that because so much of your work has a feeling of action, some movement. That engine—your initial interest in human or animal interactions—initiates the thumbnail sketch, which in turn leads to your choice of materials and how they move in space. There's these different steps, and when you're at the final step, completing the work, I'm wondering if you go back to that initial impetus and think, does that really express what I wanted it to? In a way, as I'm looking at my sources, it's the same thing. There's something—there's a little turn of a collar that interests me or there's a movement of the body because of that collar. That certain essence of what interested me in the initial source is what I'm hoping comes through. But what happens in the process of drawing is that, at a certain point, before I begin to construct the piece, I've almost forgotten where I began. I've almost forgotten my source because the drawing changes so much. It becomes a hybrid, a more personalized form. And other, maybe subconscious things come into it, other source images that I'm seeing. It could be a piece of furniture; it could be, you know, a painting that I remember, or whatever. A lot of things come into the drawing, and the drawing ends up being very different from the source. And then the actual sculpture even removes itself further from that. However, I'm hoping that in the end, that essence, that little thing that got to me when I was looking at the source—I hope that still comes through.

RACHEL: Could you say what that thing is? Or is it like the unnameable?

DIANE: It's hard to say unless I was looking at a specific source—then I could tell you. As I say, it's a certain line, it's a certain curve, it's a certain attitude. It's an attitude of the clothing and an attitude, of say, the person wearing it. At one point, I was looking at Shaker bonnets, and the thing that interested me was the little loop that came down over the ears, that little shape, that swoop. The rest of the bonnet wasn't so important. It's that kind of thing, you know, that I hope is still there. So, this makes me think about titling pieces, because as my work gets very removed from the source and becomes much more abstracted and, in a way, much more architectural, I like to bring it back to the source through the title. On the other hand, I don't want to direct the viewer. I'm constantly bothered by how to title a work and will boringly title it something to do with either my process or the subject. In some ways I think I should just say, "Untitled." So I was going to ask you about your titles, because you have some crazy titles!

RACHEL: I do, but they're always afterthoughts because, like you, I am very ambivalent about titling. For the most part, I just appropriate language from something I'm reading. So if I'm reading something and a turn of phrase or a strong word catches my eye, I write it down thinking that I might need that as a title. And then at times I feel fraudulent; I just slap it on the work at the end. I mean, of course I think about it, it's not totally arbitrary, but it just feels *so* unnatural to add language at that point. So I sort of just developed this process of matching language that had caught my eye during the period of time that I've been working on the project as the work's title—an arranged marriage of sorts.

DIANE: Would you ever think of going back to that original idea that you had when you began the work? In terms of the imagery you were looking at and the feeling you had at that time, or just relate it in some way to that.

RACHEL: The inspiration is always nonverbal for me. In fact, perhaps its nonverbalness is the very reason I'm drawn to it. For years now, I've worked with the incredible fabric artist-seamstress Kelsey Knight Mohr once a week in my studio, and by now I can say, "We're going to do this blah-blah mushy blah," and on paper it sounds abstract and ridiculous, and yet she'll respond, "Okay, got it! Let's discuss the fabric's bias." We dive right into the technical. So she's right on the front lines with me and is the first person I have to lay out the plan for what we're doing in the coming months. I am aware during these discussions of how pre-verbal my process is. It *is* a *very* inner thing, and I try to stretch that headspace out as long as I can before it gets crystallized into a describable thing. [*In a robot voice*] "I am making these rectangular frames with..." So I think that's why it doesn't feel natural to me to go *back* to that, because there's nothing really there that's concrete. When I first encountered your work, walking into your show at JTT in New York last fall, I felt such an admiration for your systems of display. Those systems are inextricable; they are half of the sculptures. Whether it was a delicate stand or an elegant

hanging bar, they were connectors to the space... and your hardware! And your attention to the way everything gets connected. That is so rare to see anymore. More common is to see a very thoughtful piece of art that someone's made, and then it's been screwed into the wall with any old drywall screw, and those screws have *nothing* to do with the rest of the piece's construction and it's like, "Send this person a link to the McMaster-Carr website, stat!" There's *so much* hardware in the world and, not to make anyone's head explode, but one can also alter or custom make hardware. But you are so sensitive to these matters, and that made me an instant and massive fan of yours. Has that always been important to you?

DIANE: First of all, as you were speaking, I thought, I can understand why you would respond to these things because that's one of the things I responded to in your work. [*Laughs*]. All of the details of presenting the piece, whether it's a wall piece or freestanding. I think this goes back to the interdependence idea. The hardware that holds a piece together or attaches it to a wall—the "hanger" is part of the piece, as much about the piece as anything else. And the other thing—about presentation—I guess I want to avoid having my sculpture plopped on a block of wood, or worse yet, someone placing it on a piano. So the stand becomes part of the sculpture. I want to control everything. [*Laughs*]

RACHEL: I liked what you said about preparing the work to go out into the world—you do sort of have to arm a piece with what it needs. For better or for worse, I begin by mistrusting how my work will get handled out there, so I'm always striving to make it foolproof. But then I'm like, that means I'm assuming everyone out there is a fool, which isn't the way I think about the world. [*Laughs*] Is this innately maternal of us? Last weekend I was at a dinner and talking to someone who had worked with Cady Noland over a long period of time. We were talking about how she ultimately stopped producing work and for all intents and purposes pulled out of the art world years ago, leaving everyone begging for more insanely important and influential work. This person gave his explanation via analogy: He said, imagine you had thirty children, and a lot of them turned out to be junkies; you would dedicate your life to caring for those children, and you would feel it was totally irresponsible to make any *more* children. He believed that because she was *so* wonderfully specific about the way that her work was presented and how it had to look *exactly* right—and it had to be *exactly* the way she intended it and *any* slight variation made it no longer the piece. She made a choice to stop producing and instead dedicate herself solely to supporting what exists and doing everything in her power to ensure it was presented as per its original terms. This impulse—and its follow-through—*really* struck a chord with me. Mad respect! That's an *extreme* version of what I think you and I experience, but because he used the mother analogy ...

DIANE: Yes, these pieces are our children in a sense. I think we all feel that way. You become *so* dedicated to what you're ▶

doing. Actually, though, I think it's more of a control thing. We're both control freaks.

RACHEL: Yes, okay, so there's that. [*Laughs*] You said it.

DIANE: When I send off work and I'm not going to be installing it myself, I mean, I send absolutely *explicit* instructions on the spacing and how high it should be hung. Another thing about placement: I sometimes have alternate ideas for placement. Sometimes I realize that the same piece could either be hung suspended from the ceiling or it could also be attached to a framework—a stand made specifically for that piece. For my show at JTT, I designed a floor structure for a sculpture that I had originally suspended from the ceiling. Or sometimes a wall sculpture could work equally well as a freestanding piece. It could be optional. But then it's a little tricky because you have to choose. You can only show it one way at a time.

RACHEL: And people panic when presented with options. They're like, "I don't know! You just tell me what I'm supposed to do!"

DIANE: Right. So, where were we? I started realizing that you have three very distinct and reinvented bodies of work. I wanted to ask you more about that. Another question, which is getting me sidetracked: Were you originally a painter? Because you have used the wall in a defined way, like it was your canvas, and used that molding as if it was extending to the very edge, say, of a canvas. Not only that, but also your interest in color. It just made me wonder if your background had been in painting. Because mine had, and so I just wondered if you also ...

RACHEL: You were?

DIANE: Yeah. I never had a sculpture class at all. [*Laughs*] I was in the painting department.

RACHEL: I always wanted to be. I did like the idea of being a painter in school. I haven't thought about this in a while, but I liked the expression and abstract thinking that seemed possible—the conversations around painting. But I proved much better at making things with my hands and I really enjoyed the *rigor* of sculpture—the conceptual framework of the assignments and the problem-solving nature of it. While I was at NYU, despite concentrating on sculpture, I continued to take painting classes, but I started asking my professors—including Lisa Yuskavage and Maureen Gallace—if I could bring what I was making down in the sculpture studio to the painting crits. At the time, I was making paper landscapes with miniatures placed around them. There were some foreshortening things happening, as I played with scale. I loved the whole suspension of disbelief within pictorial language, and yearned for that in a sculptural territory. Painting seemed to elicit reverie and imagination, and I wanted to do that with things in the real world. So I definitely was always trying to smash the two together in some way. And what

stuck was that relationship of figure to ground in making things that sat on things. In grad school, the "ground" was a lava-like paper landscape; dark, amorphous, and abstract. Later I made a series of cedar deck sculptures, so the surface became a more minimal, stoic ground. This evolved into the series of work that you're talking about, where wall "drawings" constructed from cedar molding network together to allude to an architecture. Now, with these new pieces, they're these stand-alone frames, and the canvas is a little stretched in some areas, pulling or hinging on the framework. There's something about the expressive space of painting that I still desire—perhaps now more than ever—but I'm committed to making objects that are complete. A surface alone is totally unsatisfying to me.

DIANE: Would you say that what you're doing now is related to that earlier group in some way? Because of the framework?

RACHEL: I see them all as just different frameworks. Sometimes they're additionally functional. In the "Cluster" series, the horizontal cedar molding was quite simple, but the wooden peg cleats were designed to slide along it. That was a way to allow for the whole installation to be movable—changeable—up until the last second of installation: to keep the whole concept modular.

DIANE: Yeah, interesting. You have these three groupings: The large wall installations, incorporating the existing architecture; then the "Clusters"; and then, going to this recent group, concentrating on more contained individual forms. For me, I relate probably the most to the "Cruel Radiance" works. I like your combination of found objects with your own constructed forms. In contrast to the clusters, I can zero in on those individual structures in a more concentrated way. There are so many little details to look at—and the functional aspect of it—like, I want to know how things work. They don't really work, but you have that assumption: This looks mechanical, this should work. And then the idea of the transformation of materials, how I wasn't sure what was new and what was old. There are so many mysterious things going on that come to mind.

RACHEL: Sometimes those pieces feel incredibly tedious to make, but I think I'm in a less patient phase of my life right now than I normally am.

DIANE: It might have felt tedious to you as you were working on it, but it doesn't appear tedious when you're looking at it.

RACHEL: Well, that's good! Because the "Clusters" access this idea of a collective history of groups of people, living and working, I then began making these more intimate, reflective works, so that really only one person could experience the piece at a time. The polished nickel surface acts like a small mirror, so you're made aware of just yourself. One to one. I stain the wood and fabric with a raw, fleshy palette. I think of them as being really naked in comparison to the "Clusters."

In my show at ltd, they were actually hung on opposing walls. It was dramatic how in contrast the two bodies of work were, and how the small mirror pieces reflected the chaos of the other side. Do you feel like you've had any radical changes in your work over the years?

DIANE: Only very recently found objects have directed a few sculptures, either as stands or as templates for the shape of a piece. This has eliminated the reliance on a 2-D visual source and a working drawing. But over the years, the one thing that has been a constant is my interest in a sculpture's orientation in space. This orientation was related to my drawings. I devised a kind of isometric perspective—my own system in order to draw dimensional objects independently without looking at the actual object. And so I developed this perspective... like two planes going back in space at a parallel angle with the frontal planes remaining parallel to the picture plane. And I was able to really see volumetric forms that way. And this goes back to how I began sculpture, because I was doing these drawings and they really wanted to pop off the page. And my advisors in grad school—they were all painters in the painting department—were encouraging me to start building the drawings.

RACHEL: Who were those advisors?

DIANE: I had four advisors. My two main advisors were Ray Yoshida and Barbara Rossi, but I also worked with Whitney Halstead and Ted Halkin. I'm not sure exactly who first suggested this but my reaction was, "Why do I have to build something? What's wrong with illusion?" You know?

RACHEL: Right!

DIANE: I finally gave in, but I built them in the same manner. I applied the same system I used in the drawings for creating illusionistic space to construct something three-dimensional in real space. The first pieces were wall pieces that angled out into space at this forty-five degree angle, the same angle that I used in the drawings. They were made of a triple-layered cardboard. It was cheap and clean. I could cut them in my house and all I needed was a jigsaw with a knife-edged blade. The sections held together with interlocking slots—no hardware. So all the interlocking edges and outside edges had to be cut at a forty-five-degree angle for the piece to retain this orientation. In other words—this is too complicated to try to explain! [*Laughs*]

RACHEL: No! I want to hear it.

DIANE: So the whole thing, when you looked at it from a certain view, looked exactly like the drawing and appeared very normal. But then if you saw it from other angles, everything was skewed and compressed and very strange. And I loved that idea, the disorientation, the tricks that would happen in space. So the next step was taking the work off the wall, bringing it onto the floor. But I continued to angle them with that same forty-five-degree angle.

Then, I started using MDF and connecting the sections with hardware, which meant drilling angled screw holes. But I liked those complications, those challenges. Back to your question—I think a shift in my work happened when I realized I was limiting my choice of materials by using this angled orientation. For instance, if I wanted to use perforated metal that had a ninety-degree grid pattern, it would be impossible to work it into this angled form. And so I was struggling with that a lot and I was forcing it. I also felt like I was getting into this repetitious trap. But even now, I still go back and forth, making what I call "normal" pieces with right angles, along with pieces angled anywhere between forty-five and ninety degrees, because I still find the challenge and results interesting. But other than that, I think my materials have constantly changed, and that always presents a new way of working and discovery. With each new material, I have to learn what it does and how I can work with it. And in some ways, because I never had formal training in sculpture, I will do things that maybe are not orthodox in terms of a historically conventional kind of solution. Maybe that's an advantage. For instance, I was doing this piece *Amish Bonnet*. And you saw that in the show. It was on a wall at JTT. It was made of brass tubing. I wanted to connect the tubing, make it into a grid pattern. So I thought, I've got to take a course in welding or whatever it takes to connect these pieces. And then I realized I don't want to hide the connections. The connections are very important, and they should be seen as part of the pattern and structure. So I crimped each area of tubing, flattening them where I wanted the two parts to connect. Then I wound together the crimped sections using various colors of waxed linen thread. So that provided color and pattern, a decorative element that was related to the structural needs of the piece. And I find solutions like that—kind of unusual ways of doing things because I have to figure them out myself.

RACHEL: I love that can-do approach. I use that too—that, "if I had to solve that right now, right here, what would I do?" approach. And more often than not, it's a really interesting solution.

DIANE: I know the last time we spoke you were texting with your assistant, who was searching for a specific fabric. How did it go?

RACHEL: Good. She found it after we eventually FaceTimed our way through the fabric store while she zoomed in on the grain of things she thought might be it.

DIANE: I usually bring home samples of a lot of things until I know what I want, and then sometimes, by the time I really decide, I go back and they don't have it anymore.

RACHEL: Oh, yes, that is so traumatizing.

DIANE: Or, I run out of it and I go back and they don't have it anymore. ▶

RACHEL: Or they don't make it anymore, or it takes three to six months to reorder and the stock might be different. Years ago I was using handmade papers that I was told were still being produced in a ditch in Nepal.

DIANE: They make what they want and then they don't. Not everything is mass-produced.

RACHEL: There's a beauty there, but you don't always realize it when you hit a wall like that.

So, Diane, now for a question to hopefully cut right into the core of how you work: How do you know what to make *soft* in your work and how do you know what to make *hard*? And I don't mean "difficult!" [*Laughs*]

DIANE: Firm materials ... okay. My choice of material is really dependent upon the particular shape and structure of the piece I'm going to make. So at a certain point in the drawing process, I will usually start thinking about materials. I like to combine rigid materials—architectonic materials—with what I call domestic materials, or materials that are maybe associated with what would be traditionally considered women's handiwork. At times my form will become so architectural that it loses the connotation of the initial source. And so I might want to insert a material that would bring that connotation back, a softer material, a fiber material or something related more to clothing. The other thing is, I'll often use a material that I think of as an illogical material for the particular subject. Let's say it's a curved form that would suggest a pliable material; I would contradict that notion by substituting a rigid material, making it conform. And that also makes things much more difficult, but that's interesting to me because that poses problems, and I like problems. [*Laughs*] Anyway, those contradictions prevent the final form from being too literal in relation to the source. And I thought of you making your clothing and going to extremes to do what you have to do. In a way, I do that same thing. By picking illogical materials I make things that much more difficult for myself.

RACHEL: I think that's the headspace of making that you and I clearly both subscribe to—and not all sculptors do—this way of working where transforming the materials *is* the work: the challenge of doing something unexpected, such as undermining a material, and/or undermining the subject matter by way of the material. I don't like to use the word *magic* but ...

DIANE: You worded it better than I did; that's exactly it. It's undermining what the expectation is, what you would expect, but you're getting something else. And because of that, you're getting various interpretations.

RACHEL: Yes, it kind of cracks open the potential for meaning. It breaks with the linearity of "this is this," and opens up new pathways for thinking about both the subject matter and the material and also the sculpture in front of you. It's a good shattering technique. [*Laughs*]

DIANE: I think I'd like to hear what you have to say about this subject because you definitely have combined, especially in your most recent work, forms that you have made from a solid material, like metal, with a soft material.

RACHEL: I really began combining materials with the "Cluster" works. I was enamored by the way that I could import things I found into a playing field that included raw materials, and the confusion of the made and the found that ensued. This was because everything had been rendered or processed in some way in my studio. I might make something out of fabric and then dye it, and that's its own sort of rendering process, but I would also remove a piece of debris from a junk pile in the barn, scrub it and clean it, and the object's original color would reveal itself. It felt like a very parallel process to the dyeing. So this transformation was occurring—of things both found and made—and it yields them equivalent. *Ninety* percent of the fabric elements in my work are sewn from scratch, beginning with a bolt of canvas or linen and figuring out a pattern, although the thing isn't made to be functional or wearable; it has none of the trademarks of a functioning garment. Nothing is lined or has a zipper. It's really just a shell. They're like ghosts. In the dye bath they gain visual texture—a realness, an authenticity that becomes read as something that's preexisting, which is good. That's the area where I play. The cedar I use is new lumber—not reclaimed. It's finely milled and dressed and then stained or finished using a multipart process, but people, well, lazy people, will look at it and say, "Oh, is that old wood?" And I'm like, come on, that doesn't look like old wood. That wood is in immaculate condition; there's not one dent on it. But I actually kind of like tricking that lazy eye, and I work with that kind of read in a way. I can fuse materials and periods of time and allow one to play visually in this slippery zone of "when is that from?" Is that real? Is that authentic? Is it fabricated? I like that place, and I think you must, too. When I first encountered your work, I couldn't tell where everything was coming from; I really wasn't sure. I enjoyed being tricked again and again though, and I thought, "I really like this person's hand and eye, whoever they are."

DIANE: I have a question regarding what's what, with your piece from the "Cruel Radiance" series called *Seed Sower*. I love that piece, and I'm just so confused.

RACHEL: Okay, I'll tell you, I'll break it down.

DIANE: For instance, the antique seed sower—what part of the piece is that?

RACHEL: All the wood.

DIANE: All the wood? Is it just the wood? And there's the metal.

RACHEL: Only the wood is original.

DIANE: Just the wood. I even looked up “seed sower” to see what it looked like, and I didn’t—well, it usually has a container that looks almost like the bag shape . . .

RACHEL: A metal container, yeah. When I bought mine, it didn’t have a metal container; it had a fabric bag. It already contained the primary ingredients of my work, i.e., wood, metal, and fabric, and I liked how someone else had done their own version of cobbling it all together. So I bought that thing, even though it was a wreck—it was falling apart—and then I rehabilitated the wood: I put it on a jointer and tried to clean it up as best I could, but the handle—a hand-carved handle, which I thought would look really strong when I milled it—still looked just so ham-fisted. It wasn’t transforming enough, so I chopped it off and drew up technical specs for an idealized version of what that original toolmaker was trying to make. I had it fabricated in brass and plated in polished nickel. I had a little brass coin made as well; it’s a tiny circle, where the nail goes through at the bottom—a small reflective disc.

DIANE: It looks like some type of hardware, like a screw?

RACHEL: That’s a nail that goes through a hole in the disc. The disc is mounted in a little cavity where, on the original tool, an individual seed would pop down into this space from the seed bag and drop to the ground. This way, the tool allowed you to evenly distribute seeds while walking along a row.

DIANE: So you’re actually putting the seeds in the ground that way; you’re placing them.

Okay, then there’s this carved little indentation at the end of the wood arc. I was wondering if that was already there? And what was the purpose of that?

RACHEL: That was part of the original sliding mechanism. I flipped part of the tool around to reveal the internal mechanism, which was lo-fi, but very elegant.

DIANE: And the wood itself, you sanded and stained it?

RACHEL: I put it on a jointer and through a thickness planer to make it truly flat. Then I stained it and sealed it with wax.

DIANE: And then the bag part, I love that—is that actually made from scratch?

RACHEL: Made from scratch and dyed, yes.

DIANE: Great. It looks so right for the piece. I mean, it’s so curious. The combinations of materials and shapes—just really amazing. The other one, right opposite in your catalogue, is also one that I find very interesting because of the antique washboard, which is totally changed because you plated it.

RACHEL: Yeah, actually, I took out the glass and then I . . .

DIANE: Really? A washboard with glass?

RACHEL: Well, the original washboard had glass; it was heavy, ribbed, cast glass.

DIANE: But this looks like metal.

RACHEL: Well, I took the glass out and redesigned it. I turned the axis of the ribbing on a forty-five-degree angle and designed a piece of corrugated brass and had that fabricated and plated. What you can’t ever see in a photograph, but can when you experience the piece, is that because of the corrugation and because the plating acts as a mirror, it reflects alternately: the floor, the ceiling, the floor, the ceiling, the floor, the ceiling—and not the viewer! It’s very disorienting. I left a little bit of the original printed bubble motif that was on the washboard before I sanded the hell out of it. I used the circle form of those bubbles as a cue for the overall design of the piece. I also drilled a big hole to have that little fabric spurt coming out. Like most of these tools, the original washboard was falling apart. After being deconstructed, it became clear what a sad and tenuous relic it was. So I actually had to rebuild internal workings of it, which you can see on the legs, those little cut marks. I had to surgically kind of take the whole thing apart in order to fit the new metal element in safely. So, yeah, this piece was open-heart surgery. [*Laughs*]

DIANE: My God, you will go to any extreme, and it sounds so similar to my methods of working. [*Laughs*]

RACHEL: Once you start going down the rabbit hole . . .

DIANE: Yes, you can’t go back.

RACHEL: I certainly feel that way when I look at your pieces. Now I want you to take me through a work.

DIANE: Sometimes I forget how I do a piece, actually; it’s so complex.

RACHEL: Is there a piece in the Corbett and Dempsey book that you would like to describe?

DIANE: There are a couple of pieces from that show that were initiated and directed by found objects, my new approach I spoke about earlier. I had collected vintage collars. Usually I find them on the Web or I go to rummage sales. There’s a wonderful rummage sale I go to every year.

RACHEL: I know, you were telling me about that. I want to come to Chicago and go with you sometime.

DIANE: Sure, but you have to be there by 6:30 a.m., and to get first pick, you shove your way in when they open at 7 a.m.! Anyway, for these two pieces, *Collar (connect the dots)* and *Collar (fluted)*, I used the collars themselves. I didn’t do a drawing from a source image, so it was a much more

direct method of working from a found object. I traced the found collars, enlarged them and transferred the patterns to cardboard. Then it was all about scoring, bending, and folding the cardboard before transferring the idea to the final material. I think they feel quite different from the other work—more asymmetrical. I started realizing why. When I do the drawings, I'm looking at a visual source, usually the frontal or three-quarter view of the body, and so there's a symmetry—sometimes an angled, skewed symmetry, but still a symmetry. Whereas here, I was not thinking about the body at all; I was just looking at the form and what I could do with it.

RACHEL: It's more independent here. I was curious about your materials, so walk me through *Cuffs* on page eleven of the catalogue.

DIANE: Again, that's another piece that veered from my usual approach. I had a box of leftover scraps of embossed papers from an earlier project. I had embossed the papers by placing them over metal grids and running them through a printing press to create a variety of embossed patterns. So that's how this piece started; no—the piece actually started with this plant stand that I found.

RACHEL: So that's found—I was sure you had made that.

DIANE: No, I just sanded and painted it. So I based that piece on both a found object and my own re-found leftover material.

RACHEL: But then you made matching smaller stands—each little paper cuff has a small stand of its own.

DIANE: Yes, that's true.

RACHEL: You matched both the way it's made as well as the feel of it. That's a funny thing that we both do. It's as though we find our "work" already existing in the world, or we start to find things in the world that look like we might have made them, so we co-opt them. It isn't a shortcut, like, "Oh, if I buy that I don't have to make it." It's more like the world cooperating with you, offering up something that is a perfect companion to your own approach... so much so that you *have* to entertain it, or at least it's very tempting to entertain it, titillating. Now tell me about your use of linoleum? Because I can only think of one other artist who has ever used that material.

DIANE: That linoleum was also left over from an earlier project I did for six windows of the Racine Art Museum in Wisconsin. It was titled *Window Dressing*, and my idea was to evoke the feeling of merchandise window displays of the Deco period. The patterns and colors of this linoleum were so perfect in referencing that period.

RACHEL: Do you cut it by hand? And did you cut the copper by hand?

DIANE: My band saw is my favorite tool. It worked well for both.

RACHEL: So this is an example of a material imported from the domestic sphere, right?

DIANE: Right, I think there's that association, and at the same time, the industrial aspect of linoleum helps remove it from the wearable association. Also, since the linoleum could be scored and bent, it lent itself to the faceted shapes of *Vest-Scalloped* and *Collar-PaGoda*. You saw them both at the JTT show. With *Collar-PaGoda*, I think the form suggests a wide collar, but at the same time, both the shape and the linoleum suggests a pagoda roof shape. I like that it's open-ended.

RACHEL: This is a good example of something in your work I've been trying to put my finger on. Your works *present* themselves. *Yoke* is this way, too. They stand up on their own devices, or hanging mechanisms, and they address the viewer very directly. They shoot straight. There's a lot of sculpture in the world that shirks away from, or that communicates shyly. Your work seems to stand up and speak. Do you think about that as a gesture? Am I crazy?

DIANE: Sometimes I wonder if it's too obvious or too in-your-face.

RACHEL: No! It's wonderful because it's rare. It strikes me as unusual. And it's not solely because of some of the anthropomorphic qualities. Your work doesn't include a lot of pathos—the way most anthropomorphic work—including, perhaps, my own—does. It doesn't have this thing where you feel sort of sorry for it; a pathetic quality. I think that's why I told you I would ask you about making sculpture that refuses to turn its back. It's strong and authoritative. I really respond to that. As you look back on the gestures you felt compelled to make as an artist, do you see any connection between them and how you experience the world?

DIANE: No. My work is so directed toward form. I don't consciously bring in psychological aspects or historical references of my past, although those come in, I'm sure. There are certainly nostalgic visual references. For example, the color I chose for a sculpture called *Apron II* was similar to the color of a kitchen that I remembered from when I was growing up. It was very Deco, sort of a very shiny cream color and green. I also found a vintage linoleum to use on that sculpture that was almost identical to the linoleum in that same kitchen. But at the time, the choices were related to what I felt the piece needed. I wasn't aware of those nostalgic associations. I think it all came subconsciously. It's the same way my drawings metamorphose from the initial source. A lot of that is subconscious references. I mean, there are so many influences—especially things I look at—that may be more important overall than the specific actual source from which I'm working.

RACHEL: What are those?

DIANE: Well, architecture for sure. I remember one of the reasons I made a trip to Vienna was because of my interest in architects like Josef Hoffmann and Adolf Loos. I also went to Scotland to look at Rennie Mackintosh's work. Also, traditional Japanese architecture and clothing—their packaging—and, in general, Japanese culture is certainly an influence. The other thing that really excited me was when I first saw an exhibit, some time in the 1970s, of the photographs of industrial structures by Hilla and Bernd Becher. I bought their book called *Anonymous Sculptures*, which I still refer to often. The thing that struck me with those images was this close relationship between the form, the pattern, and the actual function of these water storage tanks or brick kilns. They were not designed by architects. They were designed by engineers, so there was no ego involved. It was just designed for functional purpose, but as a result, they were absolutely gorgeous structures.

RACHEL: That makes so much sense with your work!

DIANE: Then, back to my interest in spatial systems, I think that all came out of my interest in the type of perspective used in early pre-Renaissance paintings, sort of a tilted bird's eye view and parallel planes going back in space—no vanishing points. I especially love the way architecture is described this way in Persian miniatures, or early Siennese paintings or in Japanese screens and scrolls, like *The Tale of Genji*. But now, changing the subject, I wanted to ask you how you ended up working three-dimensionally.

RACHEL: Hmm... I don't have a great memory when it comes to what I spent time doing as a child, but there are some very specific moments when I can remember really trying to *construct* something from whatever I had around. I have one very vivid memory of trying to make a pair of shoes out of cardboard—real shoes I could wear. I was probably ten. I had a vision of making very grown-up-looking low high heels—kitten heels. The only vaguely structural material I had was cardboard, so it was a losing battle. But I remember it kind of worked and I was just thoroughly entertained by the exercise of it. As I grew up, I know I had a basic instinct to transform materials, but until I went to art school, I really only understood that through crafts and handiwork. I didn't know any artists and I didn't know contemporary art existed. No one ever explained to me that you could just be an artist, and it didn't have to be an applied art—graphic design, etc. So I was really slow to that possibility because I just wasn't exposed to it. But as soon as I met and came to know professors who were artists, I knew I wanted to be a part of that and signed up immediately—decided this is what my life is going to be like, and I began to “world build.” My early work was all miniature landscapes because I could quickly build out a space and talk about spatial relationships in a relatively efficient way. This idea of an autonomous zone continues in my work today—a place where there are very few strictures from outside forces, so the governing rules are created from the ground up by an individual, a family, or a very small community. I love the results of spaces in which the inhabitants make the rules. I search for

those environments, thinking about sculpture, the human body, animal bodies, relationships with a landscape, and needing the land to cooperate. There are relationships that in order to function require work patterns and productivity. It gets into this world that, for me, is a very fruitful regenerating feedback loop of making things and working with other people. I work with a number of exceptionally skilled craftspeople who help me fabricate very specific elements. I enjoy working very closely with my husband on projects. There are relationships around my practice that allow me to make projects, many of which are much larger than myself, that I could not make alone. I went from the miniature to many relatively large-scale works, which feel almost like theatrical productions, and which have to get set up and they inherently involve other people. Many times I take on a more directorial role.

DIANE: Thank you. You've expressed this all so beautifully. Hearing you speak about your interest in the interdependence of communities and your admiration for the craftspeople you work with, it seems to connect with your interest in the rural pioneer kind of movement, and your appreciation for the early rural farm structures and tools. That all relates so much to what you were just talking about.

RACHEL: I think there's a collective memory that a lot of people have about those circumstances, and that every little household is a microcosm of this kind of scenario. And I like that. I like thinking about people throughout history—and today—making ends meet.

DIANE: Maybe we could talk about how our experience as a female artist has changed—how has that influenced your career?

RACHEL: I want to know about yours first. How is it being a female artist? [*Laughs*]

DIANE: I go back much further than you. I was continuously making art, even when I was raising a family. I remember once—this was maybe back in the sixties—when I was, I don't know, showing my work in an art fair or something. Not like today's art fairs, but a little one, you know, a suburban art fair, and I remember someone saying—a man saying to me, “Your work is really good. I thought maybe a man had done this. It doesn't look like a woman's work.” And, at the time, I think I actually thought that was a compliment. I didn't have a lot of female role models. So I thought, okay, good, that means the work is strong.

RACHEL: Sure. I can imagine that.

DIANE: I shudder now to think of it, that I was thinking that way, you know?

RACHEL: Everyone is always at where they are at.

DIANE: Yeah, so I went back to school after that. I was just about to finish my BFA at the Art Institute of Chicago ▶

when marriage and starting a family quickly interrupted that. But I continued to work on my own in a very isolated situation for ten years until my youngest child was in first grade. Then I went back to SAIC to complete my BFA and then MFA. I loved being back in the art world.

RACHEL: How old were you then, when you went back to school?

DIANE: I was probably in my thirties. That was in the seventies, when I went back to school, and I—what was so important to me then was realizing that there were women artists whose work I related to so much. And it turned out that these women happened to be sculptors. Before that I hadn't really been aware of these women, like Eva Hesse and Jackie Windsor. Ree Morton was a visiting artist at the school when I was there, and also Linda Benglis. I related to their work because they were using ephemeral materials, not what I considered typical sculpture materials. And besides using these unorthodox, soft, pliable materials, they weren't putting their work on pedestals. Eva Hesse and Ree Morton's work would flow down from the wall to the floor. All those things interested me. They didn't fabricate their work; it was handmade. So I think that was what initially got me interested in working three-dimensionally. It was very important to me in terms of women artists making art.

RACHEL: Totally. That's so important, and a lot of the work you mentioned is quite physical. There's impact.

DIANE: Right, but it wasn't slick. That was important because so much of the work I was aware of before that, in the sixties—by male artists—had such a different feel to it.

RACHEL: You were struck by the fact that something could be both authoritative and handmade.

DIANE: I could relate as a woman to how that work was made, and as I think I mentioned earlier, I wasn't really trained as a sculptor, so many of the techniques I use are self-taught. Many of them are related to my experiences as a woman, sewing and working with fiber.

RACHEL: I feel it's still very challenging to gain traction as a female artist in the current contemporary art world, especially one making sculpture. It feels as though the support that's available is still quite slim. That's been my experience. I would venture to say that the same struggles women artists were dealing with in the sixties and seventies are still *just* as present today.

DIANE: Do you think it has something to do with a less aggressive nature of women than men in terms of their ...

RACHEL: There's very little *investment* prioritized toward women and the work that women make. It's egregious in the marketplace right now. The boom that's going on at the moment—it's ninety-five percent male artists. Sometimes

I wonder if it's because of the reality of women artists who choose to have children having to step back a little bit for family obligations. The art world has such a short attention span, so it's as if it's too risky to put money on someone who might step out of the light, or not produce new work for three to six months at some point in the future. The current mode is simply not to invest in supporting a long-term career of a woman the way the investments are set up to support long-term careers of men, beginning when men are *very* young, *very, very* young, like *twenty-three* years old. It's so surprising to me because I think, "Oh, that work is so unmaturing, it's so untested The investment is therefore embedded solely in the identity of this young man, the hope of the work he might create."

DIANE: This is the same problem that happens in other fields, not just art.

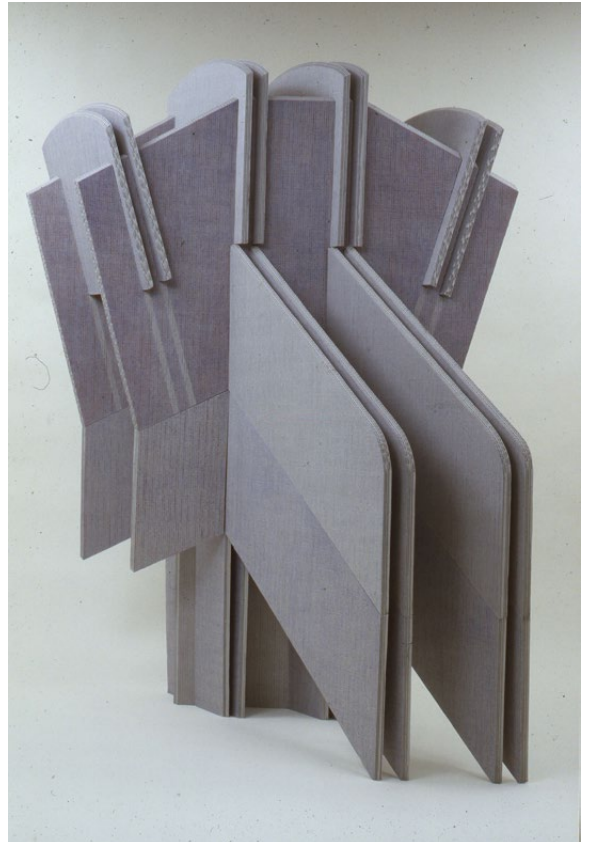
RACHEL: I know *so many* bold, strong, groundbreaking thirty-something, forty-something ... seventy-something women artists. The work is so sophisticated. It's so tested. They're not going to stop making work. They have a *huge* body of work, like yourself. They own it all, so it's like the stockpile of the century! I'm just so shocked that the investment isn't placed there. I just wanted to connect with you on this, to learn a bit about what your experience of that concern has been, if only to relay that I don't think much has changed, and that's shocking with how far apart we are in age.

DIANE: I would say there might be a positive change in terms of exposure for women because, for one thing—this isn't a scientific survey, but it seems to me that many curators, many museum curators, are women. And so I think that is helpful in terms of exhibition exposure. In terms of what you said about overall career building, that is still male-oriented, and auctions are not dominated by women artists. In terms of the market, you're very right about that, but I think in terms of exposure, women ...

RACHEL: It's better, I think. I hope you're right. Exposure is helpful, but unfortunately you need that other end. You need the back end for fuel.

DIANE: Yeah, and to pay the bills.

RACHEL: Well, yes, and to continue to make, no—to push—the work. ==



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: All images **Diane Simpson**.
Amish Bonnet (detail), 1992, brass tube, waxed linen thread,
 fabric, 68 x 18 x 21.5 in. *Cuffs*, 2012, found wood plant stand,

enamel, MDF, embossed paper, 48.5 x 18.5 x 12 in.
Ribbed Kimono (front view), 1980, corrugated archival
 cardboard, colored pencil, crayon, 84 x 60 x 44 in.

Yoke, 2012, enamel, oil stain, crayon, aluminum,
 64 x 20 x 16 in.