

Nancy Rubins

California-based sculptor Nancy Rubins is a pioneer of monumental constructions and installations made from discarded industrial and recreational material. Using steel cables, Rubins has tethered together old airplane parts, water heaters, trailers, or boats in enormous abstract compositions that seem to defy gravity, vertiginously cantilevering over their steel base structures. Her work is represented in major institutional collections such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. She has erected monumental sculptures in prominent public spaces, including a 45-foot high, 55-foot long sculpture, *Big Pleasure Point*, in the plaza at Lincoln Center in New York City, for which Peter Schjeldahl of *The New Yorker* magazine dubbed her “the California genius of junk.” Rubins just completed an even larger sculpture, *Big Edge*, of the same title for the MGM Mirage’s City Center project in Las Vegas. Nasher Sculpture Center Curator Jed Morse recently visited her at the home and studio complex she shares with her husband, artist Chris Burden, in the hills outside of Los Angeles.

Jed Morse: Nancy, this place is incredible. How long have you been here?

Nancy Rubins: I believe Chris came out here in '84, and we just tried to accumulate land. We lived down the hill in kind of a cabin-y tent for about four-and-a-half years while we built the house. Now, I've turned that into a kind of studio. We put that big, barn-like structure there and I built the sculpture pad here originally. There are huge concrete chunks under the ground here, and over there in certain places so that, like the piece that is now at MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles], I could build it here to fit into Gagosian's space [where it was shown initially]. So I can work stuff out here at actual size. That always worked for me.

Then, somehow, not that long ago, I kind of graduated to making these models [points to the scale models inside the studio]. I had never really understood the use of models before because always the physical space that you go in is going to be a little bit different than that model you think out. It wasn't anything that I really needed; it was something to make a presentation to someone else and get them inside. Me and the guy I work with, Collin Cook—he's worked with me forever—we've used all of these different materials and



Nancy Rubins with models inside the sculpture studio



Nancy Rubins, *Chas' Stainless Steel, Mark Thompson's Airplane Parts, About 1,000 Pounds of Stainless Steel Wire*, at Gagosian's Beverly Hills Space at MOCA, 2001, Stainless steel and airplane parts, 300 x 648 x 396 in. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Purchased in honor of Beatrice Gersh with funds provided by the Acquisition and Collection Committee; The Broad Art Foundation; Linda and Bob Gersh; David, Susan, Steven, and Laura Gersh; and Eugenio Lopez. © Nancy Rubins

we know how they physically go together, and we know how to work them in space, and it's kind of an unspoken conversation that we can have with each other and it works out fine. Then, with the first boat piece, which is cantilevered off the roof at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, Collin and I are thinking about these boats and he's worried about physically how they work. So we made these models and pretended that our hands were cranes and thought where the cables would go and thought, 'Ah, this could work.' It was really amazing because when we went to do the piece, there's a certain point where Collin and I looked at each other and thought, 'Wow, it's working just like that model!' And, all of the sudden, the model and the tininess made sense to me. There's a *caveat* to it that once you are physically there, you always change things; the model is just the spirit of it.

JM: So, now you're working on a big installation for Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills?

NR: We have the model for it here. We're going to drill into the concrete and pour piers because you don't want things to shake. This will be like a stainless steel armature and these boats are all monochrome. I have hundreds of them in the desert in storage. They're really 'used,' stripped down. They have a lot of marks on them.

JM: What drew you to the boats in the first place? Was it the forms?

NR: Yeah, they're nice. They are just beautiful. They recall the figure and the womb and they are everywhere and forever; a universal, ancient thing that crosses boundaries.

JM: So, at Gagosian, you're going to keep it monochromatic?

NR: Yeah. [Pointing to the model] This sculpture will be about forty-foot long. This one is about forty-six feet long and is thirty-something feet high, and this space is a little smaller. They have a curved ceiling with rafters, so some of the boats are going to have to fit through holes in there.

JM: How long do you think it's going to take to build?

NR: Ten days.

JM: Ten days? That's it? That's impressive.

NR: Then on the other side, I'm going to have drawings on the first floor, and then on the second floor, collages. Let's go over and take a look at the drawings. [Walking downhill to drawing studio.]

Artist Q & A



Drawings in progress

I was draping them over things—like a big sawhorse or over a piece of rope like a big tent. I didn't really know what to do with them—and I'm still trying to figure it out!

[We enter the drawing studio, which is really the garage of their house, where there are solid graphite drawings on the wall, on the floor, piled in the corner.]

JM: Do you tear the paper and put it together?

NR: No, I glue it together. That's an old drawing stuck on top of a new one. I have a collection of old paper. You know, there's a really nice piece that had drawings and hot water heaters [*Drawings and Hot Water Heaters*, 1992 (reconfigured by the artist each time it is installed)]. I always loved that piece, and that always made sense to me. The line between the drawings and the sculpture became more blurred. But the drawings were still drawings. I realized that you don't need to see all of the drawings at once; I was thinking of them more like batteries, or like a place that contained energy. I thought so long as you know it's there, who needs to see them all? I could just pack them on top of each other.

JM: In these drawings, that energetic mark-making is subsumed within the whole of this entire sheet covered with graphite. It becomes a really subtle kind of motion that you see within it.

NR: Yeah. It makes a weird duck because you never see it all at once because as the light moves around you get all of these different...

JM: ...Reflections, especially when it's folded-over and the light reflects off of it in different ways.

[A high-definition digital projector is mounted to the ceiling of the garage and the white wall across from it serves as a screen. A film is projected showing the assembly and construction of an enormous, warehouse-size installation of recreational trailers and water heaters stacked and cantilevered over one another.]

JM: Holy smokes! What's supporting the other end of that trailer?

NR: There's a steel structure that goes through it—like a steel bridge inside the trailer. Trailers are built like nothing. The only structural part is that little piece of steel on the bottom; the rest is like cardboard.

JM: Were you composing as you built?

NR: Yeah.

JM: All just tethered together with wire supports. Wow.

NR: I know. I love the wires; the wires are beautiful.

JM: It reminds me a bit of a Leger painting, all cylinders and rectangles and cones, but done on an enormous scale in three-dimensions.



Collage on the wall of the collage studio

JM: I'm interested in how the two-dimensional work—the collages, the drawings—relates to the three-dimensional work. Or, maybe it doesn't; maybe you see it as separate?

NR: No, I'm sure it does. I'm not sure how they relate, but they do. I think I first started making [drawings] in graduate school and I couldn't figure out what to do with them? Do you leave them on the board? Do you put them on the wall? I didn't really know what to do with them. So, at that point,

NR: I think there's something important about seeing that structural part. Formally, you're right—it's very painterly that way. But the really structural, visceral part of it that you see; it's really staying together like *that*.

[New film begins showing installation of *Big Edge* in Las Vegas].

NR: This is from Las Vegas. We just finished this.

JM: This is even larger than the one you did in Lincoln Center?

NR: This one took six weeks, but we had a restricted amount of time between 5:30 in the morning and 12:30 in the afternoon to work on it because of the heat.

JM: It's amazing. Are the connection points on the boats predetermined?

NR: You mean where you're attaching the wires? You kind of know; there are these repetitive spaces and then the crew has drills up there if they need to drill more. They drill around the ribs, around the structural places—they know where the boats are strong. Do you want to go down the hill and look at the collage studio?

[We hike downhill and arrive at the collage studio. The room is filled with large tables covered with collages.]



The collage studio

NR: I used to use this as a drawing studio and then I started making these photo-collages. They are just made with pictures from old sculptures and old models and I have a photographer who prints them to any scale. So you can really experiment with scale and mix images of toys [used in three-dimensional models] with images of real boats. Everything I do in sculpture is so labor intensive; this is a kind of pleasure.

JM: You can tell which of the cutouts came from finished works because they have the chains on them.

NR: Yeah. The wires are still there. [Looking carefully at the collages...] These are toys; that's a toy.

JM: Such great light in all of these spaces.

NR: It's a beautiful space; I really like working down here. And, people have to really want to find you to come get you here.