

Architecture of the Spirit: Reflections on the work of Norma Minkowitz

by David Revere McFadden, Museum of Arts & Design, New York

“Everything is complicated; if that were not so, life and poetry and everything else would be a bore” wrote the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). Norma Minkowitz’s sculptures are unabashedly complicated; she designs and devises complex pathways in fiber using the traditional and long sidelined technique of crocheting. This is not crochet that ends up as an ornamental doily or antimacassar; by stiffening the fibers she is able to produce intricate knots and loops that hold and support each other to create translucent air-filled three-dimensional forms.

Complexity is not pursued as an end in itself, however, Minkowitz exploits the labor intensive nature of crocheting into often large-scale forms that have great presence in their environment. They are admired for their seemingly weightless and elegant simplicity. This is the magic of Minkowitz’s work.

The disciplined repetitiveness of crochet is the foundation for her imposing forms. Each minute fiber interaction, guided by the artist’s hands, is revealed as essential to her achievement of form. At once solid and evanescent, filled with light and air, her works are often installed in such a way that they hover in the magical middle ground between heaven and earth. In these gracious and organic shapes, air and light are held in a delicate balance, recalling the misleadingly delicate struts and trceries found in Late Gothic architecture. Her metaphorical building structures do not remain vacant shells, they are inhabited by a spiritual presence that evokes a

sense of life, which reflects the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual concerns of the artist.

My early studies in biology, particularly structural biology, have been a wonderful background for appreciating work like Minkowitz's. Each of the smallest elements — a crossing of threads, an individual knot, is essential to her realization of the final form, in a manner not unlike the complex assembling of individual cells to form a complete organism. This transformation is made possible only by cells held in genetically predetermined arrangements. By paying homage to the basic construction principles of the natural world, the artist achieves forms that appear to have been given the breath of life.

The natural colors of her chosen medium also reiterate fundamental organic origins and significance. When the artist introduces color other than that of the fiber, she evokes the lustrous secondary and tertiary colors of nature, colors rich and yet subtle.

Norma Minkowitz reminds us of the fleeting nature of our beings while embracing the corporeal. Norma Minkowitz's work is truly architecture of the spirit.

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