

Norma Minkowitz

By Jane Adlin

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Sculpture made from flexible material is for the most part a post World War II art phenomenon. This intensely inventive era, in which artists felt a freedom to experiment, spawned new ways to use less than traditional materials. Fiber previously thought of as a functional material, was liberated from the loom and used to make three-dimensional works of art. Fiber took its place along side other 'new' materials – Corten steel, cast concrete, and plastics of all sorts. Sculpture need no longer be chiseled or cast, but could be knotted or even knitted.

Norma Minkowitz has taken textile art to new heights. Her shellac-stiffened and painted crochet sculptures emerge as unique and brilliant forms expressing self-conscious ideas and worldly concerns.

As a young child Minkowitz learned the traditional technique of crochet from her mother. She has translated this 'woman's work' into a high art form and it is the major technique she uses for her sculpture. "Through the medium of crochet the process becomes part of the content while structure and surface are achieved at the same time." (p.49 *The Tactile Vessel* by Jack Lenor Larsen).

She has also been fascinated with line drawing as in the fine pen and ink cross-hatching of Albrecht Durer's prints and drawings. Minkowitz connects her love of drawing to the linear quality of the fiber she uses to make her sculptures.

At a personal level, the notion of containment has been a continuous investigation for Minkowitz. "The concept of containment motivates personal feelings and thoughts that I express in universal themes of earth, life and death. We come from a container and end life in a container". (p.49, *The Tactile Vessel*). Her early pieces were most often basket forms or box-like shapes, containers that always retained and questioned the outside/ inside that she emphasized with suggestive titles, such as *Trap*, *Inside*, and *The Jealous Eye* (in which a spherical iris rolls back and forth frighteningly trapped in its socket).

Frequently an abstract form, a body part, or even a small figure would be added embellishing her preoccupation. Minkowitz is continually exploring the notion of containment - more recently in figurative sculptures. She crochets portraits in *Rosemunda*, torsos in *Dreamer's Descent*, two boys expressing the content of their dreams, and plant forms in *Root*, stressing the three-dimensional strength of a metal or stone sculpture while retaining a sense of ethereal lightness. These are, upon first glance, solid but are surely translucent. We see the outside skin but we also see what is contained within.

Many of Minkowitz's most recent works have become narratives exploring transitions both literally as in *Sequence* (which examines the life cycle of a flower from pod to bloom to shriveled bud) and figuratively as in *Body to Soul*. "My concept was to create a sequential installation using the female figure as a symbol of the ephemeral". These wall reliefs and sculpture series studies the light, shadow and mystery of her transparent forms, and the clarity and sophistication of her ideas are resonant.

All of Norma Minkowitz's sculptures are remarkable for their ability to evoke what are seemingly opposing visual sensations. The psychological complexities of her work, the observation of human behavior, and the metaphorical containment, fuse into the beautiful forms she creates, making some of the most important sculptures of our time.

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