

Norma Minkowitz: Drawn to the Edge

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Upon first seeing Norma Minkowitz's work we immediately know two things: that it is beautiful and that it is strange. Both strangeness and beauty are derived from her strong bond with nature and its mysterious cycles of death and regeneration. The images are so distinctive and compelling that their beauty bears no relationship to the pretty, unusual or merely novel. Her work asks its viewer to consider her images not as things that have equals in the 'real' world, nor as substitutes for such equals, but instead as things that have their own kind of specific and astonishing reality. These images are deeply visionary, drawing in and seizing hold of the viewer's emotions and imagination. The images fascinate because each piece seems inhabited by a personality that animates it and has brought it quietly to life.

Minkowitz's invented pods, seeds, humanoid and animal shapes seem both probable and possible because of the way they connect to forms that exist in nature. Her work is reminiscent of the time before scientific classification when thinkers and philosophers imagined a world full of yet-to-be-discovered, astonishing and uncanny plants and animals. Her work makes it possible to believe in marvels and visions such as the woman transformed into a landscape, Goddesses transformed into spirits, and transparent bodies that present their bones and arteries to our amazed eyes.

Minkowitz often merges, clones or 'morphs' the botanical with the zoological. The mixed creatures she creates are 'chimeras', cousins to those strange beasts of Greek mythology that had the body of a goat, head of a lion and the tail of a serpent. Her work makes it impossible to answer the riddle "Animal. Vegetable or Mineral" because these possibilities are so fused. Although the work defies categories, Minkowitz subtly guides, focuses and transforms the response to her work through the poetry of her titles. These may be humorous or punning, literary or descriptive; they are always significant and referential, providing a clue to the work's meaning.

Minkowitz's method of fabrication is stunningly repetitive, compulsive and painstaking. It has created a unique and idiosyncratic way of making sculpture, an arena usually defined by heaviness, mass and opacity. Throughout her career, Minkowitz's work has been constructed using the crocheting technique she learned as a child. As a young adult in art school, Minkowitz was preoccupied with making

very elaborate, painstaking line drawings. Her original attraction to fiber was grounded in correspondences she saw between fiber's linearity and the drawn line. Her use of thread or light wire as three-dimensional line determines shape and, like hand-writing, guarantees that each loop, whorl, stitch will be entirely unique and individual.¹ The elaborate tracery she creates with her materials mimics the hesitations and irregularities of drawing, changes in pressure and direction, erasures, missed areas, hatching and cross-hatching.

Drawing continues to be important to Minkowitz. Although the drawings are not done as preparation for sculpture, they are often made when she completes one and may contain elements of the finished work. These drawings are as complex and intricate as the sculptures, full of an intense and explosive energy. They fill the page to overflowing with a phantasmagoric efflorescence of detail. The drawings are made intuitively, spontaneously, without a plan; their evolution suggests their content and direction. The experience of making these drawings is extremely self-revealing and personal for Minkowitz. It gives her a different technique than those she uses in making sculpture to communicate emotions, thoughts and fears.

When she made her first transparent sculptural form² by crocheting around a shoe, her subsequent artistic technique was established. Minkowitz has crocheted around a wide variety of forms; basketballs, *paper maché* supports, children's toys, bowls, and figurines. When these found forms are not the ones she needs, she makes her own. All her work begins with these armature-like supports and evolves from these beginnings.

Her characteristic use of see-through construction and translucent materials exposes the sculpture's interiors. This transparency often reveals interiors containing arrangements of rocks, twigs, and branches that resemble systems of veins, nerves or organs. Regardless of the beauty and complexity of her technique, the most significant parts of some of the sculptures are the areas where there is nothing – the holes in the mesh, the hollow spaces defined by the shell of a thread. Even the material, the crocheted mesh, becomes a nearly theoretical web just barely defining the boundaries of

¹ Minkowitz has said: "I feel like stitching and drawing are one and the same".

² Prior to this time, Minkowitz made solid forms.

there/not there. These holes and absences underscore the relationship of this work to drawing as they mirror drawing's negative spaces, erasures and blank areas.

Every inch of her work bears the visual evidence of her hand. Even though they are comprised of the same materials and use the same techniques, no two pieces are alike. It is the astonishing variety and individuality of her work that makes it both fascinating and significant. A particularly interesting aspect of her technique is the way it emphasizes and preserves the sense of time it took to make the work. It calls attention to the repetitive nature of her touch on the surfaces and evokes a sense of shared touch with the viewer. The appearance of seamless, of endless circling with no clues as to start or finish underscores this sense of time, labor and endless touch. The viewer feels that their experience of looking can never reach an end and that mysteries lie on the unseen sides.³

This sense of inability to see everything she has made, is due in part to her use of shifting scale. The armatures used range from doll-like to larger than life size and are often disproportionate to their counterparts in nature. Depending on her chosen image, these shifts in proportion relate to the crucial role the miniature and gigantic play in her work. Her large pieces present a child's eye view with big vistas of magnified detail. The small work makes the viewer a giant and creates the illusion of a galaxy inside a jewel, containing details sensed but not seen.

The pieces are less delicate than they look; the thread, wire and hog gut are stiffened and protected through the application of a variety of strengthening and damage-resistant coatings including resins, shellac and epoxy. The crochet itself is quite strong, its web-like grip controls and defines exterior space and gives shape to the inner structure. When she works, Minkowitz often strains her crocheted fibers to extremes, sometimes using weights to form and distort the work. She says this is "similar to the process of aging or the simple movements of skin"⁴. Although they are quite durable, the sculptures appear as fragile as an eggshell. Such secret toughness and buttressed delicacy is an important part of how her work should be understood. Their hidden strength is their secret, like the steel hand in the velvet glove.

³ No matter how often I see these pieces, I can't find seams of any sort nor can I figure out how supports were removed.

⁴ Quote from the artist

Minkowitz frequently uses the image and symbolism of the nest, web, and shell; all forms deeply encoded in human memory and emotional response. Her work mixes together many aspects of all these primal forms, creating entirely new combinations. There is one particularly distinctive sculpture that falls into this primal arena: "Ruskya Certza".

"Ruskya Certza" (Russian Heart, 2002)⁵ is horizontal, 6.5" high, 21" wide and 15" deep. This piece is autobiographical, a reference to a memory of the intricately embroidered, vividly colored, Russian-inspired peasant blouses her mother wore during Minkowitz's childhood. The word 'heart' is laden with meaning above and beyond the anatomical; this piece is about love as the heart's blood, and the strength of relationship within a family. The sculptural heart of the title is "made of cloth and stuffed. It is embroidered in the same type of colors that I remember seeing as a girl."⁶ "Ruskya Certza", centrally dominated by an opaque heart-like shape, is anatomically complete with painted and stitched veins and aortas. Much as a child might sit on a parent's lap, the heart is nestled on and supported by a crocheted coil. It is held within an elaborately crocheted, scallop-edged net form, very delicate and refined in appearance, not unlike an old-fashioned doily.

Minkowitz makes her human/animal forms by crocheting over existing naturalistic forms. These include small statuettes, portrait busts, *papier-mâché* models or dressmaker's forms. The figures that emerge from her crocheting and wrapping processes have facial features that look as if they had been gently erased. They may often be missing extremities such as heads, hands, arms, facial features and torsos. These absences lend these figures an enigmatic and plaintive appearance yet at the same time they have an extraordinary, anonymous dignity. All have distinct and powerful personas. These figures of Minkowitz's present the body as an empty and anonymous vessel that must be activated by emotional response. All her figures are ciphers, Sibylline in nature, bearing no overt signs of emotion.

"I Am The Land", 1991 (12.5" high, 50.5" wide, 16.5" deep⁷), was crocheted over a generic form. It's empty interior is revealed through its transparent skin. It is a reclining, headless, armless and genderless form painted in the modulated earth tones of a desert landscape. The movement from the torso to the hips and the gentle decline towards the delicate ankles creates the impression of an aerial

⁵ Collection of the artist

⁶ Quote from the artist

⁷ Collection: Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO.

view over some desert place. The color shifts from ochre torso to muted orange hip to shadowed charcoal legs much like late evening sun moves over hills. This torso piece is meant to “become a representation of anyone...not a specific portrait of a person.”⁸ This presentation of the body as landscape, as an aspect of nature, is deeply rooted in Minkowitz’s aesthetic.

“Boy In A Tree”,⁹ 2001, is roughly the scale of a young boy’s head and torso: 29” high, 11” wide 11.5” deep. It is also genderless, legless and armless, the body ending slightly below the buttocks. The head is made from plant roots that are formed and stiffened with paint and resins to resemble a nest or a head. The body is opaque. “I first crocheted a form that was open, and then I crocheted on that body creating ridges from the edges of the strips that I had added...the texture made me think of the bark of a tree.”¹⁰ This boy with the mysterious head is caught in a moment of intense concentration or meditation. Like some character in mythology, he seems to be in transition from human to plant.

“Sisters”, 2001, (43” high, 21” wide, 19” deep¹¹) is unusual in Minkowitz’s work in that it incorporates an ordinary chair visible through the mesh of crochet. Above this chair sit two young girls whose armless, legless torsos appear to be fused above the hip, like Siamese twins. Below the separated waists where they are invisibly joined, they share a wide, translucent skirt banded in yellow at the hem. The four legs of the chair poke out under this skirt as if taking the place of their own legs. One is slightly taller than the other and has the beginnings of breasts; the other has more babyish features and a little pigtail. It is a deeply psychological portrait of siblings full of visual puns, ‘joined at the hip’, ‘inseparable’, ‘saddled with her sister’ etc; all things that grownups say about children or about their own siblings.

Minkowitz creates multi-figure sculptures that illustrate the passage of time or other kinds of transitions. She refers to these constellations of forms as ‘sequential’¹². This method can sometimes use several juxtaposed and related figures or it can bring together nearly identical figures, each modified slightly from one that precedes it. Regardless of which method she uses, the arrangement and alignment of the figures is crucial because of the way sequence and proximity creates meaning. She has

⁸ From correspondence with artist, June 2004

⁹ Collection: Fern Grauer

¹⁰ From correspondence with artist, June 2004

¹¹ Collection: Sara and David Lieberman

¹² The term refers to the use of an image repeated more than once in the context of an artwork.

made many of these serial pieces but "Goodbye Goddess" (2003) and "Body to Soul"¹³ (2002) typify her use of this form. Both pieces employ a progression of 5 parts and use the female figure as a symbol of the ephemeral. They both engage with the theme of transformation from bodied to disembodied states. Once again, the time needed to read across these images slows down the gaze and creates a desire to understand what is being presented.

"Goodbye Goddess" (51" high, 96" wide, 9" deep¹⁴) is a series of four nearly identical, smaller than life-sized "classical" statuettes in a line that leads to a 5th circular shape hanging above them. Their contours are blurred, their features indistinct. Each is dressed in Roman style, draped in a toga-like outfit that falls well over the feet. These multiple figures slowly change in detail to become symbols of passage. In the fifth and final form, the same face that is on the figures is now distant and sky-bound, like a soul departing the body. To Minkowitz it is a piece that symbolizes the process of mortality or perhaps immortality through a series of subtle visual alterations in each figure.

"Body to Soul"¹⁵ (2002, 68" high, 106" wide, 10" deep) also uses four female figures leading to an fifth that summarizes their meaning. Each figure loses more substance, as if demonstrating the process of becoming disembodiment. These four diminishing female bodies appear to be slowly unraveling, forming a yarn like ball at the bottom. The balls hanging from each represent the spooling out of each form's interior, illustrating the transformation of body into the lightness of the soul. The point of the series is found in the extremely abstracted, fifth and final shape. It represents the penultimate transformation from corporal body to fleshless spirit and is the most significant element of the sequence.

Minkowitz's 2004 piece, "Chrysalis" (58" x 23.5" x 10") resembles the spun carapace concealing the lumpy mass of a soon-to-be-born winged insect. As often occurs in Minkowitz's work, the total abstraction of the object is firmly grounded in the concrete world by its title. This piece combines transparency with opacity, rendering the hidden areas all the more mysterious.

Although much of an artist's process is often hidden from view, Minkowitz's work is particularly iceberg-like in nature. What's visible to the eye in her work is only a small part of an invisible mass of thought and labor. Ultimately what we see is a kind of trace, a residue of multiple processes. These often

¹³ Collection: Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY

¹⁴ Collection: Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT.

¹⁵ Collection: Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY

involve disparate ideas and materials that have been considered and rejected, used in ways other than expected or totally changed in the middle of fabrication.

Minkowitz's drawings and sculptures are among the few objects that remain in our technological culture that generously provide us with answers to the question 'where does the labor go'? The investment of time, energy and touch manifested in her work surround her objects like a corona. There is an intangible something that keeps us looking again and again at Minkowitz's work, something above and beyond mere beauty and novelty. The source of this attraction can be found in the way her objects amplify emotional associations and past experiences. We strongly feel the presence of the artist in the use of a technique that so accentuates the touch of her hand. The artist able to draw the viewer in through the marriage of concept and technique without over-reliance on one aspect or the other performs an extraordinary magic act. It is Minkowitz's skillful ability to perform this magic that makes her work so magnetic, memorable and emotionally charged.