

San Francisco Chronicle

Ann Weber turns cardboard into art

Julian Guthrie, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, February 24, 2010



Artist Ann Weber, a delicate woman, relies on some indelicate tools: a \$25 Arrow P-22 stapler from Ace Hardware, a box cutter, shellac and loads of cardboard pulled from trash bins.

Weber cuts cardboard into strips and staples pieces together until forms take shape. Sometimes the shapes are primal, looking like pods and seeds. Sometimes they are woven or coiled abstract figures. Sometimes they are smooth, elegant and towering shapes, resembling members of a wedding party awaiting a portrait.

"I was drawn to the challenge of making beauty from something so common and ubiquitous as cardboard,"

said Weber, who is the artist-in-residence at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum's Kimball Education Gallery this month. "I'm from the Midwest, where the saying is we can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Weber's works range in size from 12 inches high to 16 feet tall. While some of her pieces are finished in bronze or fiberglass, most are plain cardboard preserved and strengthened with shellac. She fishes around trash bins near her Emeryville loft for much of the cardboard, she said. She has come to see the difference in cardboard made in different countries, and looks for cardboard faded in uneven ways by the sun.

Her path to creating sculptures from cardboard began with her first pottery class in the 1970s. A recent graduate in art history from Purdue University, she fell in love with clay - and with a fellow student, a tall blond with long dreadlocks. The two married and opened a small pottery studio and store in Ithaca, N.Y. She spent hours a day making fine porcelain plates, cups and bowls.

Years later, divorced and interested in evolving from craftswoman to artist, Weber made her way west. She earned her master's degree in fine arts from the California College of Arts and Crafts, where she studied under Viola Frey, known for her monumental ceramic sculptures.

"I remember Viola said, 'Go look at the work of (Wassily) Kandinsky. That will be your information.' I sat at the potter's wheel and started throwing these Kandinsky shapes. It was a eureka moment."

She went on to work with various materials, from papier-mache to canvas and newspapers. She was always drawn to manipulating basic materials in unconventional ways and had seen the beautiful furniture made from corrugated cardboard by architect Frank Gehry.

"I had just moved into a large studio in East Oakland and there was not much money for anything," Weber said. "I started looking at the piles of boxes I had used in the move and thought, 'I will make art out of cardboard.' "

Many of her pieces are metaphors for life experiences, she says, particularly her view of relationships. Several sculptures are titled "Almost" and represent how the sexes imperfectly connect. Their imperfection, Weber notes, is part of the beauty.

"If you fit together with someone too perfectly, it wouldn't be good," she said. "I like looking at the tension, the dynamics, the variety."

Standing in the Kimball Education Gallery, a museum visitor approached Weber and asked, "How do you know whether your piece will stand up?" She smiled and replied, "Isn't our whole life about balancing acts?"

Looking around the gallery, where her wedding party sculptures were on display - the white came from cheese boxes, not paint - Weber added, "I love the simplicity of cardboard. I love how it invites you to see things differently."

Artist-in-Residence: Each month, the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in Golden Gate Park invites one artist to take up residency in the Kimball Education Gallery. The artist of the month works on installations and talks to visitors. Sculptor Ann Weber is the museum's artist-in-residence for February. On Friday from 6-8:30 p.m., Weber will give an artist's talk and invite people to create their own works. Admission to the Kimball gallery is free. For information on Weber, go to: annwebersculpture.com. For information on the program, e-mail cinaba@famsf.org or call (415) 750-3528.

E-mail Julian Guthrie at jguthrie@sfgchronicle.com <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/02/24/DDEV1C064T.DTL#ixzz0hiOrQrda>