

Audrey Wollen

**The Steel Curve
of Adornment**

Arts and Letters

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for Diane Simpson
Formal Wear

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Diane Simpson's *Formal Wear* is on view at the American Academy of Arts and Letters from September 27, 2025, to February 8, 2026.

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The Steel Curve of Adornment

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When I was a little girl, one of my favorite things to do was draw my own paper dolls. I cut them out—carefully, lest I lop off a tenderly angled elbow—and in a state of complete rapture traced their bodies, face hovering close to the page, concentration-tongue peeking out of my mouth. I created a closet of elaborate outfits for them, with rectangular foldable tabs on the shoulders, waist, and thighs of each stiffly floating dress or skirt suit. (Pants were hard to get right, because of the gap between the legs.)

As I look through my company of surviving dolls, they seem to track my growing awareness of femininity's affordances and constraints, my predictions of what a gendered adulthood might require of me. I want to be clear: They are not tragic. They are, at times, kitschy, majestic, funny, smutty, glamorous, and bizarre. Drawn somewhere between ages five and nine, in the late 1990s, they sometimes verge on the pornographic or the totemic, like perky blonde fertility goddesses, half-*Baywatch*, half-Willendorf Venus. Huge,

globular breasts tilt over lanky legs. Biceps are emphatic, toes are tippy. Hair, astronomical.

I often provided an assortment of babies to go alongside this statuesque woman, ostensibly her children, but I drew them in such numerical excess that my dolls started to scan less like parents and more like Henry Darger's generals, commanding infinite battalions of round-bellied daughters. The dolls transcended more than just presumed biological limitations; they spilled over and across history. I was one foot in the Britney-dominated pop-*Umwelt* of my era, midriff bare and begging to be hit just one more time, but my other foot was firmly planted in the Victorian childhood that invented childhood, the leafy, sprightly world of *The Secret Garden*, *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Peter Pan*, rustling with petticoats, clattering down narrow hallways in shiny black boots. I dressed them across time, pinafores next to crop tops. I added *-ella* onto my favorite nouns to create names, as if the entire world belonged to us and could be easily feminized: Poetrella, Forestella, Nightella. These were all pleasures. But the central delights of my private bedroom factory were those of flatness. The game was turning imaginary flesh, curved and fecund, into thin paper and then back again. Sexuality could broaden and collapse, like an accordion pleat. I was discovering girlhood as a form of *trompe l'oeil*, a sleight of hand that could make something deep out of what is conventionally understood to be shallow.

My paper dolls were bodies without organs, slivers of image and feeling, who were undeniably incomplete without their garments, which, of course, were made of the same stuff as they were. Glassy reams of printer paper, thick streaks of marker in mass-produced pinks, yellows, and blues, giving off the smell of gasoline. Materially speaking, the doll and her dress were interchangeable. Spiritually speaking, this promised something important: that I could, through accoutrements, both expand and narrow who I was, creating exoskeletons that would bridge the gap between different versions of myself. (A friend told me recently that cockroaches can flatten themselves down to a thin pancake to crawl through cracks in the walls, "because of their exoskeletons," a fact I find too horrifying to verify.) I started looking at my clothes differently, wondering how they were built. I started paying attention to what they looked like when I was not wearing them: lying on the bed, a calm lake of fabric, vacant. Somehow, they still held a girl inside them. An idea of a girl. But that's all a girl ever is—an idea. An idea I have, again and again, every day. My silent, continuous "Eureka!"

When I search for "mirror stage baby" on YouTube, to remind myself what babies are like, I find an eighteen-year-old video of a chubby baby looking intently at a live stream of himself, through a digital camera hooked up to an old TV. The technology seems considerably older than 2007. The father, who appears gleeful in the background and runs the

account, has added “There Must Be an Angel” by Eurhythmics over the clip. The description reads: “Ray looking at himself on camera again. This is quite old footage but I can’t throw it away.”

In Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, the infant notices herself in the mirror, and through seeing her reflection, she begins to understand herself as an image. She is framed, visible, and newly real, as in, she exists outside the splintered flesh-consensus she had previously understood reality to be—gut churning, hand grasping, mouth wet and drooling. She witnesses empty space between her body and other bodies (who she had thought were merely weird, milky extensions of herself, appearing when she needed them). The rest of the time, she feels herself to be round, acutely three-dimensional, but in the mirror, she appears to be flat, contained entirely in a two-dimensional surface. In the mirror, she has no backside, or underneath—no secrets. She has only an outline. From that realization on, Lacan proposes, this person will be pulled between two realities: the baby in the mirror, paragon of coherence, evident to others, inside-less, and the baby she is aware of through her own body, fragmented, sensational, and private. In other words, we start to carry the idea of the mirror inside of us—we don’t need to see our reflections in order to access that idealized version of ourselves. When I look at a dress on a hanger, limp and narrow, some deep part of me thinks: I might be *that* baby, in that dress. The baby in the mirror. In that dress,

I can imagine how I am seen from the outside, and in that imagining, I am offered brief solace from the insistent voluptuousness of having a body, with all its attendant bliss, muck, and decay.

The outline—and the fantasy of enclosure that it evokes—is dependent on its surrounding background: The room around the baby is just as important as the reflection of the baby herself. She can see that she is held in space, plopped into a setting that she does not control; when she kicks, the carpet does not shudder in tandem. She is a discrete thing among things, in relationship to each other through mappable distance, as well as through the proprioceptive rush of texture. Context! It’s a helluva drug. But we actually reach paper-doll levels of gestalt. But we do flirt with our edges, our edginess. We co-author the fiction of self, with the help of garments, buildings, strangers, and other methods of spatial and sexual organization. We open doors, walk through them, slide our arms into sleeves, lean out of windows, cover, and uncover ourselves—another archi-tectonic element among many, a roaming shape on a linear plane. When I remember something that happened to my body, something I really experienced, it occasionally returns to me only as a drawing or a photograph, even if no such representation exists. I crawl back to myself through a tiny crack in the wall, flattened like a pancake.

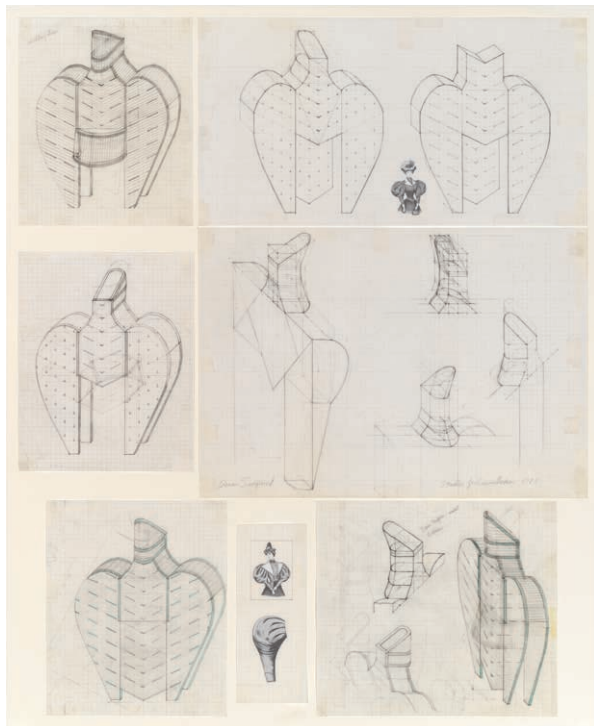
When I first saw Diane Simpson’s sculptures, I thought: She’s made paper-doll outfits for a building.

They looked like clothes, but rigid, oversized, and right-angled. Not huge, but they read like schematics, or scale models, as if they are promising something larger than themselves. But, no, that phrasing—an outfit for a building—it's too Christo and Jeanne-Claude, too cloaked and massive, not what I mean at all. She's made an outfit for a woman, if a woman were stocky and square and made of industrial materials. I mentally conjure a superhero, bionic and colossal, wearing one of Simpson's bonnets. No, that's not quite right either. But it's true that her work vivifies what might appear to be pure edifice. One imagines a person wearing her capes, muffs, vests, and gowns, and the wearer is built of something stronger than muscle. Something like brick. Everything I'm saying sounds too cartoonish. The feeling I'm trying to get at is much more intimate, more familiar. In a way, the rectilinear ruffles on her imposing, elegant aprons summon the same feelings I had when I stared up at my mother from the kitchen floor when I was very small. It's like being on the street in New York City and tilting your chin to the clouds: the comfort of something, something you are almost a part of, standing so high. A mother as a kind of monumental architecture—a skyscraper, or a cathedral.

Simpson's work recalls, disrupts, and expands the domestic sphere, and all its implicit maternity. Her sculptures are often made with homey, at-hand materials—cardboard, linoleum, linen, crayon,

Diane Simpson, *Green Bodice*, 1985





Diane Simpson, *Studies for Green Bodice*, 1985

versions of Tyvek—and they bow to the ingenuity of the kitchen dressmaker, the backyard carpenter. She finished her MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago at forty-three years old in 1978, as the mother of three, and she has always made her work in the same Chicago house where she raised her family, filling the basement, attic, heated garage-studio, and eventually, the empty bedrooms of grown children with her collapsible sculptures.

I tend to think art making, at its best, is almost entirely a practice of problem-solving, craft actualized within constraints: 87 percent logistical system-tweaking to carry off the 13 percent ideation, curiosity, or wonder. When a large swath of practical problems—those of space, time, material, transportation, physical ability, and so on, ad infinitum—disappear, the artwork often suffers. (To be clear, poverty, discrimination, social marginalization, and other violences are not what I would describe as “practical problems,” and their disappearance can only aid innovative thought.) The object intermingles, even collaborates, with the limitations in which the artist worked. If the context of an object’s creation is so facilitatory that its conditions of making pose no challenge, no friction between idea and outcome, the artwork risks becoming a floating spectacle, an apparition. Room-less, and therefore, body-less, too. (In using the word “room” here, perhaps I’m trying to find a synonym for “reality.”) Simpson’s works wear her problems, the rooms in the house

where she lived, and her resulting systems of ad hoc solutions, on their (literal) sleeve: light, durable, cheap materials; Flat-Pak-style patterns that can be easily moved and stored; methods of fabrication and assembly that are self-taught and done alone. In her words, her sculptures are made by “stitching, wrapping, interlocking, riveting.” Four verbs that contain an entire creative philosophy.

The progression of her sculptures—from idea to system to object—is sternly linear, highly structured, like the objects themselves. She begins with a pre-designed, utilitarian item, usually a garment or fashion accessory. The category of “garment” is elasticated, stretching to include almost all of human history, ranging from Sengoku-jidai samurai armor and seventeenth-century neck ruffs to flaring World War II-era peplums, quilted baby bibs, Amish bonnets, and the segmented sleeves depicted in a painting made by Lucas Cranach the Elder around 1535 of the princesses Sibylla, Emilia, and Sidonia of Saxony. Both distantly historical and undeniably intimate, these worn-things are translated into Simpson’s precise isometric projections, technical drawings that trace an abstracted interpretation of their shape. There is some reverse engineering here; the drawings look like blueprints, as if she is trying to re-build the already existent artifact, trying to salvage or copy something buried in the past. The style of the drawing denotes nothing but mathematical accuracy; there is no subjective



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Princesses Sibylla (1515–1592), Emilia (1516–1591) and Sidonia (1518–1575) of Saxony*, c. 1535



smudge, stroke, or daub, no expressive squiggle, no loose artistic hand. And yet, they are not “accurate” representations of the thing itself. They are distorted through perspectival shifts, slotted into exaggeratedly geometric forms, pulled taut and frozen, worlds away from the flounce or drape of the fabric original. From these gridded, graphite plans, Simpson then builds a different object, in different materials, a warbling echo of the first. This new third thing—neither bonnet, nor axonometric drawing of a bonnet, but a bonnet-like construction of what the drawing almost contains—is optically illusive, tussling between flat and round. From certain vantage points, it seems as thin as paper.

When one first views Simpson’s work, there is an immediate thrill of contrast between the industrial and the decorative, two modes that are usually at odds. The fripperies of what is traditionally considered women’s work—lacy collars, puffy sleeves, window valances—are re-staged in utilitarian materials and minimalist forms that bring to mind, in Simpson’s words, “a similar experience to the electrical tower experience,” a conventionally masculine realm of production. This is a clear and effective transvaluation of values: The skirt must be reconsidered structurally, as well engineered as the tower, and the tower must be reconsidered aesthetically, as elegant as a skirt cut on the bias. Given the lucidity of such a gesture, it’s easy to simplify Simpson’s investments into further oppositional binaries:

Diane Simpson, *Formal Wear*, 1998

She's taking something soft, and making it hard; she's taking something bodily, and making it conceptual; she's taking something girly, and making it boyish. But, while there is some of that tension, what's more interesting, and truer to the work, is that her highly architectural sculptures, moored and distorted at a 45-degree angle, are not that different than the source material, often curios of erstwhile femininities. What might read as formal opposites, at first, are revealed to be closely linked, holding hands.

Let's take Simpson's 1986 sculpture *Underskirt*. A pair of intricate grilles, made of slanted green beams overlaid with cotton mesh, are delicately balanced in what appears to be bilateral symmetry, but each side actually veers subtly outward, contorting the equilibrium of the hollow halves. They look like two skeletal, tiered apartment buildings, each floor with its own balcony, that have been tipped into a precarious kiss, with a single helipad on top. The inspiration for *Underskirt* is a pannier from the 1750s, an elliptical hoop skirt. It is essentially a collapsible whale-bone basket that ties to the waist and extends the width of the skirt by building out an angle at each side, making the front of the skirt into a smooth, broad surface to display embroidery or other adornment. The shape it creates on the body is wholly, unapologetically artificial, broadening the hips up to six feet, without adding padding to any other limb or curve.

Like my paper dolls, the central delights are those of flatness. Contrary to the logic of most hoop undergarments, such as the earlier farthingale, a stiffened circular skirt upheld with woven grass or rushes, or the later spring-steel crinoline, a swaying birdcage, the woman wearing a pannier is not creating a spherical forcefield around her lower half. Instead, the visual effect is as if she was pressed tightly between two planes of glass or rolled out like dough. She is more like a drawing than she is like a sculpture. More mirror image than fleshy baby. She must sidle slantwise through doors because she is like a wall herself—her body has become a barricade.

Underneath the tinsel, flounce, and furbelows, there was always bone. Simpson has taken the strange skeletons that were already there—the steel curve of adornment across history—and isolated them, interpreted them, performed a kind of sculptural ekphrasis. The pannier, the suit of armor, even the soft-brimmed bonnet or the cascading sleeve, are already prosthetic exaggerations of the body, abstract in their own right. The tilted, oblique view of Simpson's drawings is not one of the bird or the architect-engineer but of the omniscient, an eye that has stepped outside of time and sees all sides at once. From that impossible perspective, physicality and its paradoxes become clearer. What is emotionally resonant in her work is the raw material she has chosen to elucidate: not bodies, mortal and destined for dust, but their abiding exoskeletons,

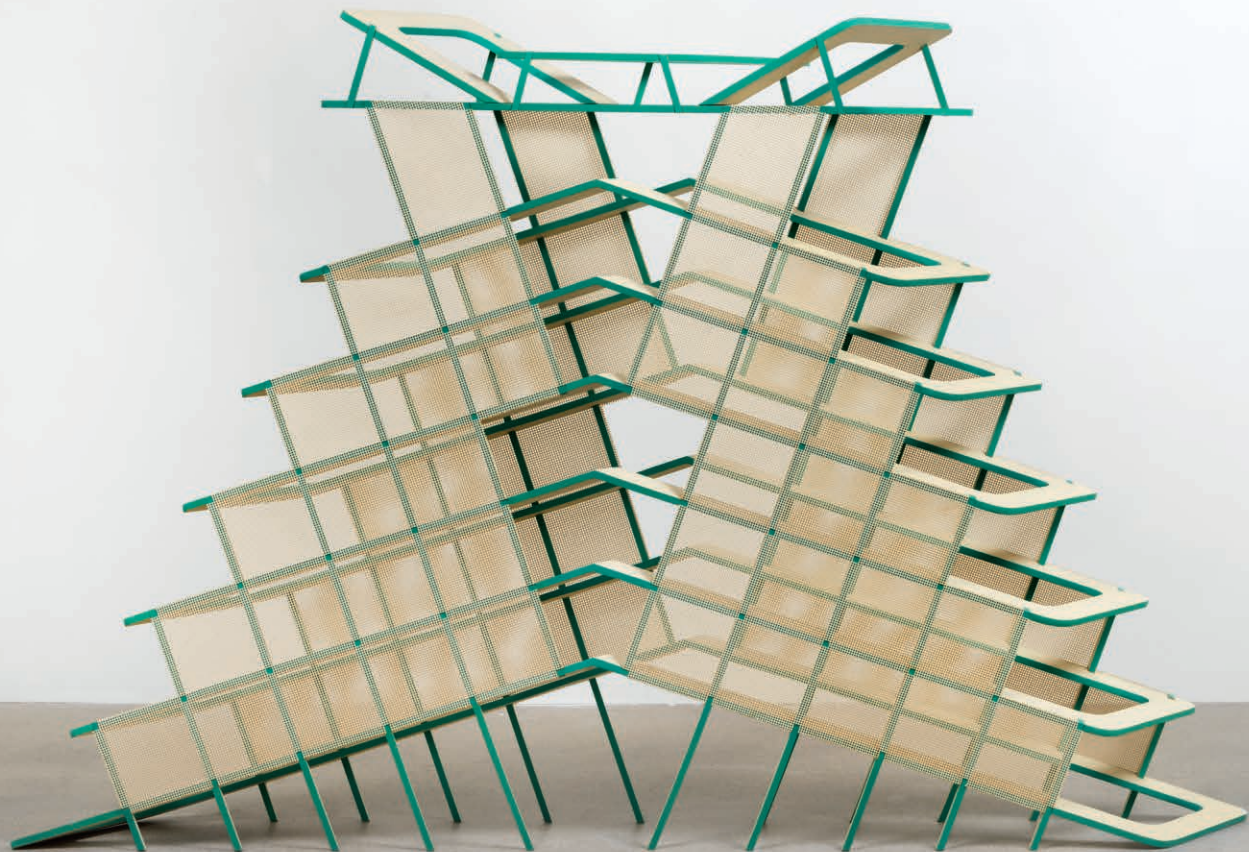
their yearned-for selves that only exist through the strange proxy we call clothes. She draws our ritualistic efforts to trace a new outline in the mirror. They are the little houses we build over our nakedness. What if my hips jutted out like balconies? What if my elbows pulled like taffy to my knees? What if my head curved away from itself into a horn? What if my chest was made of iron? What if there was no gap between my legs? She erects them again, re-builds the edifice, but this time, we cannot fit our bodies inside.

The un-wearability of her wearable-seeming objects—I could almost call them figures—is what solidifies them as sculpture, rather than recursive pieces of fashion. There is something profound, and quite funny, about art making demonstrated in that boundary: Art is the cave we can't crawl into. The house we can't live in. The dress we can't button up! Again, there is brief solace in impossibility, in a space of pure projection. If we could actually insert ourselves, we would have to contend with our flesh, our backside, our underneath, our roundedness. Lacan describes “the flutter of jubilant activity” when the baby holds “the instantaneous aspect of the image” in her gaze. I think a nostalgia for that merry fluttering pervades our relationship with images, with flatness, for the rest of our lives. Maybe that's what we call “beauty.”

facing Diane Simpson, *Apron X*, 2005

following spread Diane Simpson, *Underskirt*, 1986





Audrey Wollen is a writer. Her writing has appeared in *Bookforum*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *The Yale Review*, among other publications.

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