

Cardboard becomes the stuff of art

By Nicole Montesano



“Curiouser and Curiouser,” 2008, cardboard, staples, shellac.

M. Lee Fatherree photo

The ability to turn something incredibly ordinary into a unique work of art — so ordinary it’s all but invisible — is part of what draws Bay Area artist Ann Weber to cardboard. Irony isn’t the only attraction, but it permeates her work. Trees are cut down and milled into various products. Waste material from that process is pulped and dried to create sheets of paper, which are glued together in turn to create cardboard. A far-from-natural and decidedly unattractive industrial product, cardboard is typically used once or twice, then tossed into a Dumpster. Weber fishes it out, cuts it into strips and weaves the strips into organic forms, reminiscent of seed pods and gourds. She uses staples to hold the pieces together. If she doesn’t like the finished piece, she simply deposits it back where it came from — the Dumpster.

Her sculptures are astonishing and uniquely creative, but the process of creating them is as mundane as the material itself. “It’s boring,” Weber said. “It’s very repetitive. “The thing that keeps me going is that I often have an idea of a large shape that I’m interested in. Then it’s a matter of sitting there for hours stapling the pieces together.”

Weber's sculptures will be featured in the inaugural exhibit at Newberg's new Chehalem Cultural Center from March 22 through July 2. The exhibit, titled "Infinite Possibilities," will feature a number of Weber's giant sculptures, the tallest of which rises 16 feet.

Executive Director Robin Anderson said many of Weber's sculptures look like "giant chess pieces that could come from a game taking place in the 'Alice in Wonderland' novel. "She will lead an informal discussion of her work at a reception set for 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Friday, March 26. It is open to the public at no charge. Weber also plans to do a presentation on her work at 12:30 p.m. Saturday, March 27, as part of the center's grand opening ceremonies.

The tiresome labor of creating her sculptures plays into their meaning. "My teacher used to talk about that a lot," Weber said. "How do you keep yourself from being bored?"

"She likened it to a farmer in the field going up and down the rows. You have to do that to make the crops grow. "Weber said, "It's the kind of thing I think a lot of people do in their cubicles. People think artists must have so much fun, but a lot of it is just hard work."

Many of her sculptures symbolize either relationships or life processes. The forms show balancing acts, twists and turns in direction, unexpected juxtapositions. "Even though I think of those as abstract, they take on a biomorphic form," she said. "I'm very interested in the sculptures as metaphors for life experiences."

Weber said it takes her 10 to 12 hours to create a 6-foot sculpture. "I also say it takes 40 years," she said. "I'm 60 years old and I've been making art since I was 20."

Weber did not start out weaving cardboard into metaphors for daily life, however. She first spent 15 years as a potter in New York City, creating the tools of daily life, she said. The she decided she "had had enough of running a business, and becoming more of a business person than an artist."

She left the East Coast for the West Coast because it was full of interesting and unusual artists. "When I decided to stop doing functional pottery and start doing art, the West Coast was the place to be," she said. She enrolled at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, where she studied with Viola Frey and Art Nelson. The school offered all the kilns, equipment and space an artist could want. But once she left, she found her options more constrained.

Frey told her that one should consider oneself a beginning artist for the first 10 years, so feel free to experiment with various media without settling exclusively on any particular one.

Weber turned to cardboard for several reasons. She was out of money, but had plenty of cardboard boxes lying about, having just made a long distance move. And they were lightweight, no small consideration after hauling — or deciding not to haul — heavy plaster sculptures. Plus, it was a new kind of challenge.

"The day after I moved in," she said, "I was sitting there with all the moving boxes, and I looked down my nose, and there were my materials. "I thought about Frank Geary, who made beautiful pieces of furniture from cardboard, although he used a different process than I use. I thought, 'If Frank Geary can do it, I can do it.'"

Weber covers her finished sculptures with shellac or polyurethane. Occasionally, when they need to be particularly durable, she bronzes them instead. She said cardboard "could easily have been just one more thing I experimented with." But it struck such a chord with her, she's been working with it ever since.