

NORMA MINKOWITZ:
Shadow Boxes



I Can't Touch You, 1988, crocheted cotton, acrylic paint, colored pencil, shellac, 13" x 12" x 12".

Norma Minkowitz's crocheted cotton sculptures are transparent containers in which an outer geometric form encases an inner component. Her choice of technique and material produces strikingly accessible visual statements. But the interlocking duality of outer and inner, the trap and the trapped, does not permit a single, simple reading. Minkowitz plays continuously with this enigma. "My vessels or sculptures cannot be entered," she says, "and therefore cannot hold anything but the forms I create within the skeletal shell."

Minkowitz has frequently been grouped with basketmakers, though she does not consider herself one. In her vessels of the 1970s and early 80s, she gained precise control over her chosen medium. For the past few years, she has been combining the vessel with figurative forms. There results a tension between the shaped figure or fragment and its surrounding encasement. Minkowitz speaks about the interplay of these elements as bound by a "weightless quality [which] is meant to express our fragile and vulnerable existence." (Quoted in *The Basketmaker's Art*, edited by Rob Pulleyn [Asheville, North Carolina: Lark Books, 1986], p.50.)

The rigid structure, however, challenges the fragility of the limpid mesh. What is diaphanous is also obdurate. Since the skin is the armature and the inside is always visible, I falsely assumed that her sculptures exposed all facets simultaneously. On seeing Minkowitz's exhibition of works from 1988-89 at Belles Artes in Santa Fe, New Mexico (August 18-September 1), I discovered that lighting utterly changes one's perception of her works.

In bright light the outer form dominates while the inner structure remains mysterious. The pearlescent painted and shellacked surfaces are also heightened. Edges and shapes pull and push themselves into a continuous fabric in which the interior form is apparent but definitely governed by its exterior framework. In softer light the outer cage recedes and the inner form is magnified.

After observing the 15 sculptures from several perspectives, I concluded that the simplest speak the clearest—those where inside meets outside in the cleanest contours. In *The Further I Go, the Closer I Get* and *I Can't Touch You*, the crocheted figure and face protrude from the cube structure but depend on it. Neither the figure nor the base dominates. The image separates from the surrounding pedestal but never frees itself. The cube is as much container as it is support.

When the gallery lights were turned off, more changes occurred. The interior fragments gained dimension, and surface color modulated the forms; where the color sometimes had appeared too intrusive, now nuances materialized. The sculptures do not lose any of their wholeness in daylight, but they become more equivocal. For instance, in *I Can't Touch You* the handprints on each side of the cube float rather than stamp themselves upon it. Under spotlights the head and hands appear separate; without them the hands help

to keep the head above water. *The Further I Go, the Closer I Get* is a shallow wide box with a supine figure cradled in the left half. The figure projects its shadow on the lower surface. On the right lower surface a similar shadow is painted. Under intense lighting the physical body and its projected shadow eclipse the painted one. In softer light the separation of the real and apparitional is more cryptic. The flat figure assumes weight. More than a shadow, it becomes a doppelgänger.

House of Marble was the only piece without an interior form. Painted on the center front of the gable-roofed structure is a suspended, reclining figure. In the glare of incandescent light the figure is positioned firmly, without apparent support, in the middle of the frame. But in daylight the figure wanders from its resting place, appearing to hover inside, outside and on the surface.

Another phenomenon occurs when one looks at these sculptures in natural light. In certain works, such as *Wrapped*, I had thought the juncture of inner and outer too convoluted. The head did not emerge in one plane from the surface of the cube but instead seemed trapped in undulating waves. Yet under diffuse lighting the intricacies of these several elements merge completely. The head struggles to float free from its surrounding surface, and the allusion to wrapping is abundantly clear.

Dementia and *In Her Image* both have a sculptural convention as a starting point—a head resting on a columnar base. The head in *Dementia* is pierced by two brass rods entering just below the bridge of the nose and emerging above the ears. *In Her Image* depicts a face replicating itself in a mask floating immediately in front of it. Minkowitz infuses the prototype with new meaning. These portraits of women are familiar but nonspecific. The pellucid face is not a particular likeness, nor is it a generic head or face. Rather, each sculpture encourages identification—I can substitute my image for that indeterminate self.

In *Boundary* the dwelling is a metaphor for the figure. Within its roof is a suspended spherical eye. Another, smaller, sphere rests on the bottom of the enclosing box, reiterating the force between enclosed and exposed. That force permeates Minkowitz's sculptures. She has worked with knowing singlemindedness "to communicate a sense of fragility and structure." She has also spoken of her desire to achieve a sculptural presence and a mysterious quietness that invite contemplation.

Norma Minkowitz is firmly established within the craft world, though too often her reputation has rested on her intrepid devotion to crochet. But she also has crocheted her way into the art world. While this technique suits her purposes admirably—she responds to the intimate relationship it gives her with the working object—it remains always a vehicle, a means to manipulate linear elements into compelling statements on shelter and entrapment. ■