Finding, Choosing, Making

By Judith Stein | excerpt from *Dina Wind: STAINLESS*, 2018

Sculpture intrudes a new object on a universe already full of objects. . .
Peter Schjeldahl, critic, 1997

Sculptor Dina Wind liked to raid our universe of objects and retrieve fragments she would transform into art. Life, art. Art, life. Lily Tomlin's Trudy the Bag Lady struggled to explain the difference to her space chums by showing them a soup can and a painting of that can. But aliens don't know art history. Our earthling education got an early start from Marcel Duchamp who plucked a bottle-drying rack out of the kitchen and placed it in an art gallery. Life repurposed as art, we might say today. "It is evident," painter Robert Motherwell would later write, "that the bottle rack [Duchamp] chose has a more beautiful form than almost anything made, in 1914, as sculpture." Picasso would fashion a bull's head from the seat and handlebars of a bicycle, and Meret Oppenheim unite a teacup and a fur scrap. Cubists, Dadaists and Surrealists made incursions into life to retrieve raw materials for their collages and assemblages.

Dina Wind arrived in the United States from Israel as a young bride in 1963. Her visual acuity, surely in place since childhood, gained in strength in the early 1970s when she enrolled at the Barnes Foundation to study with Dr. Albert C. Barnes's protegee, Violette De Mazia. The education program that De Mazia oversaw evolved out of early twentieth century theories of psychology, perception and understanding of the ways we learn. Dr. Barnes believed that one must be trained to see and that the "discriminations which the artist, or the student of art, needs to make are more subtle than the scientist's, for art appeals to a more varied range of human interests." To understand a painting, he believed, "one must learn to care about the visible aspects of the world, to find satisfaction in color, texture, the flow of line, the rhythm of light and shadow, the sequence and interplay of volume, as these appear everywhere in the world about him."

Over the course of her career as a sculptor, Wind experimented with various material "aspects of the world," but maintained an abiding love for metal. The body of work she created with stainless steel, a metal with unique properties, constitutes a distinctive subset within her oeuvre, one she segregated from her other mixed media work. *Dina Wind: STAINLESS 1981-1994* at The Philip and Muriel Berman Museum of Art at Ursinus College, is the first exhibition to focus on her passion for stainless steel, a metal that can only be welded to itself, not other metals. Other types of steel rust readily when exposed to air and moisture, but stainless steel resists corrosion. It's low maintenance and has an appealing luster, as familiar to us as our kitchen sinks, or the Chrysler Building. Stainless Steel is not only composed of some 60% recycled material but is itself 100% recyclable. Wind would have been attracted to stainless for multiple reasons, not the least of which was its inherent beauty. William R. Valerio, t*he Patricia Van Burgh Allison Director and CEO* of Woodmere Museum, has observed that when Wind's stainless-steel sculpture was cleaned and waxed, the metal appeared "fluid and corporeal, sometimes even flesh-like," as in *The Cruiser* (1990).

Wind's schooling as an artist began with painting. Her first art teacher was the abstract painter Samuel Feinstein, a Philadelphian who had studied with the renowned European teacher Hans Hofmann in New York and Provincetown. Hofmann, a German émigré, was a conduit to the most advanced painters in the world—he had known Picasso, Braque, and Matisse when he was a student in Paris before the First World War. Hofmann—and Feinstein—were expressionists who took joy in unfettered brushwork and exuberant color. Wind's canvases from that period exemplified these characteristics of abstract expressionism.

Later Wind studied with Tom Gaughan, who started out as an expressionist painter but shifted to hard-edged shapes in the sixties. His was a transition many artists made at the time, when the collective temperature of the art world cooled, and emotional brushwork fell out of fashion. Over time, Wind became disillusioned by Gaughan's rigidity and emphasis on advanced planning. He wanted students to determine their compositions in advance, and to anticipate where to place the tape that facilitated hard edges. She found that she preferred to work intuitively, to follow the path gradually revealed during the act of painting.

Wind learned the vocabulary of modernism as a painter before turning to sculpture in the late seventies. Something clicked when she began to study with sculptor Leon Sitarchuk, the artist who would become her primary inspiration and mentor. Her work as a sculptor would be informed by the art-making strategies she'd learned as a painter: abstract expressionism's loose and spontaneous gestures, and the hard-edged boundaries favored by minimalists. Sitarchuk taught her to weld metal and to construct sculpture by the additive method, an approach that gave her free reign to feel her way forward as she worked, not knowing exactly where she was headed until she got there. She had found her medium. Besides, welding empowers, a truth embodied by Rosie the Riveter decades earlier.

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We just take the waste that nobody don't want
or couldn't care less about, and we see the beauty in it.
Bessie Harvey, self-taught sculptor, 1990

Finding, choosing, making. As a sculptor, Dina Wind moved easily from one gerund to another. An inveterate scavenger, she brightened when on forays to body shops and junk yards she spotted damaged garage-door gears, dulled saw blades or a bucket of rusty chains. She could never predict what she'd find, which made return trips and the promise of new discoveries all the more enticing. By the eighties, she was upcycling, well before the word came into common usage. Her favored materials were found metal objects with dent and pockmarks and irregular scraps of stainless steel discarded by industrial manufacturers. She gained a host of collaborators she would never meet, the unknown cutters, designers and fabricators who'd first created the quirky objects that she culled and welded into free-standing sculpture, wall reliefs and table-mounted assemblages. Wind's family recounts a story of one visit to a scrap metal yard. When asked by the dealer what she was looking for, she replied as an artist might, "anything with interesting shapes." The fellow then disappeared only to pop up at a distance holding something aloft. "Hey Dina," he asked. "Is this interesting?"

To better understand Wind's wall-based sculpture, the career of her son John is relevant. In 1983, John won a Thouron Scholarship-from the University of Pennsylvania and enrolled at London's Slade School of Fine Arts, where he spent the next two years finding his own artistic voice. As a respite, he perused London's street markets, and began to collect vintage watch parts and assorted frippery that he would arrange to form fanciful brooches. Dina Wind drew inspiration from many sources. New possibilities opened when she began wearing John's brooches, with their imaginative combination of materials. "You take it" is a vintage tap dance routine performed by two dancers: the first does a flourish of steps and then pauses, whereupon the second picks up the beat and adds their own embellishments. John enjoyed assembling a core of incongruous fragments and extending its boundaries with looping chains; Dina then exploded this theme to high relief compositions she mounted eye-level on a wall backing.

In *Brooch 1* (1988) Dina wittily used a toothy length of steel that initially reads as a chain but isn't. In this and works such as *Crushed Elements*, the central segment of *Triptych* (1988), linear elements doff their hats in homage to Anthony Caro, one of Wind's heroes, whose work was once described as "like a line drawing in air." The graceful *In the Round* (1988), one of four free-standing sculptures included in *Dina Wind: STAINLESS 1981-1994*, acknowledges another pathfinding artist, David Smith, who etched into his surfaces with a circular sander, creating the effect of brushstrokes. It was a technique that Wind used in many of her works in stainless steel, an intervention that harnesses ambient light and creates visual effects without applied color. For Wind, the inherent spontaneity of the technique brought her back to her roots as a painter of expressive abstractions. When she did encounter remnants of paint on her found materials, she incorporated them to accent the monochromatic tonalities of the steel. It's present in the red dial hands in Sundial (1990), and the smudge of blue in *Still Life with Pitchers* (1990).

Wind didn't labor over titles, which practically speaking, are a convenient way to differentiate one piece from another. But her titles often expand our experience of looking, and are tantamount to a handle, a way-in. Wind coaxed a languorous body language from an assembly of sharp-edged, geometric cutouts in *Crossed Knees* (1988), a pedestal piece. Hugging is an act of compression, with a hugger and a huggee. In *The Hug* (1990), the sculpture initiates the virtual action, and the viewer receives the squeeze. Wind usually retained—and was inspired by—the unexpected elegance of the crushed condition of damaged materials. In some works, she allowed components to retain the haywire configurations they'd acquired during their post-functional lives, her artistic power revealed in their placement within her composition. In other places, she coerced her raw materials to conform to her vision for the sculpture.

Wind excelled as a visual punster, playing with the related rhythms she saw in otherwise unrelated things. In *Brooch 2* (1988), spirals are prominent. It's easy to spot their largest presence, but their extended family becomes apparent during a slow scan. In her sculpture, Wind set up conversations between circles and lines, and between asymmetrical shapes and the regularized grids of perforated disks, grilles and intriguing whatnots. We may or may not be able to identify the original function of the constituent parts, identities that are displaced, not erased, in the new context she created for them. But the pleasures of looking do not depend on recognition—it's the gestalt of each sculpture that rewards us. Wind's legerdemain sets in motion a material transformation—we may point to the shards of life she's commandeered, yet experience the whole as a work of art.