

BROWN PAPER

An Exhibition of Sculptural Origami

Saadya Sternberg 7 December 2004 – 2 January 2005

Henkin Gallery of Design, Holon, Israel. Virtual Exhibit: www.saadya.net

As the name says, most of what's in this show is brown and it's nearly all paper (or at least, paper backed by a thick aluminum foil). All 42 pieces in the exhibit are "original origami designs" of mine, though this is less relevant than usual since I mostly mean the works to be one-off sculptures and not models to be diagrammed and reproduced. Ranging in size from 10 to 80 centimeters, most of these works are heads or busts, sometimes representing famous figures; styles are a shameless mix of Modernist,

Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, North Indian and Far Eastern... I'm told they are highly expressive.

Why "brown"? I'd been wondering what it is that's keeping origami from being a 'high' sculptural art; and it occurred to me maybe it's those damn colored papers that make everything so childlike. Where others have addressed this by going for quality papers or 'mature' color combinations I went the



other route, toward humbleness and neutrality of color. But having made that choice I discovered the terrific qualities of this paper for representing human figures: it is so *warm*; so *vulnerable*; so *skinlike*; its very neutrality is exactly right. For take away what animates us and we really are ashes and dust, as the proverb has it. Here the reliance on form and expression to bring the brown nothingness to life is just as complete.

I confess to mixed feelings whether this sort of sculpture is the art we know and practice today as origami. On the YES side, I use paper and rely heavily on its folded properties (the thick backfoil notwithstanding). I always start from rectangles, and never cut, glue or paint, etc. On the 'NO' side, not only have I abandoned the square, but the rectangles I remain committed to—actually long strips—don't really have a geometry to them, or at least a proportion that matters; if I need more material for hair or a longer neck I just make myself a longer strip. Likewise when folding the crimps for the eyes or nose I make the angles as big or as small as serves my needs and pay little attention to geometry---something I never could get away with when designing animals in the traditional manner. (I kept a few of my older animal designs in the show for heuristic purposes.) Another obvious difference is that most of the folds remain 'open'—valley folds literally are valleys, at open angles like 140°, rather than 0° with both sides of the 'valley' touching. The curvature of the folds also gives a



different feeling than most origami, which relies on straight-line folding. Finally—this is hard to explain—but the bulk of the artistic work, the generating and refining of form and expression, does not come from the origami at all. That is, I use origami methods (and as few as needed) to put compression-fold bulges in the right places and to create the basic structures; and sometimes I use origami methods to add surface ornaments like hair or to get the form to stand as a sculpture properly should. But the main art here, the awakening of expression, comes not from these beginnings or ends but from the great in-between; and here the solutions aren't folded so much as found by flexing the paper this way and that, much as one moves

lines about in a block of clay. This too may be why the sculptures are not fundamentally repeatable, as most origami strives to be.

While the expressive or aesthetic aspects matter to me most I believe I am making a technical contribution here too. (Though it is axiomatic with me that anything "new" is sure to have been invented by Yoshizawa back in the 1950s....) It is this: suppose you draw a curve—say an oval—on a sheet of paper, and you now try to fold the paper back along that curve, preserving its line cleanly. There are essentially two ways this has hitherto been done. One is to curve the surface of the oval forward: this forces the paper to bend nicely around the back of the oval in a continuous mountain fold. The other way (which keeps the oval flat) is to make a series of shallow

triangular crimps, with the tip of each long triangle ending at the rim of the oval. The crimps pull the paper back but since they all end in a point, the oval is not interfered with. What I am offering is a third way; it arises naturally from the use of curving folds. It is—to have the lines or curves that reach the oval each reach it at a *tangent* to the oval. Touching an oval at a tangent is *also* a way of not interfering with it, but it (a) is more visually continuous hence more elegant than using crimps, and (b) achieves its effects with a single line at each point of contact, not the two lines of a triangular crimp. In my exhibition I use this trick in quite a few pieces, but it is especially prominent in ‘Sunny-Head’. Less obviously, yet more importantly, it is present in ‘Edge-Pattern’ too. Here, if the question one asks is, what sort of deformations of a sheet that result in a 3D pattern can be carried around a 90-degree edge of the sheet without interfering with the pattern, one general answer is: if the pattern forms a tangent with the edge you will meet with NO OBJECTION when you try to fold the edge, no matter what angle the edge is (from 0 to 360°).

Finally: while this entire exhibition one way or another is a way of probing the question, Is Origami A Full, Sculptural Art (and If Not, What Would it Take to Make it Such), clearly this question can be asked either intelligently, from within the field, or boorishly, in ignorance of its possibilities. I put in, as a bit of an inside joke, a display to address the boorish crowd as well. On one stand I left E. H. Gombrich’s classic art-history tome, *The Story of Art*, open to a page with some nice sketches of monkeys by a middling artist (Pisanello, *circa* 1430). In front of it I placed an origami monkey of my own design, no less nice in my opinion. The point being: if *that* can fit

nicely and easily into the Story of Art—why on earth can’t *this*?

But for the boorish crowd this was probably over their heads.

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