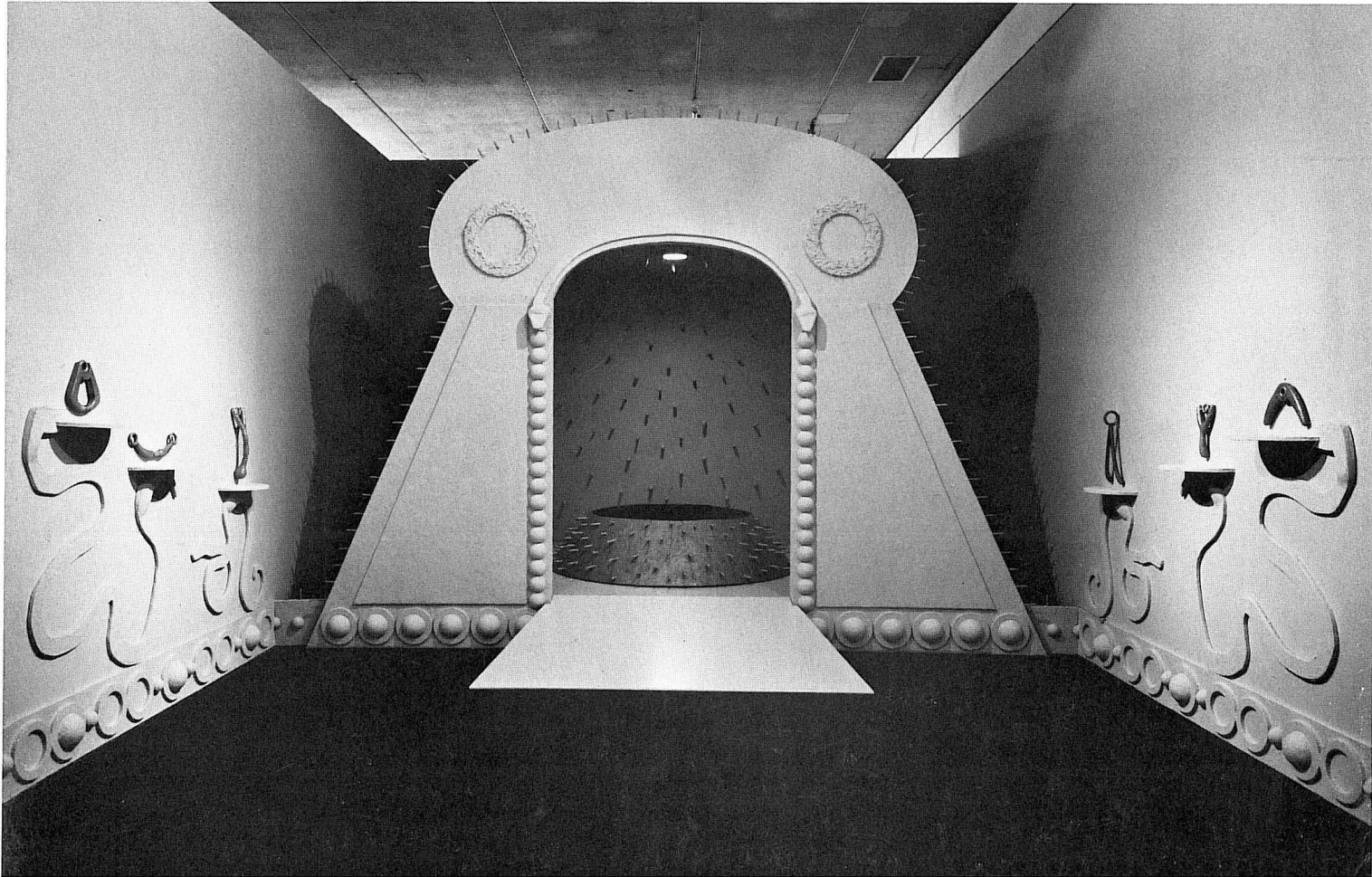


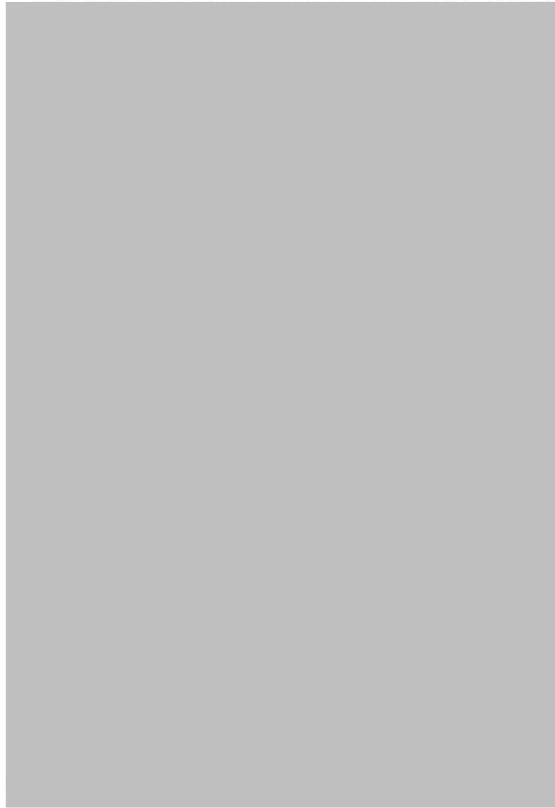
# CURRENTS

June 12 - July 29, 1982

## The New Museum

# Mary Stoppert





Left: *Prickley Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 35½ x 5".  
Right: *Ring Quintet*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood;  
30¼ x 5½".

**Mary Stoppert's** installation at The New Museum is a synthesis of formal components developed over the past decade, as well as those narrative references from which she has always drawn inspiration.

In the early 1970s Stoppert's sculptures were small boxlike wood and leather structures containing devices that appeared to be rigged for some unknown task. A key early example, *You Ring It* (1972), houses rings placed over cones that project from all sides, crossed wires forming an X, and a central shaft of natural light. With no direct means of access, the objects inside are

viewed through small openings at different heights on several sides; thus the interior is revealed in stages, but ultimately only in part. Also in *A Well Kept Secret* (1973), the X motif is used: one peers in to see long flat shapes illuminated by an opening at the top. The architecture of these pieces was related to the artist's childhood fantasies, their titles referring to games, and her passion for Saturday matinees and science fiction stories about dark underground worlds and the people who worshipped a simple shaft as if it were a supernatural force of natural light. At the same time, in the attention to craftsmanship, the use of houselike structures, the combination of diverse elements, and irony, these early sculptures were linked to those of H.C. Westermann, longtime an important influence on Chicago art.

Around 1974, Stoppert stripped away the architectural framework and, focusing on the elements inside, began to do large-scale sculptures of wood and latex-and-gauze-covered metal that often seem reminiscent of ladders, stretchers, or sleds. These open structures consist of a few simple straight and curved lines; as they taper their brown painted tones grow lighter in color. In 1977 two changes occurred: Stoppert began to use unpainted wood, first employed in a three ladder metamorphosis piece of that year, *Trio*; and the X-shape—seen first in the architectural boxes of the early 1970s and used as crossbracing or as the form itself in her wrapped wood sculptures—became a predominant motif.

In her first outdoor installation dealing with a specific site, *Double O-X* (1978), Stoppert made two consecutive X formations by stringing rope among six trees in a grove. The center of each was marked by a ring that hung above a clump of wood posts and a single large post, respectively; the rings moved up and down according to the effects of the climate on the tautness of the rope. In *Dream Site*, an installation the following year at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Stoppert defined a corner space by three rope X shapes with rings at their crossings; one X was on each adjacent wall and one on a bed of sawdust on the floor. The title of this piece is a reminder that even in these seemingly formal studies of the mid to late 1970s, geometry was used as a reference to a personal symbolism. *Spring Lake Ring* (1979) was again an outdoor installation, this time incorporating water. Three rope Xs were tied to a ring of pilings in the lake. The center rings

were graduated in size: one was above, one on, and one below the water's surface, like concentric circles in a pool after a stone has been tossed in. The rings of this poetic and simple piece, like *Double O-X*, moved up and down in the water.

In 1980, Stoppert visited the ancient temple ruins of Meso-America. Here in the use of geometric forms, particularly the X motif, the rich mythology, and the creation of magical, mysterious spaces, she found sympathetic reinforcement for her own direction. Her first major work upon her return was *Queen's Ring—Marcia's Piece*, a large outdoor structure composed of dried earth molded into the form of a collar surrounding an earthen mound. The projecting prongs on the ring made reference to the eroded state of the barbs that had been used in the construction of Mayan temple walls, as well as providing texture and a sense of process and growth. Also, by evoking the name of the "Queen," Stoppert set up a distinct narrative with mythical reference not present before in her work.

Stoppert then began a series of wood objects which she refers to as tools. Their shapes make reference to a number of known and unknown devices, and their Sculpt-metal surface add to the notion of metal tool. Yet their isolation makes them seem like artifacts not unlike those Stoppert saw in the archeological museums of Mexico. Despite their aspects of growth (in the use of prongs), utility, and comfort (being handsized), these objects also seem like weapons; their pointed, prickly parts have a threatening appearance. Moreover, the use of circular ringlike forms with elongated phalluslike shapes that have prickly surfaces sets up a tension in these works of female and male aspects.

The New Museum's installation creates for the first time a context for the *Queen's Ring* and the tools, implying that there is a story behind these objects, though never fully revealing it. Stoppert has again turned to creating an architectural space, but, rather than in miniature as in her early work, here it is lifesize. The entrance is flanked by two curling serpents—the head of one and the tail of the other are visible; each serpent continues around, completing itself on the interior wall. Serpents are also the motif on the interior; each of the side walls is lined with six snakes which crest in the middle. On the bodies of the snakes, placed on small shelves, are the tools, some of which even take on a

serpentine shape or snakelike imagery. In this context, they seem less like actual artifacts, and more like ritualized versions created specifically for this sacred space. At the far end is the temple, a pyramidal shape with a low, curving top, and an opening through which we glimpse the *Queen's Ring* illuminated by a shaft of light from above. Ascending into the temple chamber by means of a ramp, we sense the tightly confined space, made more intense by the surrounding projecting prongs. The *Queen's Ring*, with its metallic surface, seems like the product of a later and more sophisticated culture than that which might be associated with the earthen *Queen's Ring—Marcia's Piece*, where the structure assumed a more natural, primitive state. The overall plan and architectural elements find their sources, in part, in Meso-American examples; in each case the focus is specifically directed toward a temple structure. Stoppert's larger anteroom serves as the plaza or walled ball court. The temple form is linked not only to the Mayan flat-roofed pyramids pierced by dark openings, but also to one of the vaulted passageways which leads to a stele placed on a rounded altar at Tikal. The geometry and zoomorphic forms, specifically the serpent symbol foremost in the pre-Columbian, are put to decorative uses both in Stoppert's and Mayan examples.

Stoppert has been fascinated by the symbolic content and recurrence of a motif. It is through the performance work of Marcia Grubb that Stoppert became keenly aware of the richness of a single archetypal symbol (for Grubb, the Virgin Mary) and how it could be re-expressed in a multitude of situations. (When Stoppert began the *Queen's Ring*, it was to Grubb that she dedicated the piece.) Later during her visit to Uxmal in Mexico, Stoppert encountered one of the most elaborate examples of this notion. According to Jose Diaz-Bolio in his guide to the ruins (Merida, Mexico: Area Maya, 1971), he describes how the features, particularly the diamond pattern, are used as the basis for the structure of the pyramid and decorative elements (both zoomorphic, in representational ways, and geometric, in abstract patterns of diamonds and Xs). He also links this omnipresent motif of the serpent to the religion and cosmology of the Mayan culture. As the Mayan used the rattlesnake or serpent, Stoppert has chosen to replicate the ring as the central motif around which is created the culture

associated with the Queen: from the sacred ring itself in the temple, to the round and slanted elements of the temple facade that echo the shape of the mound and ring collar, to the rings incorporated into each tool, to the tools used as part of the architectural motif, to the decorative frieze of circles (rings) and half-spheres (mounds). As seen in this installation, the ring seems to hold a key place in the religion or culture. It is the symbolism and existence of a motif within an entire hierarchy of forms (from the depiction of gods with serpent characteristics or the *Queen's Ring*, to decorative uses of each of the same forms) that joins Stoppert's installation to ancient precedents.

The multiple aspects of the ring may be thought to be one of the many manifestations of a single god in Mexican and Central American mythology. For instance, Quetzalcoatl, the most powerful figure in that mythology, assumes many guises, including the form of a plumed serpent. This can be compared to the Queen in the seemingly imaginary culture devoted to the ring; the ring may be one of the manifestations or symbols for this Queen. In contrast to her male counterpart in Meso-American culture, the Queen is presented as a female archetype, a mythical source in women's history.

The Queen may also be interpreted as the female manifestation of a yet more powerful god, such as Tloque Nahuaque, the dual god-above-all in Mexican and Central American mythology, who had both male and female aspects, for whom likenesses were not made, and who was, coincidentally, described as the "Lord" of the Ring. This temple may then be dedicated to such a dual god, replete with symbolic references to the god, not in human form, but signified rather by the ring.

Mary Stoppert's "Queen of the Ring" has no identity which can conclusively be linked to earlier examples. She is the product of a personal mythology developed by the artist, drawn from Meso-American culture, recent feminist attitudes, and childhood fantasies. This present installation marks a major shift in Stoppert's work in its implied narrative content. A re-examination of Stoppert's sculptures and installations of the last decade points out her exploration of geometry as a potent, universal symbol and her preoccupation with defining sacred or mysterious spaces. These interests reach a new point of development here. They will, no doubt, be enriched by future presentations, as

Stoppert continues unfolding and revealing to herself and to us this personal, yet archetypal mythology.

Mary Jane Jacob  
Guest Curator

#### Works in the Exhibition

Within this installation, *Queen's Ring*, constructed by the artist specially for this exhibition are included the following individual works of art. Height precedes width precedes depth; all dimensions are given in inches unless noted otherwise. All works are lent by the artist, courtesy of Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago and New York.

*Baby Huey's Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 9¼ x 8¼ x 2¾.

*Bone Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 7½ x 4 x 2¼.

*Cheek Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood; 9¼ x 8½ x 2½.

*Double Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood; 7 x 10½ x 1¼.

*Flash Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 6¾ x 5¼ x 2¾.

*Moon Catcher*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood; 2 x 11 x 3¾.

*Prickly Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 35½ x 5.

*Prong Piece*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 9¼ x 8½ x 2¾.

*Ring Brooch*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth, string, and wood; 5¾ x 15¾ x 1¼.

*Ring Quintet*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood; 30¼ x 5½.

*Ring Shot*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 9 x 5 x 1.

*Ring Tongs*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood; 3½ x 16¾ x 6½.

*Ring Trap*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth and wood; 9¾ x 3¾ x 2¾.

*Snake Rattle*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood; 15¾ x 6¾ x 2¾.

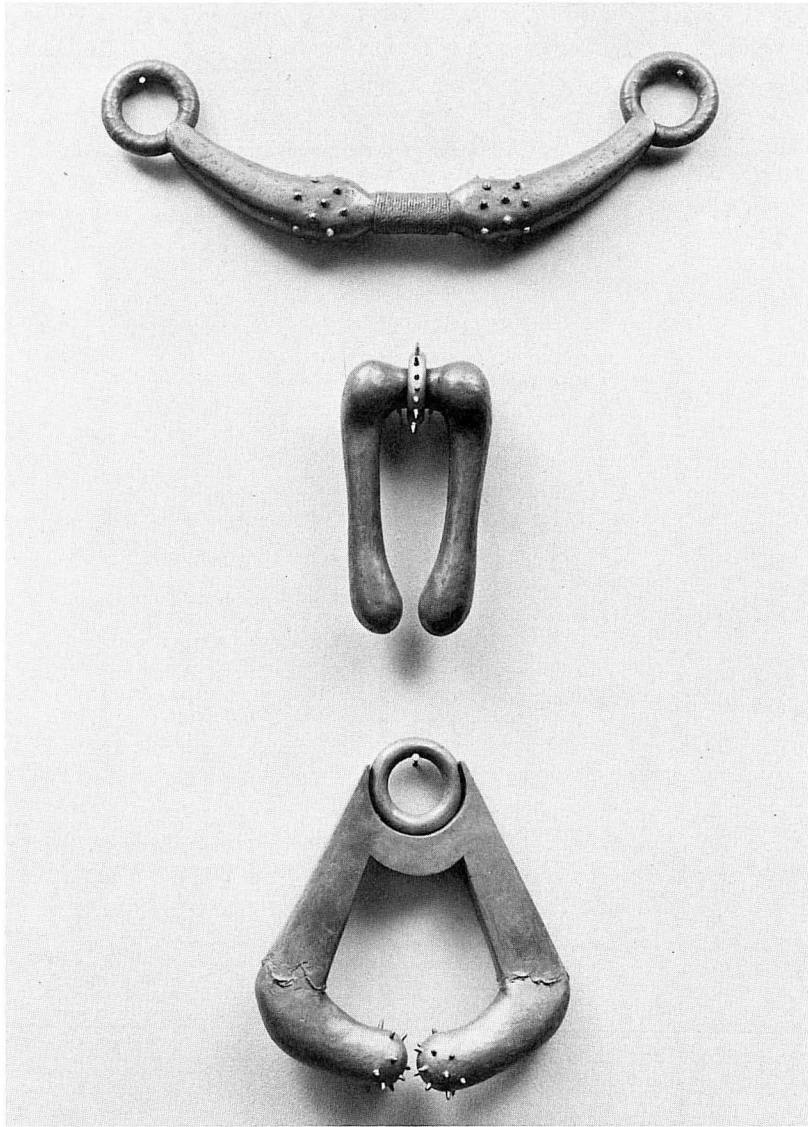
*Queen's Ring*, 1982. Epoxy resin, fiberglass, lacquer paint, masonite, sheet metal, wood, and wood sticks; diam. 6 ft.; height 15 in.

*Prong Sling*, 1982. Sculp-metal on wood; 16½ x 5¼ x 2½.

*Twist Rattle*, 1982. Sculp-metal on wood; 17¾ x 8 x 2¾.

Special thanks to Sandra Gierke, Claudia Kramer, Mary Jane Jacob, Sandy Meade, and Jane Weintraub.

—Mary Stoppert



Cover: *Queen's Ring* within the "Temple," 1982.  
Detail of *Queen's Ring* installation in  
progress. Mixed Media; 8 x 8 x 8'—  
"Temple;" 12 x 16 x 32'—overall installation.  
Courtesy of Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago  
and New York.

Photo: David Lubarsky

Top: *Ring Brooch*, 1981. Sculp-metal on cloth string, and wood;  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{8} \times 2\frac{3}{8}$ ".

Middle: *Bone Ring*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood;  $7\frac{1}{2} \times 4 \times 2\frac{1}{4}$ ".

Bottom: *Prong Piece*, 1981. Sculp-metal on wood;  $9\frac{1}{4} \times 8\frac{1}{8} \times 2\frac{3}{8}$ ".

## Mary Stoppert

Born in Flint, Michigan, 1941. Attended Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo (B.S. 1964); Wayne State University, Detroit; and School of the Art Institute of Chicago (M.F.A. 1968). Lives in Chicago.

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1977 Women's Interart Center, New York
- 1978 Festival Gallery, Krannert Center for Performing Arts, University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana
- 1979 Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago
- 1980 Museum of Nations, Illinois State University, Normal  
Space Gallery, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
- 1981 Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1973 Artemisia Gallery, Chicago (*also 1974*)
- 1974 *Invitational Drawing Exhibition*, N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago  
*75th Chicago and Vicinity Exhibit*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, (*also 76th in 1977 and 77th in 1978*)
- 1975 *Chicago Abstraction and Six Contemporary Sculptors*, Northern Illinois University, Dekalb
- 1976 *Abstract Art in Chicago*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (cat. essay by C.L. Morrison)  
*Painting and Sculpture Today*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis (cat.)  
*Women Artists—Here and Now*, Art Gallery, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame (cat.)
- 1977 *The Challenge of New Ideas: Contemporary Chicago Sculpture*, Kalamazoo Institute of Art, Kalamazoo (cat.)  
*Contemporary Issues: Works on Paper by Women*, Women's Building, Los Angeles (traveled)
- 1978 *Chicago: The City and its Art 1945-1978*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (cat.)  
*Detroit and Chicago Art of the 70's*, Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit  
*Romanticized Structures: Chicago Abstraction*, University of Missouri, Kansas City (cat.; traveled)  
*Seven Sculptors*, DePaul University, Chicago (cat. essay by Holliday T. Day)
- 1979 *Abstractionists from Chicago*, Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, Chicago (cat. essay by Devona Pieszak)  
*New Dimensions: Volume and Space*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (cat. essay by Pauline Saliga)  
*Prize Winners Revisited*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago (cat.)
- 1980 *American Women Artists*, Museu de Arte Contemporanea da Universidade de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil (cat.)  
*Chicago Art Perspective*, City of Chicago, Navy Pier, Chicago  
*Circle as Format*, Evanston Art Center, Evanston, Ill.
- 1981 *City Sculpture*, Cultural Center, Chicago Public Library, Chicago

### Selected Bibliography (Articles and Reviews)

- Aubin, Barbara. "Reviews," *Visual Dialog*, vol. 4, Spring 1979, pp. 16-17.
- Day, Holliday T. "Vital Signs: Drawing Invitational," *Art in America*, vol. 66, November/December 1978, pp. 38-39.
- Frueh, Joanna. "Mary Stoppert's X-Communication," *Reader*, Feb. 23, 1979, pp. 42-43.
- . "My Kind of Town? Chicago Artist," *Feminist Art Journal*, vol. 5, Fall 1976, pp. 25-28.
- Morrison, C.L. "Chicago Dialectic," *Artforum*, vol. 16, February 1978, pp. 32-39.
- . "Reviews," *Artforum*, vol. 14, April 1976.
- Schjeldahl, Peter. "Letter from Chicago," *Art in America*, vol. 64, July/August 1976, pp. 52-58.
- Stein, Judith. "Contemporary Issues: Works on Paper by Women," *Art Journal*, vol. 34, Summer 1977, pp. 328-29.

### The New Museum

65 Fifth Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10003  
(212) 741-8962

This exhibition is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal agency, and is made possible in part by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts.

Design: Joseph B. Del Valle  
Composition: Caledonia Graphics  
Printing: Metrographics, Inc.