

UNVEILING THE HIDDEN COMPLEXITIES AROUND US

The James A. Michener Art Museum and Miriam Carpenter present *Shaping the Ethereal*



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Miriam Carpenter's works are as simple as they are complex almost by design. (Photo by Amber Johnston.)

There is a school of thought that in order to master a given discipline, the execution of the final product must conceal all of the efforts that went into achieving it. Miriam Carpenter's latest exhibit, *Shaping the Ethereal*, is a compelling argument against that notion. While Carpenter is indeed a master sculptor and painter, the aesthetic quality of the work is a testament to the hours of technique and labor behind each individual piece.

Full of seams

Carpenter's work is an exact example of how an artist can consciously use negative space in their work. Every tool mark and brush stroke is a careful and deliberate choice, balancing each piece with consciousness, austerity, and grace. Her artistic choices confront the viewer with deceptive simplicity, demanding that they take on the same consideration of space, shape, and material as the artist herself.

Carpenter, a Bucks County native who studied under furniture designer Mira Nakashima, has a clear appreciation for natural beauty, asymmetrical design, and subtle complexity. Her wood feathers, each numerically designated in reverse order from the total number on a mallard duck (11,903, for those counting) were an endeavor that began in 2012, and it is apparent to the viewer that the creation of such delicate work would have to be the product of almost a decade.

The Japanese influence is apparent throughout the exhibit. Each sculpture, woodwork, and ink drawing is cultivated to draw in the viewer, pleasingly arranged to appear sleek and simple at first until closer inspection reveals the soul of the piece.

The exhibit, curated by the Michener's chief curator Laura Igoo, has a reverent, meditative, almost religious quality to it. Examining each piece is an experience of spiritual reflection as well as artistic consideration. Parallels between Carpenter's work and the sparse tranquility of the museum's George Nakashima Reading Room (named for the father of Carpenter's mentor) are not only warranted, they are impossible to ignore.

Having spent the majority of the past two years either indoors or alone in nature, Carpenter's work seems tailor-made for an audience that's still being shaped by the pandemic. Her work is not an exaltation of the magnificent, but a quiet uplifting of the mundane, entreating viewers to be mindful throughout the daily routines of life. The exhibit invites us to consider the hidden complexity in the world around us, and asks us to pay attention to the labor behind a single act of creation.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Miriam Carpenter: Shaping the Ethereal. Through March 9, 2022, at the Pfundt Gallery of the James A. Michener Art Museum, 138 S. Pine Street, Doylestown, PA, 18901. \$5-\$15. (215) 340-9800 or michenerartmuseum.org.

The Michener currently requires masks of all patrons over two years of age; as of this writing, they did not require proof of vaccination.