

LIFE LINES

Simone Pheulpin's singular sculptures evoke the passage of time, with their intricate pleats and folds suggesting the rings of a tree, geological strata and cracked, arid terrain. Ahead of Collect art fair and her retrospective at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Parisian textile artist sits down with Cynthia Rose.

Photography by Alex Crétey Systemans





Détail VII, courtesy Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

Great conceptual makers understand the humble and can make the ordinary stir our deepest thoughts. Simone Pheulpin, who recently turned 80, has been doing this for more than 40 years. She is the inventor and sole practitioner of her craft, a technique of intricate folds held together by fine steel pins. With the very simplest tools – including fabric and scissors – Pheulpin turns flat cotton into three-dimensional art.

At first glance, the sculptures of the Paris-based artist seem familiar. Many appear traversed by natural veins and strata, others overgrown with what resembles fungi and moss. Some works feel as if they were whipped in the wind and others as if fissured by a drought. But while all of the similarities are intentional, they can also be deceptive. For Pheulpin's art is more than just an homage to nature: she orchestrates rhythms and appearances to capture time, to personify how the past and present meet.

'For me,' she says, 'it's all about memory – but it enters through the hands. It's my hands that deal with time and re-

make the memory. There are moments when I know exactly what I want and yet things won't proceed. But that's part of it, too. At those points, I can sense I'm being led somewhere else and I let the fabric itself take over.'

Pheulpin likes to say she only makes two things: 'I just create folds and *failles* (gaps or spaces).' But, as she passes strips of cotton through her fingers, she bends and turns them, folding layer atop layer while immobilising every movement with her pins. She tucks and crimps and pins and compresses again and again until – by centimetres – she creates a solid shape. Doing this uses 50,000 pins a year. Yet, with the exception of a few pieces such as 2012's *Telle est la question* ('This is the Question') and 2019's *Écllosion Épingles* ('Points in Bloom'), she conceals every trace of her tiny anchors.

Pheulpin is represented by Maison Parisienne, which will bring her work to Collect art fair in February. The gallery's founder, Florence Guillier-Bernard, exhibits 20 such singular makers, specialists in various heritage skills or media, reinterpreted through a contemporary lens.





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They range from Pheulpin's work with ecru cotton – proudly made in France for almost three centuries – to the master cabinetmaking of Pierre Renart and *plumasserie* (feather art) by Julien Vermeulen.

Whether they create in crystals or cardboard, all the gallery's artisans are eminent figures. But although their ranks include masters and laureates, Pheulpin remains the group's doyenne. In 2015, France venerated her with its national Fondation Ateliers d'Art Prix le Créateur, and in 2017, the capital followed suit, awarding the maker its Grand Prix de la Création de la Ville de Paris.

Antonia Boström, director of collections at the V&A, first encountered Pheulpin's work in 2018. 'That was when one of her series, *Croissance* ('Growth'), made the shortlist for the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize,' she says. 'What first attracted me was that I misread it as ceramic. It looked as though a large disc of white clay had been sliced with a wire, in order to create all these apparent frills. Discovering that it was actually folded fabric, held together by hundreds of pins, made it all the more extraordinary and compelling.'

Boström was so struck she promptly commissioned a piece, *Eclipse XII*, for the V&A. 'Everyone who sees Simone's work is intrigued, not just by her craftsmanship but by the

illusion she creates. For anyone to have developed such a distinctive artistic voice is remarkable.'

Pheulpin has begun her ninth decade in style. Three months into it, the two of us meet – each carefully masked – at a café. She is busy preparing for a retrospective at Paris' Musée des Arts Décoratifs. *Simone Pheulpin: Time Bender* (until 16 January 2022) will be as atypical as its subject. Instead of the usual chronological display, the museum is embedding her sculptures into its permanent collections as a way to encourage visitors to explore them. Her work will sit side-by-side with marvels of 18th-century craft and the sinuous icons of art nouveau. But what moves Pheulpin most is her admission into the site's great showpiece: designer Jeanne Lanvin's art deco apartment.

The retrospective will be accompanied not by a catalogue but a limited-edition artists' book. Created in partnership with Éditions Cercle d'Art, it's a magnificent object: 14 copies come with an original work from Pheulpin's series *Origine* ('Source'), while others are enhanced by signed, one-off prints. Supply chain permitting, Guillier-Bernard

Below: Eugénie, from the Eclipse series, 2021



'Right away I knew I would work with this cloth. That creamy shade creates shadows and can play with light. Though it feels supple, it's very tough'

says she will hold a signing at Collect.

The maker behind it all is lively and petite, with dark blue eyes and a flick of silver hair. Born in Nancy, Pheulpin grew up in La Bresse, at the heart of the scenic region Les Vosges. The Vosges are known for their alpine beauty, dazzling lakes and dark, sprawling woods. They have long been a winter sports paradise but, between 1765 and the early 1960s, the area's real fame came from fine cottons and linen. During its 19th-century textile heyday, the Vosges produced more than half the cotton in France.

Pheulpin gets her ecru – unbleached calico – from Tenthorey, one of its few surviving family firms. She says she can use 400 yards a year.

Her métier took her by surprise. As a teen, Pheulpin was rejected by the local art college, but she finally found work at a furnishings firm, designing and producing fabric panels in relief. For these, she chose 'the most vivid of colours', she says with a smile. One day, however, her eye was caught by the cotton canvas used to back them. 'It was just toile, the untreated cloth used to cut the patterns in haute couture. It was fairly rigid so I started to roll it up. Then I pinned it in place, simply playing around. It was like I had never seen it before.'

But, in fact, she had – and their acquaintance dated back to her youngest days. 'When I was born in 1941, textile works were still all around. As children, we went in and out of them all the time, visiting our relatives and everyone we knew. It was our favourite place to play, amid the fabric, bobbins and threads. All of us knew that cloth inside out.'

'When the weather was good,' she adds, 'factories spread their fabrics over the fields to bleach. This was so natural and routine that the fabric itself became part of the landscape. So I'd been socialising with it all along.'

Pheulpin has never looked back from her epiphany. 'Right away I knew I would work with this one cloth. What really attracted me was its feel, its touch. That creamy shade creates shadows and can play with light and, although it feels supple, it's very tough. It's fierce yet gentle – not at all a cold medium.'

Her work, she says, is driven by observation and instinct. 'When I'm in the forest, for instance, everything engages my eye and my thoughts: the roots, the trunks of trees, the way the bark is growing. In a city street, it might be fractures in a pavement. I have a real desire to ponder that through re-creating. But while I like all these rhythms of life, I also like to oppose them. So I'll create my own flaws and imperfections.'

Pheulpin talks in terms of spaces and openings, masses





Left: X-ray of an artwork showing the hidden pins.
Below: *Mikel*, from the *Écllosion* series, 2021

and cadences. 'I would never say something like "Voilà, I've made a tree". It's a bit more poetic. As a maker you look and you're carried away in that gaze; you let yourself go. You can't stalk your subject and you shouldn't search for things. It has to be the material that guides you.'

She starts every piece with an image firmly in mind, but that's where it stays – Pheulpin never sketches, details or photographs. She just assembles the tools of her trade and starts. The work is meticulous and demanding and takes months, yet this artist says she savours every moment. 'I like it best when I'm alone, working for hours and hours... and hours. It's very tranquil and my thoughts can travel.'

Her sculpture first drew notice in 1987, at Lausanne's International Tapestry Biennial. This was an avant-garde event that focused specifically on 'freeing tapestry from the wall'. Pheulpin presented an installation called *Décade*, 10 tall panels clasped by nest-like shapes. The piece, still one of the largest she has made, launched her career. Soon she was featuring in other landmark shows: Kyoto's 1989 International Art Textiles, Poland's 1995 Contemporary Tapestry Triennial and America's 1997 Fiberart International.

Pheulpin has travelled the world, showing her pieces in Italy, Britain, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Hungary and Japan. During the mid-1990s, the textile great Sheila Hicks happened to see a show of her sculptures in Paris. Hicks asked to borrow a piece for her upcoming exhibit at America's Browngrotta Arts. This generous act brought Pheulpin to the States, where her work is now widely followed.

In 2006, Pheulpin's late husband gave her art a second face. Noting that she used 24 kilos of pins a year, he suggested she try to get them sponsored. Pheulpin made an appointment with their manufacturer, Bohin, whose director loved the work she showed him. But when it came to sponsorship, he was blunt: 'Those may be our pins but no one can see them'.

Pheulpin departed, but then started to think, 'Well, what about an X-ray? The first time I tried getting one, they thought I was mad.'

The scans proved spectacular. In revealing her work's secret side – what the maker calls 'its armature' – they were a revelation even to her. 'Of course there were moments when, despite my outer carapace, I had been going through something or nursing a worry and... there they were! The X-rays made me understand I have two kinds of writing. There's my exterior hand and then there's the writing inside.'

Intriguing and ambiguous as the public finds them, for Pheulpin the scans remain quite personal. They expose, she says, the unsuspected mechanics of all her ripples and whorls. 'People often tell me those images look like fur, but that's not what I see at all. I don't only use my pins, you see; I mutilate them. They have little heads which I often decapitate – so they will really stay hidden. If the outside of my pieces seems serene, X-rays show their

inside is aggressive. It's a little bit like myself, I find.'

The reach of Pheulpin's work is partly from the ease with which it inhabits different spaces. Her art is just as at home in a sleek gallery as in a ducal palace or medieval crypt. (Pheulpin's 2017 show *Un monde de plis*, 'A World of Folds', transformed a neo-classical shrine to Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.)

The photographs in the new book capture this power and versatility. They also communicate her sculptures' real eloquence, their expression of nature fusing the monumental and fragile. But what Pheulpin's pieces most reflect is us. Because they are made out of humanity's greatest riches – time and imagination – they have much to say about each.

Collect, the international fair for contemporary craft and design, is at Somerset House, London, 25-27 February, and online at Artsy.net from 23 February. collectfair.org.uk sphemulpin.free.fr

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