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"Playing with Fire. Geny Dignac"

Article by Nancy Heller.

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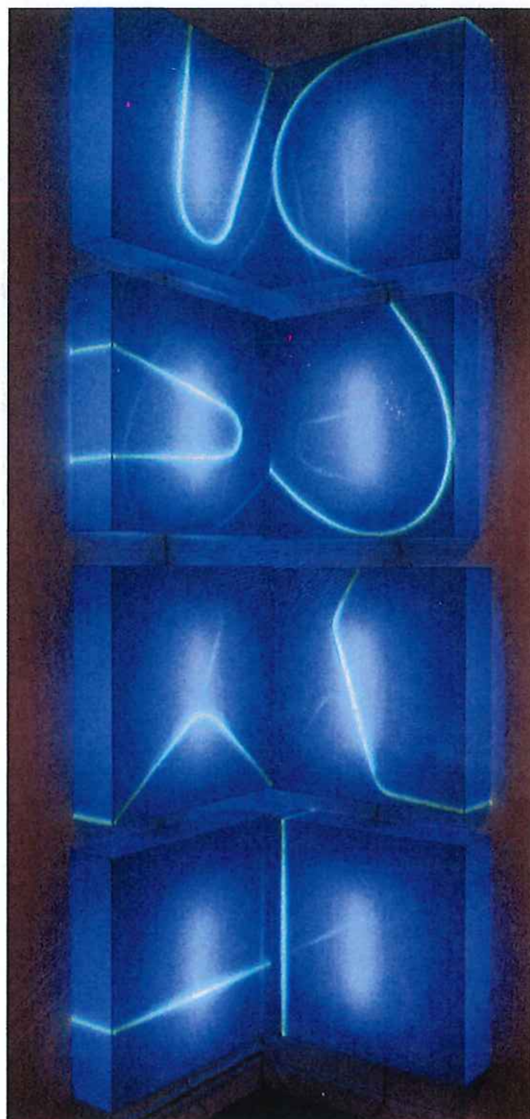
Playing With Fire

Geny Dignac



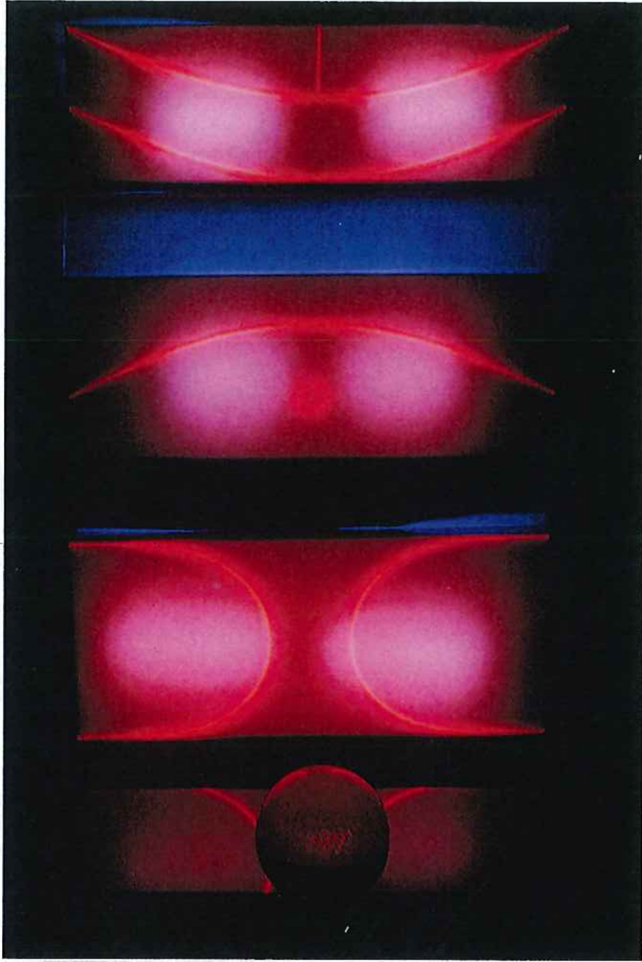
BY NANCY G. HELLER

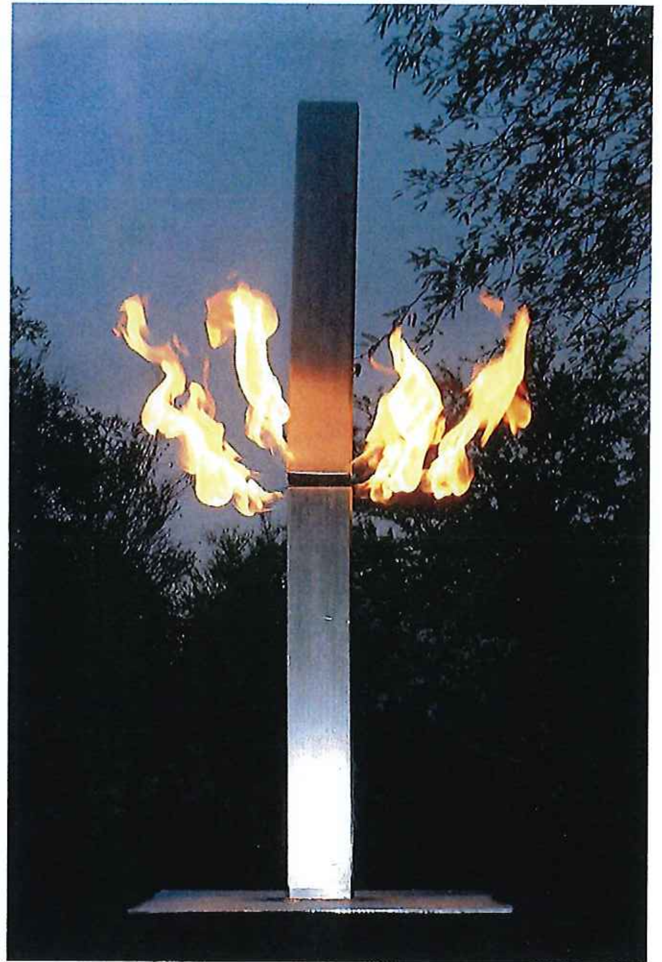
OPPOSITE: MICHELLE HOOD / THIS PAGE: JOSE Y. BERMÚDEZ

Opposite: *B.C.B.*, 2004. Steel and propane gas, 24 x 16 x 8 in. This page: *Gemini II*, 1969. Acrylic sheet and light, 72 x 36 x 4 in.

Geny Dignac says that she has "a love affair with fire." The Argentina-born, Arizona-based sculptor began incorporating living flames into her work during the late 1960s. As she explains the relationship: "I respect fire; I'm bewitched and obsessed by it, but I'm not intimidated by it, and I always feel in control." When Dignac began using fire, artists all over the Western world were experimenting with radical new materials, techniques, and ideas. More than four decades later, Dignac is still refining, rethinking, and exploring new possibilities in her fire pieces—and many other kinds of sculpture.

"I don't feel old," Dignac commented in a recent telephone interview. And, in photographs and in person, it is difficult to guess her age. This diminutive, bright-eyed woman with a cap of dark hair has boundless energy, a keen intelligence, a love of adventure, and a tremendous sense of fun. She does admit, however, that she is beginning to slow down, "just a little bit."





Left: *Vulcan*, 1969. Acrylic sheet and light, 96 x 49 x 14 in. Right: *E.D.M.* (model), 1969. Steel and propane gas, 37 x 3 x 3 in.

Eugenia Dignac was born in 1932 in Buenos Aires. Her mother taught art at a local elementary school, and her father was an electrical engineer who loved music. As a result, Dignac's childhood involved learning to paint with watercolors and regular trips to the opera and orchestral concerts. She was passionate about music, singing in several local choirs and studying the piano. Early on, she wanted to become a professional concert pianist; instead, she decided to go into visual art—painting, initially—because it was more forgiving: "I could paint whenever I wanted; I didn't need to practice three hours every day." The same desire for personal and artistic freedom has informed Dignac's entire life.

Ironically, she notes, her parents "saved" her, by not allowing her to enroll in the capital's Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes Prilidiano Pueyrredón. At the time, this august institution, named for a prominent 19th-century Argentinean painter, was "very conservative and rigid." So, Dignac was largely self-taught as an artist: "I pursued my imagination and found a way to do the things that occurred to me, with no limitations or barriers. I was free."

For her, artistic freedom has always been paired with intellectual rigor. After high school, she enrolled at the University of Buenos Aires, where she specialized in history. But her friends were mostly writers and fellow artists. In 1954, at the age of 22, she spent her school holidays visiting her sister, who had married a diplomat and was living in Washington, DC. Rather than returning to Argentina, and despite her parents' threat to cut off financial support, Dignac stayed. She landed a job in the art department at the Pan-American Union (now the OAS), after convincing her skeptical boss, who had "wanted to hire a boy, because the position involved lifting, moving, and opening heavy wooden crates," that she could do it. And she did.

At work, she met and fell in love with José Y. Bermúdez, a painter, sculptor, and graphic designer from Cuba. They married, purchased a modest house in suburban Oakton, Virginia, and raised a family. The personal and professional relationship established between these two artists was strong, Dignac explains, because they worked so differently. Both of them painted, but while Bermúdez made preparatory drawings for his work, she never did. "I don't know, beforehand, what my work will look like," Dignac says. "I like to be spontaneous, and to build [large sculptures] on site. Bermúdez thought I was out of my mind with the fire pieces. But he never said I shouldn't do them. We

JOSE Y. BERMÚDEZ

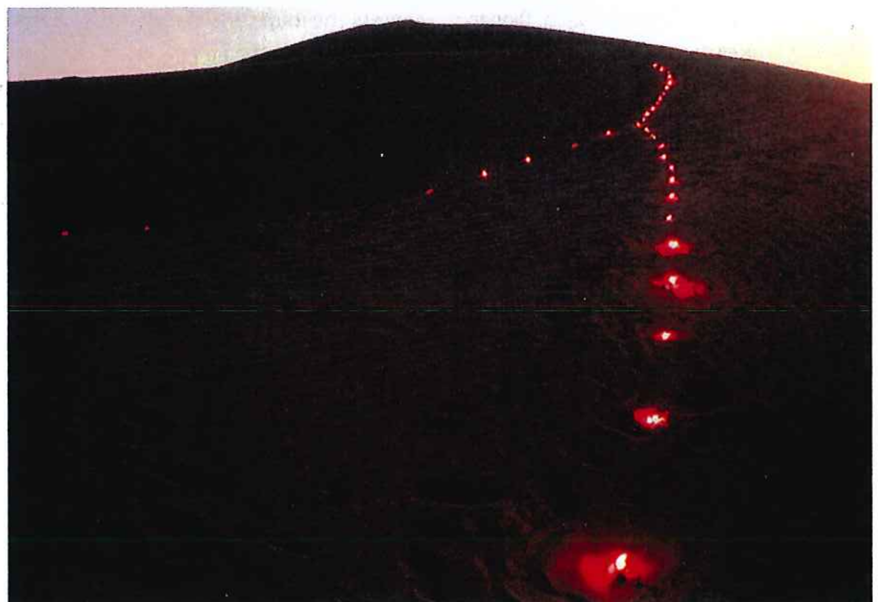
234 Gloves, 1978. Cotton gloves, detail of installation at the Arcosanti Festival, Cordes Junction, AZ.

encouraged each other to do whatever crazy thing we wanted."

Once their daughter Melanie was born, in 1964, Dignac found it difficult to keep painting and turned to making collages, which she says she found "liberating." The collages soon became three-dimensional, with curving paper strips encased in plastic hemispheres. Some of these were shown in the 1968 "Experiments in Art and Technology" exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

The hemisphere collages led, in turn, to Dignac's mysterious and powerful electric light sculptures, which Benjamin Forgey described as "elegant magic boxes made of sheets of plastic and softly illuminated from within." Writing about this series in 1971, the reviewer David Tannous said that Dignac's boxes "offer coolness, reflection, and restraint." While most of them are small, *Vulcan* (1969) is 96 inches tall. Whatever their size, these works involve a variety of visual experiences, from reflections on the objects' surfaces to the details of the paper strips inside. *Vulcan*, in particular, has elicited a large number of positive responses. Washington critic Paul Richard described it as complex and mysterious, with "a beautiful and unfathomable depth," adding that, unlike most art that basically sits there, quiet and passive, Dignac's works "perform. They function as theater."

As intriguing as the boxes are, their lights and glowing, mysterious colors do not prepare viewers for the drama, intensity, and shock of Dignac's fire sculptures and what she calls "fire gestures." She was fascinated by fire as a little girl and began harnessing it in her sculptures during the late 1960s, inspired by avant-garde artists such as Yves Klein. She approached her first experiment in her typically pragmatic way, recalling, "I went to the hardware store, bought copper pipes and fittings," and asked a staffer to demonstrate how to assemble the pieces properly. Ultimately, she was concerned that this first fire sculpture might explode since it involved a propane tank. It didn't; instead, it opened



Southwest, 1970. Flares, dimensions variable.

JOSE Y. BERMÚDEZ

Left: *Rio Salado*, 1980. Cotton rope, 2 views of work in Tempe, AZ. Right: *Pow Wow*, 1992. Cotton gloves and cotton, dimensions variable.

LEFT: JOSE Y. BERMÚDEZ/ RIGHT: MELANIE BERMÚDEZ

up an important new area for artistic exploration.

The obvious problem in working with fire is that it cannot be used indoors—which rules out conventional galleries and museums. Nor is it advisable to work with fire in the green suburbs of Virginia. So, Dignac began to explore deserts, creating her first major fire sculpture in 1971, in the Sand Hills of the Colorado Desert, in southeastern California. Undaunted by the 115-degree heat, Dignac said she was "fascinated by the dunes that kept the shape of the waves... that had been there long ago." The desert's sense of infinity, and its silence, also appealed to her.

A fire sculpture that Dignac erected outside Washington, DC's Pyramid Gallery that same year was a maquette for a 19-foot-high, Cor-ten steel piece exhibited earlier at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; it was featured in a group show, alongside works by Christo, Michael Heizer, and Richard Serra. The two square columns, stacked atop each other, with gas jets hidden in the space between them, were visually powerful. Forgey said, "By combining the severe, rectilinear volumes of two Minimalist stelae with the brilliant, evanescent, changing pattern of the flames, Dignac discovered a perfect sculptural metaphor to express the majesty and the mystery that fire can excite in the human spirit."

At the same time that she was developing her fire sculptures, Dignac started creating another important series—fire gestures. As she says, "I chose the name 'gesture' because it implies the ephemeral nature of the performance." These temporary pieces range from "drawing with fire," using stop-action photography to record movements made by a hand-held, flaming torch, to the immolation of fabric-stuffed white cotton gloves impaled on metal pipes.

Dignac has performed more than 30 fire gestures in many different geographic regions, at different times of the year. Based on verbal and photographic evidence—which, of course, is all that remains of this series—some fire gestures resemble aerial calligraphy. Others make linear patterns of lighted dots, like *luminaria* or airport runways; and they sometimes appear to surround the artist's body with illuminated, wing-like forms.

As we remember that these seductive, glowing shapes are really burning, aesthetic beauty combines with reflexive fear. And at least one set of fire gestures—the ones involving gloves—have a clear political resonance. While Dignac insists that her art is apolitical, making no specific "statements," she is openly committed to liberal causes. She began doing fire gestures with gloves during the Vietnam War, and she does not deny the anti-war sentiment, though she insists that this series makes a purely visual statement: "You can interpret it however you want. I know what I'm doing, but I feel better when other people tell me their reactions, instead of me telling them."

The most detailed description of this type of fire gesture comes from October 1978, by art writer Barbara Perlman. According to her account, one night on

Winter Solstice, 2005. Flaming torches, dimensions variable.

the edge of a ravine in Cordes Junction, Arizona, Dignac and five assistants poured kerosene over 234 "effigies" (the gloves, placed upright on three-foot-tall vertical metal bars anchored in the ground) and set them afire. The gesture was part of Paolo Soleri's Arcosanti Festival. Because the gloves were of the sort used for burn victims, and because they so clearly resembled actual human hands, images from this performance are profoundly disturbing.

Although Dignac has never stopped moving in new artistic directions, she also revisits certain favorite series. For example, in the first decade of the 21st century, she created eight fire gestures, some of their titles clearly referring to current events (*Conflagration—Iraq* and *The Burning Table—Famine*).

In 1972, having decided that the desert was important to her—emotionally, and for her work—Dignac and her family moved to Phoenix, Arizona, where she still resides. Although Bermúdez died in 1998, Dignac still lives in the beautiful, light-filled house that they built—surrounded by their art, colorful Mexican tile work, a garden, a saltwater swimming pool, an elaborate food-grilling area, and inspiring views of the desert flora, mountains, and sky. Dignac also has a studio, about a mile away, with décor that is both unusual and refreshing. The main features are bright red kitchen cabinets and silvery, galvanized-metal counters.

Dignac is still actively creating sculpture today. In addition to experimenting with new possibilities in her colorful plastic and light works, since 2005, she has been producing exceptionally handsome, silvery aluminum (and, sometimes, stainless steel or copper) pieces, many of which are displayed on the walls and floor of her studio. These works focus on the flexibility of metal; in her hands, the forms twist, curl, and interweave in totally unexpected ways. Like her earlier works, these pieces can seem deceptively simple at first glance; however, they are quite sophisticated, with evocative, often witty, titles.

Dignac says that she has also dreamed of creating a series of sculptures that hover above the earth. Given her interest in both science and magic, this seems eminently possible. Meanwhile, the award-winning artist has exhibited her work in almost 20 U.S. states and throughout Europe and South America—including several major international, invitational shows. She has lectured about her work in the U.S. and South America and is the subject of five short films and numerous articles. Her sculpture is held in a wide variety of prominent public and private collections.

Nancy G. Heller is a professor of art history at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

MICHELLE HOOD

Twisted Heart, 2008. Aluminum and light, 36 x 22 x 20 in.