Lynn Aldrich's newest art-material treasure trove is Home Depot. There, she follows in the footsteps of the seminal bricoleur artist, Marcel Duchamp, scouting for manufactured objects that she subsequently hand-fabricates into sculptures. Transforming the known into something curious, intriguing, and unexpected, her newest sculptures convert drainage spouts into tree monsters reminiscent of German fairy tales or model green and blue garden hoses into the illusion of cresting ocean waves. In building sculptures from materials traditionally used in and around the house, Aldrich also ironically folds her role as an artist into women's historical affiliations with the home.
Collette Chattopadhyay: Does your work start with the materials that you find?

Lynn Aldrich: There is a drive to deal with material as indicative of our cultural situation. You walk down the halls of Home Depot and realize, “This is the bounty of nature now,” and you’re overwhelmed with choices. It becomes its own seduction, the way nature used to be. I actually long for the natural world, and here I am living in this very artificial city that’s all about glam and surface. I’m not completely depressed about it, but I think of myself as a botanist exploring the area, looking for specimens to bring back to the studio and analyze and catalogue.

CC: Hydra, a drain pipe that has morphed into a tree-like form, evokes ancient Greek mythology.

LA: The image of Hydra has an undercurrent of the disturbing monster that can’t be controlled. I think it was Hercules who finally subdued the Hydra, but each time he cut off a head, two more would sprout. That’s the kind of feeling that I’m after. Of course, the water hydrant comes from the Hydra. Typically I like to begin work with a concept based on a grand notion or a relationship to the sublime that I feel is difficult to approach because of where and when I live. Yet I have this longing for epiphanies to celebrate, and so, I tend to tap into a suburban anxiety rather than urban angst. L.A. has a soft fluffiness to it that cushions it against real angst. But there’s an anxiety or discomfort, a sense that “I thought I’d have it all now, and I still don’t.” It’s that old story about the drive to go west within Western culture. So the Hydra seemed like an interesting topic to address.

CC: The finials on Hydra appear to be fabricated from objects found at a hardware store.

LA: I don’t usually walk around in Home Depot looking for materials. I start out with ideas, then I see materials that seem appropriate. I edit out a lot of stuff that doesn’t have the metaphors I’m after. I think it’s a combination of the early drive that formed Modernism with the Romantic-Realistic, and I want both: the realism associated with something having the ordinary indifference of its being—of it being very frank and open and secure in what it is. I don’t tamper very much with whatever I’m using. I don’t try to alter it.

CC: You’re playful with it, though.

LA: But I try to find out what it inherently does well itself, the job it does.

CC: I find the modular unit used to build Hydra interesting because it is one of those things that’s used to turn a corner.

LA: Everything in Hydra is plastic material used for gutters and spouts, mostly for residences. One part is a leaf catcher to keep debris from going into the downspout, another is used to turn a corner, another to catch a larger drain area. I just begin collecting whatever related forms I can find, but they have their diversities. Sculpture is particularly daunting because it has physicality to it, and it has an engineering aspect as well. I wanted the method to be true to the material. I stared at this stuff in the studio and put it together with the screws, but wondered how to get it to form. When I was ready to start making it, I put it together in the middle, screwing pieces to each other, then it just started to grow.
I’ve returned to the water image several times. *Bouquet* is also made from downspouts. I’m planning to submit another one to an outdoor exhibition in Arizona. The curator contacted me and asked if I would consider making some outdoor pieces. This one is made of galvanized steel painted with an oil-based enamel.

**CC:** Where is this in Arizona?

**LA:** In Tucson. It’s a desert area, with plants and pathways, connected to Pima Community College. The show is around March 2010, and the piece is called *Desert Springs.*

**CC:** Do you modify your work as needed for the space?

**LA:** *Desert Springs* includes 38 components, and each one has a pattern that can drill into the concrete path. The title, *Desert Springs,* is like a suburban tract housing name. I went to Don Edwards (a local paint shop) and asked them, “What are your five most popular colors for tract housing?” They’re all beige: Off White, Navaho White, Desert Sun. When I started to do this, the elements became like little creatures.

**CC:** A cross between the plant and animal kingdoms?

**LA:** Yes, and they flip the function of the downspout, like Hydra. They become springs coming up out of the ground, which references the abundance of a scarce resource. Many of my works reference the idea of being parched, including *Parch,* which is made of plastic and flexi-spouts.

**CC:** They’re water carriers, right?

**LA:** Yes, you hook them to the downspout.

**CC:** This is Southern California, so you can conduct the water to wherever you want your plants to be, even where there is no rainfall. Would these normally be buried in the ground?

**LA:** Well, they can be. But most people connect them from the downspout to wherever they want the water to go. I thought that...
the dark brown and dark green were foreboding—snake-like, as though the downspout were coming alive. Naming it Parch, when there isn’t any water to collect, makes the material used to collect the water aggressive.

CC: Many of your works animate the inanimate, becoming aggressive and even monstrous.

LA: In a way, making sculpture is an archaic activity. There’s so much emphasis today on ridding yourself of the physical, with the computer and our general lack of awareness of geography and place. I never set out to have a recognizable style. It was more about being interested, almost like a biologist, in exploring and collecting specimens. I think that there is also an environmental statement. How is it that we live in a culture that offers so much supposedly ready to satisfy and still there is a spiritual and physical longing for refreshment, for revival? I feel like these mouths are reaching out from thirst or longing.

CC: The Lamp Shade pieces are actually based on a lamp shade?

LA: Yes, a shade made for one of those huge lamps in a hotel lobby. There’s a place here in L.A. that makes large, oversized lamp shades. I think this is about as big as you can get. I did about 12 of these pieces, and each one of them referenced a time of day or some aspect of light, either in our sense of day and night or in the cosmos.

CC: They seem to speak about sensitivity to light in sculpture, an ephemeral emphasis.

LA: Classically, sculpture has been about form, and it was almost considered slipping into the decorative if you were too concerned with surface, which could detract from form. I’m well aware of that because I don’t want my work to appear decorative. But I’m simultaneously interested in surface. I wanted to get this form to do something that was true to its character as a lamp shade.

CC: How did you make the form spherical?

LA: First, I had to make the shade itself strong. It’s supported with wood, and I sculpted the interior cove with a plasticized clay that doesn’t shrink or crack. Then, I had to sand and sand, and layer and layer. Finally, I got to the gesso. I could have it fabricated in fiberglass, but I’m interested in having the quality of subtlety that comes from going over it.

CC: You extend the hand-fabricated methods of artistic creation, even though the form emerges from the mechanically manufactured world.

LA: I have a rule for myself that I’ll intervene in order to have some revelation occur, but I want to do the least amount possible. Another work, which isn’t finished, incorporates images from the Spitzer telescope, at Cal Tech in Pasadena. The Spitzer does infrared imagery of the outer cosmos, so they can see the past.
CC: You're placing these images from Cal Tech within a shape that resembles a Gothic stained-glass window.

LA: Yes, it's made out of drywall. I felt that, in the Middle Ages, the rose window was a kind of telescope that gave a view of the cosmos understandable in that time. The Spitzer is our eye on the cosmos. I wanted to put a collection of those images into a window that notes the distance in light years of each image world.

CC: You engage with ephemeral and other challenging concepts for sculpture.

LA: In C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, a guy on the bus that goes to heaven gets off and starts walking around. It hurts his feet to walk on the grass because it's sharp, which suggests that reality is hard. The sense of wanting to make something that is tough, in-your-face, flat-footed, and very material but that might reference something past itself—that's called transcendence. In our culture, that's a difficult concept for any artist.

For the Cal Tech project, we met with astrophysicists about five times. We weren't collaborating, we were there to learn. Cal Tech gave us money to create the work. We were inspired by the scientists—not that we were going to illustrate what they were doing. They're such materialists. They're wonderful, interesting people.

CC: So, they don't take it to the metaphysical level?

LA: They're not poets, although sometimes they like to think they are. In astrophysics, there is a grand sense that you're the stargazer. It's not the priest as at Stonehenge, now it's "us," the scientists.

CC: But in the artistic realm, we're usually trying to define how the material work reaches beyond the physical to the metaphysical.

LA: Astrophysicists are conjecturing that we might share a membrane with another universe or many universes. I was interested in the sense of awe, which the astrophysicists also feel. I constructed a wormhole (which connects universes) that people could walk through. It was made out of the cardboard construction tubes generally used to cast concrete for large columns. I took these discarded forms and lined them with fur. Visitors would start with a black hole and then move to cool purples and then through to the light, exiting a white hole. They theorize that's what happens when you go through a wormhole to another universe or pass to an existence in other dimensions, maybe a universe with 11 dimensions. There may be more than that, but they have hints that there are at least 11. I understand that I might be critiqued by those who say, "But you're so earthbound." At the same time that I want to point to transcendence, I also want to remind the viewer of his or her physicality. Sculpture does that more than any other medium.

CC: For a sculptor to move from thinking about three dimensions to 11 is a challenge.

LA: Science and art both share curiosity and the desire to know and proceed. But the scientist has a very restricted set of methods, and rightly so, whereas the artist or poet can speculate and play with other kinds of realities.

My father was a veterinary pathologist, a biological scientist. I remember as a small child, going to the research lab with him. For a while, he was the head of veterinary medicine at the National Zoo in Washington, DC. I have a rhinoceros horn from a deceased rhino that he had to autopsy. I'm not so interested in the part of the natural sciences that forms proofs and tries to figure out phenomena as I am in being an observer. Collecting animal skin samples isn't that different from what I do in the studio, collecting samples from hardware stores.

Collette Chattopadhyay is the co-author, with Peter Selz and Diane Ghirardo, of Fletcher Benton: The Kinetic Years, published by Hudson Hills Press.