

SCULPTURE

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CAROL HEPPER

NEW FIBER IN JAPAN

A DECADE OF SCULPTURE

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Carol Hepper with unfinished works and the tools of her trade in her Chinatown studio. Photo: Allen Rokach.

Right: Detail of *Beekeeper*. Chemically preserved cod skins added a novel textural element to Hepper's works in 1986. Collection of Dr. Pieter Sanders, The Netherlands. Photo: Lary Lamé, courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery, New York City.

CAROL HEPPER SHEDS HER SKIN



In the past year Carol Hepper has given up her signature skin constructions for a body of unadorned, interlacing geometries, prompting one critic to conclude “Ms. Hepper is now rolling.”

BY GEORGE MELROD

SHE'S BEEN COMPARED TO Martin Puryear for her sensitivity to natural textures and her ability to transform material into boldly sensuous geometries. Her ability to create self-supporting constructions with powerful internal/external dialogues has prompted comparisons with Russian sculptor Naum Gabo. She's been summarily lumped together with a group of sculptors under the label of “Biomorphist” for her use of organic themes, although if anything, Carol Hepper is the opposite. Rather than using plastic media to fashion imitations of organic forms, she employs natural material to create unique abstractions with a haunting sense of organic memory. But this afternoon, Hepper's thoughts are more pragmatic: how will she get the massive pieces sprawled across her white studio floor out of the building? “It's always a surprise,” she admits, “to see if they fit out the door.”

In terms of simple recognition, Carol Hepper has come a long way since she arrived in New York City in 1985 from her native South Dakota and was forced to find part-time paste-up work to support herself. In the intervening years, she progressed through a number of prestigious group shows, among them the 1987 “Selections from the Exxon Series” exhibition at the Guggenheim and two theme shows at



Hepper's *Lunar Chamber* (1983) was chosen for the "New Perspectives in American Art: 1983 Exxon National Exhibition" at the Guggenheim. Collection of Earl Willis. Photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.



Above: *Snare* (1988), included in the recent show at Rosa Esman Gallery, is exemplary of Hepper's more recent work. Wood, wire, pigment and nails, 29 × 45 × 118 in. Photo: Lary Lamé, courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery, New York City.



Below: Hepper's *Wall Piece* (1983) was included in the 1983 Exxon exhibition "New Perspectives in American Art" at the Guggenheim. Mixed media, 65 × 46 × 10 in. Collection of Earl Willis. Photo courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City.

the Sculpture Center ("Natural Inflections" and "The Sculptural Membrane"). Meanwhile, she stacked up an impressive array of grants and shed her unwelcome stereotype as a "regional" sculptor. She gained the attention of the New York critics through her unusual appropriation of animal skins and unhoned branches and her ability to craft them into elegant wedges of disturbing beauty. In October she opened her first solo show, at the Rosa Esman Gallery in Soho, to a generally glowing response. Reviewing the show, Michael Brenson of *The New York Times* attested that the implicit question of whether Hepper would ever "emerge" had been answered. Commending the work for its "command and unpredictability," he concluded "Ms. Hepper is now rolling."

On the other hand, the deep-rooted affinity between Hepper and the South Dakota landscape has clearly endured. Indeed, the day I came to interview Hepper at her studio at the edge of Chinatown, a thick parcel of willow boughs, some seven feet long and 70 pounds heavy, was resting serenely at her doorstep. After we had finally negotiated the unwieldy pile up the narrow stairway, Hepper explained that her father knew her favorite harvesting sites near home and regularly shipped her wood. The willow we had lugged to the studio was from a stand along the banks of the Cheyenne River. It grows very densely, like bamboo, she noted, adding that when it's windy the whole stand sways and you can get seasick standing in the middle of it.

Not all Hepper's wood comes from South Dakota these days; her current sources include striped maple from New Hampshire

and copper beach and hickory from upstate New York. But Hepper's dialogue with the plains landscape of her upbringing remains a constant, hovering behind her work's barky texture.

ONE OF EIGHT CHILDREN, Hepper was brought up on her family's ranch in the shadow of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, where her schoolmates had such colorful names as Virgil Taken Alive, Selby Noisy Hawk and Tracita Red Legs. The nearest settlement was McLaughlin, a town of 1,500 and no great aesthetic center ("maybe they'd recognize Pablo Picasso, or Van Gogh . . .") Hepper remembers, as a kid "I had my own fantasy life . . . playing with materials and transforming them," making forts out of twigs and moss and the like. The urge to create transformations of a more serious bent came after her first visit to Minneapolis's Walker Art Center when she was 18. This visit exposed her to such artists as Lee Bontecou, Louise Nevelson, Jean Dubuffet and the early Minimalists. "I suddenly realized," she recalls, "that you don't have to stop building things just because you reach a certain age." She felt particularly affected by Joseph Beuys, whose elegiac, obsessive references to his own personal history helped stretch the bounds of contemporary art to embrace subjective experience. It was an embrace that Hepper returned enthusiastically.

Incorporating bones as well as other found materials, Hepper's earliest work was highly ritualistic, drawing parallels between architectural form and the human body, "the home for our soul."

Like the ancient Indian burial grounds that capped the buttes of the surrounding plains, Hepper's constructions were ceremonial totems of regeneration that conjured cycles of interdependency between the seemingly eternal plains landscape and the mortality of the flesh. In these works, Hepper's chosen theme of "transformation" found a dual context: the transformation of found materials into art objects and the transformation of earthly remains into resonant totems of collective memory and rebirth.

With the addition of animal skins, Hepper's invocation of the body became all the more visceral. In truth, the works were more symbolically descriptive of the body than literally so. The actual forms, composed of interlacing volumes of self-supporting branches clustered in groups, resembled hornets' nests, curled up leaves, or primitive shelters more than anything animate. The skins were bound in taut restraint over their irregularly arching frames like vast aboriginal drumheads (perhaps attributable to Hepper's experience as a drummer in a rock band in her teens). But the parallelism was unavoidable: a membranous skin splayed brazenly over a crudely skeletal armature. That you could see through it made the invocations of mortality all the more disturbing. Understandably, the work provoked complex viewer reactions. Hepper recalls instances of patrons wearing leather or fur approaching her to confess their disapproval of the work.

As her work evolved, the visceral effect of the organic material was increasingly counterbalanced by a more sophisticated formal sensibility and a growing mastery over material. As the interlacing geometries grew more complex, Hepper began customizing the skins to elucidate the inner harmonies of the structure. The skins themselves were more obviously aestheticized. Wrapped with stripy regularity around their freestanding wooden frames, they came to seem like swathes of richly textured fabric.

At Manhattan's Fulton Fish Market, Hepper discovered a new source of material and began surfacing her pieces with chemically preserved cod skins. The skins, with their silvery, mottled patina, added a fresh textural element to the work. By her second Sculpture Center show, Hepper's work was a tight knot of deftly balanced dichotomies: nature/artifice, interior/exterior, perishable/permanent, contemporary/ancient, artless/artful, factual/instinctual, personal/collective. Newly curvaceous geometries suggested life-in-death cycles through their form, not through their reference to ritual. Yoked together under the unpretentious leash of copper wire, the new pieces arced through the gallery space with all the self-contained drama of a photograph of a distant nebula frozen in the thousand-year instant of its demise. Indeed, they seemed to be imploding and exploding all at once.

THIS PAST YEAR, HEPPER MADE what may be the boldest step of her career—she stopped using skins. The act was both a liberation and a coming-of-age. Hepper could no longer rely on the gutty immediacy of her material to evoke reaction, and her woody geometries could now blossom to their fullest expression.

Hepper's recent show at Rosa Esman testified to her ability to create unadorned constructions of intriguing complexity and vital dynamism. In *Snare*, for instance, a conic sheath of willow emerges from an open, tripartite knob to terminate in a cleanly spliced, handsomely proportioned aggregate of wood. Lying flat across the gallery floor, the piece charges the atmosphere with purposefulness, like some sort of biological energy conductor. In *Concentric Shift*, two rings and a wedge swirl through each other



Comet (1988) was included in Hepper's solo show at Rosa Esman Gallery. Collection of The New School for Social Research, New York City. Photo: Lary Lamé.

like a strobe-light reconstruction of the wake of a bicycle wheel. In *Comet*, perhaps the most sublime of the new works, a sweeping, bulbous web resolves itself in the conch-like mouth of a sleek reddish cone, which then pierces the original volume like a . . . well, a comet. But questions abound: Is the cone the instigator of the web or its termination? Is it the work's driving force or its captive? It is a measure of the power of these pieces that every new angle brings a different judgment.

Technically, too, Hepper is reaching out to new modes of expression. By dyeing the primary axes of her work red and the supplementary arcs light green, for example, and creating coils of thickly bound branches to define the most important volumes, Hepper simultaneously establishes a complex hierarchy of form and allows us its ready comprehension. Some of the newer pieces reintroduce skin, but, inverted into pockets, the organicism complements rather than dominates the formalism. In each case, Hepper has forsaken shock value for craftsmanship and clarity of thought. In the process, she has proven her skill as an abstractionist. The prairie themes still come through, but they've been driven below the surface, allowing the pieces to stand as independent entities. In a fitting affirmation of her maturity, the Walker Art Center recently acquired one of her 1985 works for its permanent collection.

While most contemporary sculpture owes at least some debt to Minimalism, Hepper's work describes one individual's way of synthesizing the requisite object fetishism with authentic personal experience. In doing so, Hepper is not only advancing her own subjective vision, but the viability of pluralism as a philosophy of art. □

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