

Elle Decor
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Carol Hepper
bends and bundles
willow with
Constructivist craft

SETTER OF TENDER TRAPS

To reach the studio of sculptor Carol Hepper in New York's Chinatown, you walk past huge modern apartment complexes and sleek, modern banks. But there are still plenty of the turn-of-the-century buildings that give Chinatown its gritty New York flavor.

Hepper's combined living and working quarters take up an entire floor of one of these. She has given over most of it to actual working space. The front two-thirds of the floor is stacked with bundles of willow branches, her preferred material, which her father cuts and ships to her from her native South Dakota. Against one wall is a table littered with sketchbooks, drills, hammers, pliers, and the odds and ends of

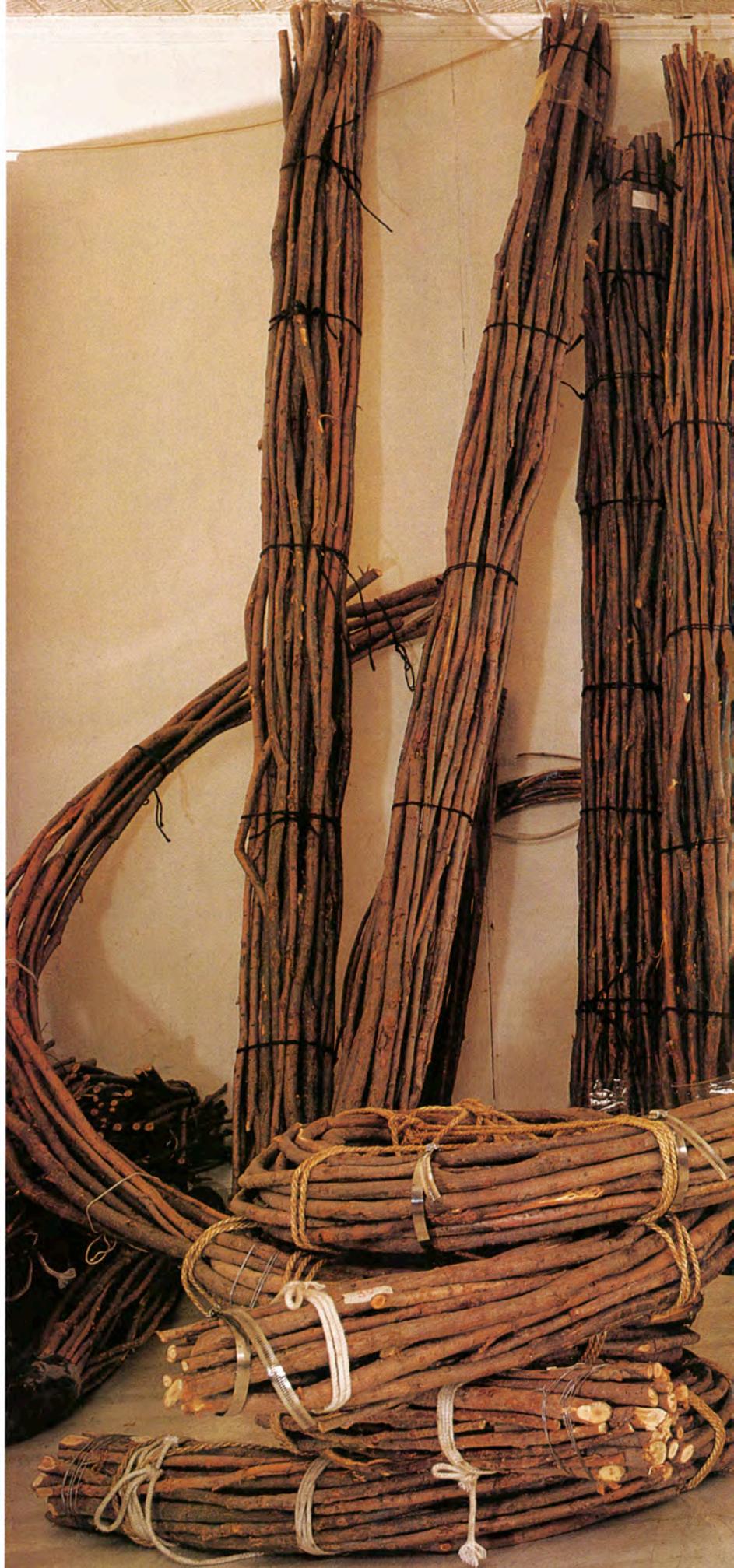
JOHN HOWELL

sculptural practice.

At first glance, the 36-year-old Hepper embodies the unadorned purposefulness of her loft: the level gaze, the sweater-and-jeans attire, the precise way in which she schedules a studio visit. Yet counterpointing all her apparent seriousness is a warm manner—she laughs easily—and a vibrant enthusiasm for talking about art.

The art-world buzz is that a significant new sculptor is developing. Last fall's triple bill—two shows in New York, at the Rosa Esman and Germans Van Eck galleries, and another in Minneapolis, at Vaughn & Vaughn—confirmed Hepper's initial promise and showed off strong new directions.

ANTHONY BARBOZA





In her Chinatown studio, Carol Hepper is flanked by the materials she bends to her will—lengths of willow and other woods. Behind her hangs one of her sculptures, *Cleft*.

“I’m
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The artist’s career path to her present position has indeed been a winding one, although it has had its own specific logic. Hepper remembers arranging materials—twigs, the algae that grow on the surface of stock watering troughs—into patterns as a child. Her awakening to more mature art occurred on a college field trip to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where she saw sculptural work by Lee Bontecou and the early Minimalists. A college art teacher who happened to be a devotee of Joseph Beuys instilled in her the courage to experiment with nontraditional materials.

Her early ’80s works were architectural structures of wood and tanned rawhide that alluded to Native American tepees and wigwams. Like tattered, abandoned dwellings, they symbolized the damage done to a virgin environment. At the same time, they exuded vitality, the result of Hepper’s devotion to her craft.

A portent of the changes this early work would undergo years later came when Hepper

briefly lived near Manhattan’s Fulton Fish Market. She replaced leather with dried fish skin as her material of choice. In 1983, after some of her work was shown at New York’s P.S.1, an alternative arts complex of studio and exhibition spaces in Long Island City, Hepper was chosen to be included in a show of emerging artists at the Guggenheim Museum.

She has also shown at New York’s Sculpture Center and was taken under the wing of Rosa Esman, a SoHo gallery owner noted for her affinity for the geometry of the Constructivists and Suprematists.

In a refreshing change from so many career-obsessed artists, Hepper claims that all of her stops along the way owed more to serendipity than planning. “I didn’t even know about the danger of being typed as a regional artist,” she remarks. But somehow she escaped the damning tag that dogged others among the Guggenheim exhibition’s participants—even though it wasn’t until recently that Hepper even thought of herself as a New

York-based artist. “Now I’m hooked on the city,” she says. “There’s so much stimulation here, and it’s been so good for me and my work that it’s hard to imagine living anywhere else.”

Like many artists, her art talk is both matter-of-fact—“The scale of my sculpture is determined by what can fit out my door and down the stairs”—and gnomic—“What is the origin of form for me? I think it comes from the sense of the body.”

She always begins with drawings. *Six Cornered Cube*, for example, “came out very close to the idea I had for it in the drawing,” she says. Though she feels that the execution of a sculpture should follow on the heels of the preliminary sketch, Hepper admits that it doesn’t always work out that way.

Her trademark material since the beginning has been willow branches soaked in water, curved, and then fixed into position as they dry. Bundles of the wood, sometimes stained, sometimes natural, are then bound, gathered, and twisted into shapes that have



Above: *Cross Bend*, like all the works on these two pages, was created in 1989. Typically, it’s made of willow branches soaked in water, curved, and then fixed into position as they dry. Bundles of the wood, sometimes stained, sometimes natural, are then bound, gathered, and twisted into shapes that have

Opposite page, top: *Six Cornered Cube* (left) and *Linchpin* (right). Like benign traps, they recall Sioux handiwork. Hepper grew up on a Sioux reservation in South Dakota, and some of her early work alluded to tepees and wigwams.

Opposite page, bottom: *Over and Through* is an arabesque of willow reined in with steel collars. Hepper finds some of her hardware in stores, makes other elements herself.



NICHOLAS WALSTER/COURTESY ROSA ESMAN GALLERY



organic references.

She says of her current work, "I see my newer abstractions as a paring down of forms I've worked with before." But many of them seem like close-up looks at bodily systems. One piece, *Ventricle*, alludes to a heart valve,

although its visible flow and sense of construction as process—the exposed method of its making—give the generally allusive shape equal weight as a representation of a ventricle's function: that is, to regulate the flow of blood. Since Hepper hasn't used animal skins in her work for the last few years, these latest sculptures are laid bare, open.

In the last two years, Carol Hepper has also begun to introduce industrial materials into her vocabulary. "The forms now go back and forth between nature, wood, and industrial culture, pipes and clamps," she says, "although wood is still my base." Along the way, Hepper has become an expert on hardware, most of which she buys from a Long Island City supplier.

In another expansion of her original ideas, the woods she uses now include striped maple, copper beech, and hickory.

How does she sum up her aesthetic enterprise? "Ultimately, I guess, I'm working in the area where nature and culture meet, with the alchemy that results when ideas and matter mix."

Do critics ever comment on her art as an explicit metaphor for Hepper's personal experiences? After all, she imports South Dakota wood to New York and adapts it to industrial fittings just as she has adapted herself to urban life. She laughs at the notion, but admits, "I've thought about that myself. A lot."

This combination of savvy directness with a basic sense of wonder makes Carol Hepper's sculpture one of the richest bodies of work being produced today. Resonant with satisfying meanings, arresting in their clarity, her sculptures exemplify a welcome turn toward the personal in contemporary sculpture. John Howell, *ELLE* magazine's art and dance editor, reviews for *Artforum*.