

# CONTEMPORANEA

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## CAROL HEPPER

Rosa Esman Gallery  
and Germans Van Eck,  
New York

Combining an intuitive affinity for organic material and a deft, post-minimalist comprehension of an object's power to charge a space, Carol Hepper has spent the last decade developing her own unique language of sculptural form. Brought up on the plains of South Dakota, she imbued her early work with themes of transformation and regeneration, in evocative, often totemic constructions of wood, bone, and/or animal skin. In recent years, she has continued to pursue her dialogue with natural materials while expressing her growing formal acuity in curvaceous, woody forms of great lyricism and complexity. In two simultaneous exhibits in New York last fall—a solo show at Rosa Esman Gallery and a group show, with Lisa Hoke and Terry Adkins, at Germans Van Eck—Hepper has taken her work to yet another stage.

This new oeuvre is at once deceptively simple and joltingly muscular. Eschewing the gracious permeability of her recent works, which almost seemed to filter the air of the gallery with their presence, these new works are closed systems of enormous dynamism, compelling attention through their very self-reliance. Although dense, these works are far from static. Their defining compactness offers the tension that they might unburden themselves of their assigned forms at any moment.

The key elements in these new pieces are the weighty steel or iron plumber's elbows into which Hepper has bundled her trademark willow branches in tightly bound arcs of varying curvature. The result is a confrontation between nature and artifice in which the metal elbows appear to dominate the object and, at the same time, serve as the mere vehicle for the flowing wood. At its most succinct, the metal, usually painted black, resembles the rubber outer skin of a thick electrical cord which has been abruptly stripped away to reveal its true, organic essence with the streamlined, woody wiring inside. This juxtaposition of dualities (which is aptly reflected in Hoke's and Adkin's work as well) is one of Hepper's most eloquent devices, and she wields it here to great effect.

*Carol Hepper, Conduit,  
1989. Wood and steel,  
83 x 42 x 42 inches.  
Courtesy Rosa Esman  
Gallery, New York.*



The three most powerful pieces, or at least, the three that exemplify this balancing act most cogently, employ pairs of heavy elbow joints as the source of thickly looped closed circuits. In *Crossbend*, two semicircles of bound wood cross each other at ninety-degree angles, re-entering their parallel macaroni shaped sheaths to form a kind of rough hewn infinity symbol. In *Double Return*, one of two parallel elbows is mounted on the wall, while its companion, connected by uncrossed bridges of willow, seems to defy its own gravity by pressing upward into space at a subtle angle. *Over and Through* replicates a loop-the-loop form which threatens either to crawl snail-like across the gallery floor or to unloop itself in a sudden snap of liberating ferocity. In each, the artist demonstrated her respect for the inner strength of her material, and her complete mastery of it.

Carol Hepper, *Over and Through*, 1989. Wood and steel, 33 x 30 x 50 inches. Courtesy Rosa Esman Gallery, New York.



The two standing pieces, *Conduit* and *Linchpin*, are also the quirkiest of the lot. The former emphasizes the symbiosis between the two materials by channeling parallel streams of wood between forked metal torso joints, while the latter resolves broad arcs of wood in sharply pointed corner joints to create an almost cubist assemblage. Less authoritative than their companions, they explicitly reveal the totemic undercurrents of the smaller works.

My personal favorites are the two pieces that most understatedly balance the wood's desire to find a natural curve and the artist's desire to rein in that force to fit her own subjective formalism. In *Jackstraws*, a huge, starlike sprawl that confronted visitors at the entrance to Hepper's solo show, generous loops of bound willow emerging from shiny, aluminum elbows careen under and over each other. Conjuring unlikely biological inferences, the sculpture occupies its floor space with an almost willful determination to make itself at home. Ironically, the relative laxity of the artist's hand here reminds us conversely of the act of reshaping that is at the root of Hepper's approach to her material. *Three Corners* condenses this aesthetic Gordian knot into a compact, tricornered star composed of three matching willow arcs held in check by three softly V-shaped metal joints. Nestled deferentially along a wall at the Germans Van Eck Gallery, the piece disdained the muscle flexing theatrics of its cousins three blocks east and merely reveled in its own equilibrium.

—George Melrod