

Arts & entertainment

2 perspectives on contemporary art

Hepper explores dualities

By Philip E. Bishop

SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

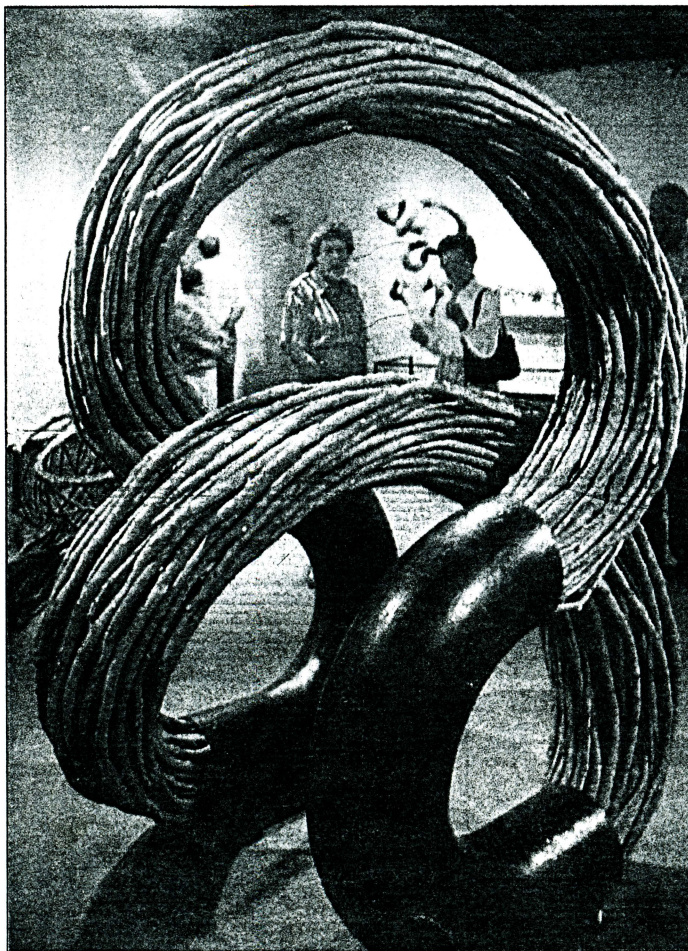
The cow hides still bristle with hair. The fish skins gleam in the hot museum light. The old bowling pins and steel pipes have been dug from an Earth sated by eons of living and dying.

With such varied refuse, sculptor Carol Hepper spans the worlds that define her art, from a South Dakota reservation to brawny New York City, all the way to the White House sculpture garden.

Hepper's remarkable career is summarized concisely in an exhibition titled "Carol Hepper: Skin/Deep" at Orlando Museum of Art, part of the museum's ongoing series on contemporary art curated by Sue Scott.

In a well-timed happenstance, Hepper won recognition this year in an exhibition of 20th century American sculpture at the White House. Her large-scale work titled "Vertical Void," which belongs to Orlando Museum's permanent collection, was displayed in the first lady's sculpture garden.

"Vertical Void" was returned to the museum last week for the show.



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

Carol Hepper's sculpture 'Physical Geography' at Orlando Museum of Art: Bundles of saplings are held together by huge pipe fittings that direct the flow in endless repetition.

Carol Hepper's art has reached center stage after starting in a distant corner of the art world. She was reared in South Dakota, where she drew upon the materials of the Dakota landscape — animal hides, fish and snake skins, bones and saplings — and on the customs of her Native American neighbors.

Works from this period, such as "Pierced/Pegged," demonstrate Hepper's interest in the body as a dwelling place for the spirit. Speaking recently from New York, Hepper recalled witnessing a native buffalo dance, in which the celebrants ritually carved out the buffalo's heart and other organs.

"Pierced/Pegged" represents the tented carcass that remains, with its stitched hide and bones, but also stands for the teepee that native hunters made from the remains of the buffalo.

With works of such striking materials, Hepper burst onto the New York scene in 1983 when she was included in an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. Hepper soon moved to New York City and found she could also "see the city as a body."

The sight of "a street being torn apart or the skeleton of a building going up," explained the artist, pro-



Hepper

Please see HEPPER, F-10

Fast facts

WHAT: "Carol Hepper Skin/Deep."

WHERE: Orlando Museum of Art, 2416 N. Mills Ave., Orlando.

WHEN: Through Nov. 5. Museum hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday.

ADMISSION: \$4 adults, \$2 ages 4-11, free for members and children under 4, free for Orange, Seminole and Osceola residents Thursday afternoons.

Sculptures have hint of the sacred

HEPPER from F-1

vided a visual analogy to the body's organs and bones.

This connection between the organic and the artificial is just one of the dualities that pulse in Hepper's sculpture. The Orlando exhibition includes more than a dozen "skin wall pieces," hangings that enclose found objects in cowhide.

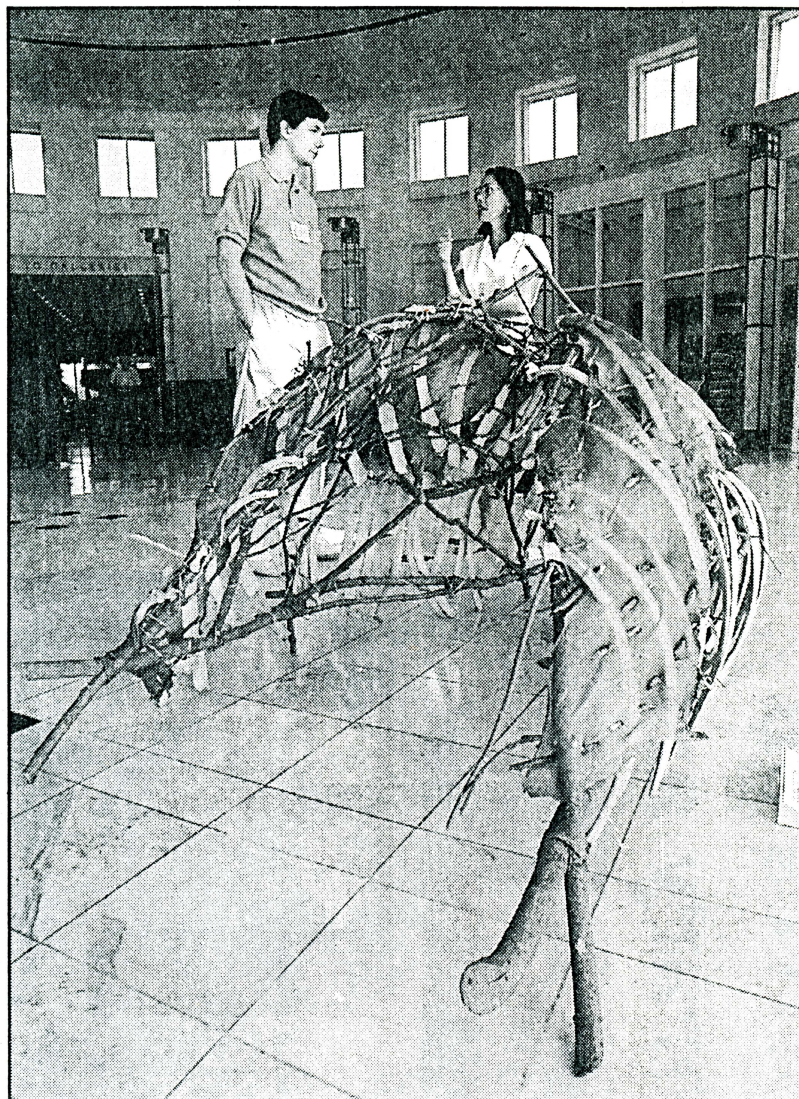
In the witty "Double Header," a pair of pith helmets is bound by hide stitched like a baseball. "Siblings" is more disquieting: Two dolls float in the womblike enclosure.

This idea repeats several more times, with boxing gloves and bowling pins, each time reminding us that sameness is not identity, that even in a cowhide womb together with our identical twin, we are still separate and alone.

Hepper's White House sculpture is typical of her large-scale works, such as "Portland Plumbing" or "Physical Geography." These are made of bound saplings or tubes that swirl and loop around themselves. The bundles are held together by huge pipe fittings that direct the flow of the bundled members in an endless repetition.

Whether the materials are wood or metal, the works suggest the compressed swirls of intestines or blood vessels, flush with life fluids. These are metaphors for the body's plumbing, enlarged on a massive scale and given the endless continuity of an Escher print.

The ever-present paradox of duality and unity gives even the boldest and most muscular of



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

Brian Joseph and Dell Foss view Hepper's 'Pierced/Pegged.' Animal hides, bones and saplings assume new lives in her art.

Hepper's sculptures a hint of the sacred.

Sometimes this spiritual theme is explicit, as in the wall piece titled "Saint." Here a careful arrangement of chicken bones beneath cowhide creates a reliquary of the ordinary.

In the other wall pieces, as well, the hide is a veil that obscures and therefore reveals. For example, in the remarkable standing work titled "Hanna," a saddle is stretched out on a garment rack, shrouded in cowhide.

Obscured from our direct sight, the saddle suggests many things. It is a crucifixion of sorts, perhaps the butchered carcass of the steer from which it was flayed, perhaps the pony (named Hanna?) now lost to an artist living among city folk, far from the plains.

With questions like these, Carol Hepper hopes to draw people in and, as she says, "make them see

things that are right under their nose": that piece of animal on their feet or the smelted earth through which they draw a glass of water.

Occasionally, Hepper's mystery is merely obscure. Her "Swiss Flies," even with Sue Scott's explanation in the exhibition brochure, ends up being obtuse.

But most often, Hepper's work inspires the kind of creepy feeling one gets in the crypt of a cathedral. Here are the remnants of noble creatures, now dead; here are dead things — bones and sticks — now reincarnated as something alive and significant.

In Carol Hepper's sculpture, hovering between the living and the dead, such dualities are resolved and such mysteries revealed.

Philip E. Bishop is a professor of humanities at Valencia Community College in Orlando.