

# Interview with Carol Hepper

by Patterson Sims

**PS**     How did it come to be that you were born and raised in South Dakota?

**CH**     Six of my great grandparents emigrated from Russia to the United States in the early 1900s. At Ellis Island they saw an opportunity for free homesteading land in the Dakotas, where they then established a home. My parents had a cattle ranch near the small town of McLaughlin in South Dakota. I was the second of eight children and we all helped with the ranch, planting alfalfa and wheat and putting up hay for the cattle. In the summer we rode horses to round up our cattle and went to powwows and rodeos. The winter months brought long bus rides to school.

**PS**     Were there any models for you to be an artist in this farming and ranching community? Was there an art teacher at your high school?

**CH**     The models were not artists that one would consider in a traditional sense. Many of my classmates were Lakota Sioux, so I was surrounded by that culture. My maternal grandmother was a quilter; she and my mother would sew clothes for us by making patterns from photographs that they saw in magazines. And they both cut hair beautifully. Most people built their own homes and barns without architects. My mother drew the plans for our homes. Her father designed and built by hand their family home from used railroad ties in the 1920s. Being isolated on a ranch, I learned how to make things that were needed with materials at hand, following the lead of my parents and grandparents.

My high school art teacher allowed me to work in our classroom whenever I had free time. I took advantage of this new and special privilege since an art teacher, art materials, and a specific room were not available in grade school. We also had a music teacher with whom I studied percussion. Outside of school and college, I traveled the state playing drums in a rock-and-roll band with classmates.

In 1971 I attended South Dakota State University in Brookings, a land grant college, where I studied with the Fluxus artist Donald E. Boyd. Don, who had been a student of Buckminster Fuller at Harvard University, introduced me to the permissiveness of Fluxus and other artistic possibilities. I realized—to comprehend one’s world and experience one’s self—there was more to art than drawing and painting. He also introduced me to the work of Joseph Beuys and encouraged me to study with him in Germany, which didn’t seem like an option for me at the time. In 1975 Don became the director of Fluxus West.

After college, I moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where I first met and made friends with numerous professional artists. I worked at the local Public Broadcasting Service station as a graphic artist and set designer, and then at the Museum of Contemporary Art Jacksonville, where I photographed the collection, designed catalogues, and assisted as a preparator. The museum acquired the Norman Fisher Collection while I was there, and part of my job was to catalogue and document this collection. An exhibition about the collection was arranged and several of the included artists were invited to speak in Jacksonville. I helped Tina Girouard with the installation and spent time with her and the artists Jene Highstein, Dickie Landry, Keith Sonnier, and Jackie Winsor, who came from New York to speak.

**PS**     After your time in Jacksonville you went back to South Dakota in 1979 for three years. What made you want to return?

**CH**     I felt a kinship with the New York artists that I met through the museum, some of whom visited my studio in Jacksonville. They encouraged me to move to New York, but I decided what I really needed to do was to go back to South Dakota in order to have undistracted time to develop a body of work. I lived on my brothers’ ranch, focused on my work, and viewed the experience as my master’s degree.

I also remained in touch with the artists and made trips to New York to keep abreast with recent developments in contemporary art and performance.

During that time, Don, as director of Fluxus West, invited me to participate in the group’s activities. By sending and receiving Fluxus mail art from my postbox on the ranch, I became involved with a fun-loving and loosely formed but intimately connected group of international artists. I gained confidence in my abilities and, with their encouragement, interacted with their art and contributed my own work. The dialogue that I had with the New York artists and with Fluxus fostered not only a rich learning experience but a sophisticated social network to share ideas with.

I also took a job teaching drawing at the newly founded Standing Rock College (now Sitting Bull College) in Fort Yates, North Dakota, where I taught along with the noted Native American artist Arthur Amiotte. The college hadn’t yet built any art buildings, so our classes were conducted in McLaughlin, where I had gone to high school. Our classroom was a one-room trailer that was parked in the livestock auction parking lot, and our students, who were Native Americans, would come from the surrounding villages of Bullhead, Little Eagle, and McLaughlin. Halfway through the course after asking one of my students to try to be on time, I learned that he was walking ten miles each way, often in freezing weather.

**PS** After numerous visits you relocated to New York City in 1985 and quickly achieved recognition. How did that come about?

**CH** I began sending slides around the country and applying for exhibitions. Upon seeing slides of my work in 1982, the curator Alanna Heiss, who founded New York’s P.S.1 (now MoMA PS1), invited me to exhibit. It was my first solo show in the city and much of the work was included in a group show the following year at the

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. That was the first time that my work was nationally received.

In 1984 I temporarily lived in New York to teach drawing at the School of Visual Arts. I also received a Louis Comfort Tiffany grant that year. Around that time, a fire destroyed my brother’s ranch house in South Dakota, including my personal belongings and some early work. I began to view New York as a more permanent place to live and work. In 1985 I sublet a studio near the Fulton Street Fish Market in lower Manhattan. On my morning runs I collected and started working with discarded fishskins.

After the summer of 1986, which I spent in residence at the Edward F. Albee Foundation in Montauk, New York, I found what would become my permanent studio for the next twenty-five years in Chinatown. Two years later, I had the first of three solo shows at Rosa Esman Gallery. I was earning a living as an artist and exhibiting my work in New York, across the country, and at international museums. This period marked the conclusion to my self-administered MFA.

**PS** I know you go back to see you family in South Dakota at least once a year, but since the mid-1990s the land of New York State has clearly become your dominant natural environment. When did you shift focus from the Dakotas to your property in the Catskills?

**CH** I spent many summer months in residence at the artist colonies MacDowell in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, and two summer residencies at Edward Albee’s barn in Montauk. I really enjoyed being away from the city in the summer and started exploring upstate New York while at Yaddo. In 1996 I found an abandoned house and property in the Catskills, which I bought and restored with my partner. I began working on larger, fabricated copper pieces as the space allowed me to make art at a scale that was not possible in my

fourth-floor walk-up studio in Chinatown. I set up a canopy with a plywood floor in front of the house, which I used as a summer studio for the first few years before transitioning to a garage. Recently, I designed and built a dedicated studio.

**PS** Your use of natural materials and imagery typically breaks, cuts, or fractures and collages material. Where does that aesthetic choice come from?

**CH** I have long used natural materials in my work, juxtaposing them with man-made materials and found or used objects to explore humankind’s intervention in nature. For example, the ongoing drawings titled Orange Slices are inspired by cuttings from pruned fruit trees or parts of fallen trees. While using a wood stove in the country, I started to put aside pieces of firewood that I found formally provocative and examined how wood incorporates wire and other unlike objects into itself. I saw cutting firewood and it’s opposite—the symbiosis of pruning a tree for health and fruitfulness—as the same act but with very different results. I made drawings of the applewood tree frozen in the process of healing a cut or a broken limb and used the color orange to highlight the human intervention. I also painted the angular ends of firewood logs orange to enhance the cuts and used these elements for larger assembled pieces in 2007. Around that time, I started making my first photo composites from images that I took of the cut-and-split stacks of firewood and broken tiles of bluestone terrace found around my summer home.

**PS** You originally took photographs to document your work; now photography is a key aspect of your art along with sculpture and drawing.

**CH** While isolated in South Dakota in the beginning of my professional life, I learned the importance of documentation in order to communicate and share my work. I didn’t have proper lights then, so I took my work into the plains and used natural

light. I located specific places on the prairie to site and photograph the work, sometimes on a butte or out in a buffalo pasture. These were the same images that I developed and printed in my small darkroom and sent from South Dakota to friends as black-and-white Fluxus postcards. When I started using these images in slide talks, I was surprised to hear people express interest in purchasing them. Although I had never offered them for sale, years later I did make some large color prints.

With the more recent photo composites, I was thinking of a way to create a new experience to view sculpture through photography that would be different than traditional documentation. Using this idea as a starting point for my photo composites, I create digital files containing multiple images, each of which captures a specific side of a sculpture. I use the camera to frame a point of view and focus of intent as I move around a work. The selected images are color corrected and printed, and then physically assembled into a composite. With this process, using light and shadow, I can compress, expand, flatten, or warp real space. My images place the viewer above, below, or beside the sculpture. The results provide a simultaneous three-dimensional view, creating a companion to the experience of the sculpture.

**PS** What can we learn from your inclusion of *Tsunami* and *Percussion* (both made in 2000) in this exhibition?

**CH** *Tsunami* and *Percussion* are early examples of my investigation into an expanded definition of painting. The works were made from fishskins that I collected, preserved, stitched together, and then painted. Their loosely hanging forms are achieved through tension during the drying and shrinking process. I then suspend those forms from the wall with wire armatures, creating an envelope of space to capture and project light through the translucent skins and in turn illuminate the color. The edges

and negative spaces of the suspended armatures also cast shadows on the wall. I wanted to make note of the information contained in the skins concerning their previous lives—to pay tribute to these animals and the perfection of their natural forms. I was also focused on the various elements residing in the construction of the paintings and how these elements interact, such as the size and type of stitch in relationship to the connected parts, the size of voids created as the skins dry, and the drawing that is woven with fishing line into the overall work. These elements set up the logic and form that the painting will take. I use this underlying physical logic as well as the content that the materials bring to the work as a foundation to inform the process of painting in a new way. I have also recently taken numerous detail shots of the painting *Percussion* and incorporated them in mixed-media drawings.

- PS

How did you come to use the materials in and choose the title for *Rough Rider* (2014)?
- CH

The glass elements were created with the assistance of glassblowing artists during a 2007 residency at the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington. I started *Rough Rider* while participating in a Park Avenue Armory residency in New York City in 2011–12. At the time, the armory was in the midst of a major renovation. Several pieces of old, scarred furniture—which were otherwise destined for the dump carts on the other side of my studio wall—became the material focus of my work.

Through a process of sawing, shaving, and dismantling, I revealed the construction joinery and the grain of the hardwood, creating an open armature upon which to build a sculpture. These bisected structures allowed me to incorporate a diverse array of materials, including hand-blown glass, foam, fur, and plywood cutouts. I then inserted long branches with bark still intact and hand-whittled tops that were honed to look like antlers.

*Rough Rider* was titled after Teddy Roosevelt’s grand trek into the Dakotas to hunt bison. During my high school years, I often drove by a billboard at the state line, which advertised North Dakota as Roosevelt’s Rough Rider country. While in residence at the armory, I was drawn to the Field and Staff Room. It had once functioned as a men’s club and was furnished with a bar, liquor lockers, a small discrete—urinal only—toilet, mounted heads of moose, and a bald eagle. I learned that Eleanor Roosevelt’s father frequented this room, and I remembered the billboard in North Dakota. I imagined that these trophies were hunted and brought back east. By reanimating the furniture and lumber collected from the renovation, I wanted to reference this particular type of human intervention in the wilderness.

- PS

There seems to be an intensified use of color in your recent work such as your Orange Slices series of drawings (2012–13) and *Geometry 3D #7* (2016).
- CH

With these works and other recent drawings and photo composites, I am examining notions about painting and sculpture. Where is the edge of one or the heart of the other? The heightened color allows me to explore the ways these boundaries expand, overlap, and conceptually support one another.

*Patterson Sims is an independent art curator and writer based in New York City, who works with several artist-endowed and visual art nonprofit organizations.*

In the studio, Maple Leaf, South Dakota, 1980

