

# Carol Hepper: The Skin of Things

by Oliver Shultz

In a 1984 color photograph taken in South Dakota, a desolate expanse of the prairie unfolds before us. A landscape of rolling hills and parched grasses rise upward, describing a gently undulating contour of horizon against a cloudless sky. Looming in the foreground is an elegant and enigmatically arched structure; it is composed of translucent, alabaster-colored fabric stretched across a rigid armature, twisting in a way that echoes the shape of the hills behind it. Composed from sheets of tanned deer hide affixed to a curved framework of willow branches, *Seven Stroke Roll* is one among a group of monumental sculptures that Carol Hepper created from wood, bone, and animal hide during the early 1980s. She photographed these works outdoors in the landscape of South Dakota, where she was born and raised in a family of cattle ranchers. Suggesting fragmentary, porous, and uninhabitable architecture, Hepper's photographs make her sculptures appear as if emerging from the landscape rather than placed upon it, pointing to a closeness between work and world—between the language of nature and the language of art—that has informed her practice ever since.

In 1982 a group of Hepper's work was exhibited for the first time in New York, where they were installed in the dilapidated galleries of what was then the alternative space known as P.S.1 (now MoMA PS1). In a photograph that documents this influential exhibition, we see her sculptures once again stretched out, this time across the linoleum floor of the old school building. A construction of cattle bones is suspended just beyond the frame of the photograph. From the perspective of art history, Hepper's oeuvre itself has remained just beyond the frame. It has garnered considerable notoriety, but like the work of other key women artists of her generation—some of whom, like Jackie Winsor and Tina Girouard, she met and befriended in the late 1970s—it has often been overlooked. This may in part have to do with the way Hepper's art is both radically specific and placeless. Her work is stretched thin between far-flung locales: the vast open spaces of the American West, where she was raised by descendants of homesteaders amongst the Sioux tribes of Standing Rock, and the bustling metropolis of New York City, where she has been based since the mid-1980s.

Later, that specificity would expand to include the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, home to another mythic landscape of Americanness—that of Thomas Cole and Asher Brown Durand—where Hepper has maintained a home and studio for the past two decades. While the Hudson River School may have been far afield from her conscious concerns as an artist, her practice remains haunted by a peculiarly American relationship between the body and landscape, between culture and nature. On the one hand, the early hide works draw on her experience of Native American culture, which surrounded her in the form of cultural traditions from the architectural to the ritual.<sup>1</sup> They also recall indigenous philosophies regarding making and using, particularly in relation to the bodies of animals. Yet the photographs also suggest that Hepper's work is deeply concerned with contemporary culture. It is not merely that her sculptures can be understood in relation to contemporary artists who engaged the landscape in the 1970s and 1980s, from Robert Smithson to Michelle Stuart, but also that they suggest a certain urgency with regard to empathy, which resonates in our age of digital disembodiment.

In the mid-1990s, around the same time that she began frequenting the Catskills, Hepper started stitching together large tapestries of luminescent fishskins in her studio in Chinatown. She preserved the skins in a process analogous to her treatment of animal hides, cleaning, tanning, and stretching them herself. After preserving them, she painted the resulting objects, endowing the dulled and faded scales with an iridescence that recalled the shimmer they had lost in death. After stitching them together into a tapestry, she suspended the entire object vertically, several inches off the gallery wall. The resulting works, like the monumental form of *Tsunami* (2000), do not so much hang as float. They suggest ghostly schools of aquatic bodies woven together in space. They seem both to arrest and preserve the kinetic quality of the dead creatures that comprise them, imbuing the remnants with an uncanny vivacity. The memory of the fish from which the skins originated is preserved, and the living creature is simultaneously transformed into something else entirely. Nature is reborn as animate artifice.

The arrival of the fish in Hepper’s work also heralded her use of color as a site of meaning. Indeed, the artist often refers to her work with fishskins as “paintings,”<sup>2</sup> and not just because she applies pigment to the surface of the tanned skins. In fact, the paint does not so much accrete on the skins as infuse them in the manner of a stain. In this way, she imbues color into the material of the scale itself—the fish literally re-absorbs its color. This reabsorption hints at the meaning of painting for Hepper: an act of abstract sensuousness more than an act of representation. It is history produced through feeling as much as fact. The whole history of each sturgeon that died to make *Percussion* (2000) is contained within the work, but not in the form of a tale that can be recounted. Instead, the work is a conduit for the energy of the fish, for a vivacity—literalized in its color—that never dies with death but only needs to be coaxed back into what persists of the body, its skin, to re-animate it.

Painting has the power to reanimate through sensuous experience. The art historian Heinrich Wölfflin famously connected painterly sensuousness to the metaphor of skin. There was no contradiction, he explained, in suggesting that painting was “nourished by the tactile sense,” for painterly experience meant seeking out “the different skin of things.”<sup>3</sup> Painting meant penetrating “beyond the solid object into the realm of the immaterial.”<sup>4</sup> And nowhere is this link between solidity and immateriality more present than in Hepper’s fishskin works, where ostensibly ephemeral and diaphanous materials of the body are rendered hard and durable, their decay arrested. Yet miraculously, they maintain this sense of lightness, this cloud-like weightlessness. In this way, her fishskins do not represent skin; instead, they give us the skin of things. For Hepper, painting is not a representational regime so much as a mode of feeling.

Since her earliest work with hides in the late 1970s, the artist has dealt with the concept, metaphor, and materiality of skin. Across her practice, she has investigated skin both literally and figuratively. If to have skin is also always to have a body, then in Hepper’s work, things exist by virtue of their embodiment; the skin-hood of a thing is like the sign that it is here, available to

us as a material entity in a world. We—or rather our bodies—are also things. We exist insofar as we are enfleshed, wrapped up in an embrace with ourselves that takes the form of skin. And if branches and bison are the same—each has a skin like ours—then skin might become a site of empathy, a fulcrum between my feelings and yours, unfathomable except through the power of analogy. Skin becomes an organizing principle that extends to the artist’s various modes of making, from her cast bronze sculptures of plumbing fixtures from the 1990s—which she has likened to the viscera of the city revealed when construction pulls back its asphalt layer—to her recent works of photo-collage—which “skin” the surfaces of her sculptures and re-stitch the resulting visual information back together as a photograph, an object with the thinness of skin. For Hepper, objecthood and skin-hood are always entwined, suggesting a bodily entanglement that dissolves distinctions between human and animal, self and other, animate and inanimate. Whether composed of flesh and bone, scales, or bark, her sculptures make palpable the logic of skin as a site of sensation, vector of communion, and cipher for the luminous delicacy of matter.

We might say that Hepper sculpts the skin of things in order to peel it back for us in a moment of revelation. In this sense, trees have a powerful place in her artistic vocabulary. The artist often works with the severed limbs that accumulate in her studio in the Catskills after she prunes the fruit trees on her property. The cuts on the severed branches suggest a certain kind of violence—they are, after all, places where the bark has been forcibly ruptured, opened, and exposed. Hepper’s trees are never whole, but rather fragmented or wounded. And to speak of the wound is always to speak of skin, because wounds are defined as a hole or break in what should be a seamless surface, a tear in the contour. Wounds also bear witness—they vouchsafe the truth of another being’s pain. Therefore, a tree’s wounds represent how we attempt to imagine what it might feel—its suffering and its loss.

In the series of drawings titled *Orange Slices* (2012–13), we see fragments of trees rendered lusciously in shades of monochrome black casein. The organic shapes are interrupted,

however, by bright orange pigment, which Hepper applies over the cuts on the branches, producing bright oval forms that hover at the surface of the picture plane and reinforce the sense of its two-dimensionality and thinness as an object. More importantly, they also produce a stark distinction between the natural form of the tree and the mark of human intervention that severed it. The orange color, which evokes construction fencing, also seems to play on the function of safety vests worn by hunters in the woods to avoid being confused for prey: it is a color out of place, not of nature. It signifies man-made intervention, redoubling the violence and amplifying it. And yet, the pigment is also applied with delicacy and care, suggesting a kind of poultice. It is a dressing on the wound, as if the act of rendering the fragmented branch in a watercolor might be a kind of healing—redemptive not for the tree, but for us, for we otherwise cut and use trees without contemplating their inherent treeness.

How many of us consider where the wood comes from in the furniture we inhabit daily, the desks on which we write, the chairs in which we sit? During an artist residency at New York’s Park Avenue Armory in 2011–12, Hepper produced a body of work that asks us to remember precisely this: to recall the woodiness of our tables and chairs. To construct *Armory Armoire* (2012), she used reclaimed furniture that was discarded outside her studio. She cut open and sanded down the finish to reveal the grain of the original tree beneath, exposing the wood’s history. She then bored holes in the fabricated objects that she pierced with tree branches—bark and all—so that the branches seem to rise up from the furniture as if, having been discarded outdoors for a prolonged period, the trees had grown through the man-made objects. Here, however, the tips of the tree trunks are altered, carved down, their bark removed and whittled into shapes that closely resemble a stag’s antlers. Hepper presented the works in a room in the Armory where they were flanked by trophy heads of preserved elk on the walls, a juxtaposition that made inescapable the comparison between two radically different modes of artifice. It suggested the horn-shaped form might have been lurking within the wood all along, as if nature were secreting one of its

creatures inside another—an animal inside the branch—something that is only imaginable if we begin to understand that animals and trees are united in their living thingness.

*Rough Rider* (2014) emerges from the same series, incorporating both the carved horn branches from the Armory works alongside garishly colored, bulbous blown-glass forms that Hepper began making during a residency in 2007 at Pilchuck Glass School. She slotted these glass objects into the wooden armatures of her sculptures, allowing them to rest precariously in defiance of gravity, poised to fall like ripened fruit. In *Rough Rider*, amorphous, almost amoebic forms of jig-sawed plywood painted in pastel colors are affixed to the unadorned wooden panels that constitute the sculpture’s central support. The artificiality of the pastel palette rhymes with the garishly colored glass and further amplifies the contrast between what is merely transported from nature and what has been altered or transformed. Glass itself is a product of this tension: the result of a natural process, the melting of silica. It is also an ancient human technology that requires a bodily technique dependent upon one’s breath. Hepper’s glass forms are therefore like traces or indices of a given person’s breathing; they stand in for the human, both in their chromatic dissonance with the natural materials she often uses, and in their status as traces of the human body’s internal processes.

The same palette of decidedly artificial colors—pastel pinks, yellows, and grays—populate the surfaces of *Geometry 3D* (2012), where a similarly fabricated angular support seems to have been vertically bisected by the branch of a fallen apple tree, almost as if the branch had plummeted from the sky and lodged itself in the sculpture. What is strange about the piece is how one of the branches seems at first to dissolve into a black graphic line emanating outward from it, disrupting its verisimilitude. Upon closer inspection, the line turns out to be a wildly curving steel bar, which has been twisted into a fancifully contorted shape that echoes the random crisscrossing of tree branches. Hepper has also painted the cut edge of the tree branch orange—just the same way she did in the *Orange Slices* that she began the

same year. She thus renders the cut surface of the wood a kind of wound, and the work itself a body. Even as it exists as a wooden thing, the artist gives us the skin of the thing.

And even when her work consists of figurative drawing, as in the Orange Slices, Hepper never actually *represents* skin. Instead, she makes objects that consist of it, evoke it, and transform it through an oblique set of operations. Even as she has embraced the process of stretching preserved flesh as a sculptural activity, Hepper has also stretched the poetic possibilities of skin as a conveyer of meaning by suggesting that trees have skin, or that the city itself has a skin. Her work is, in its essence, a way of giving flesh to metaphor, a way of locating the act of communication—as contact, touch, or exchange—in the work of art, which becomes, like skin, a material and tangible locus for empathy.

Hepper’s works show us how skin is also the primary place where selfhood secretes itself outward and makes itself available to others. The composite photographs she has made of works like *Rough Rider* and *Geometry 3D* are about remembering that fact: as portraits, they are themselves skins, thin photographic skeins that hang off the wall. In their thinness and their thingness (for Hepper makes them with physical printouts and then re-photographs the final object), they compress the temporality of sculpture into the membrane of a flattened surface. This skin is like ours: a fabric we’ve already woven ourselves into, a means by which we make concrete sense of who and what we are. In this way, her sculptures involve skinning as much as they do re-skinning. She shows us how skin constitutes a space of empathy—not just between people, but between all living things. Through an almost alchemical process, Hepper eulogizes the bodies of things once living like us—whether buffalo, deer, fish, or tree—and despite their otherness, she entombs them gently and with a care that is endemic to her practice. Her work conjures empathy for the otherness of nature’s forms. Hepper’s art does not desire to elucidate its inner life, but rather to preserve a certain inscrutable, yet familiar darkness, a particular reverence for things as bodies, whether a tree stump, a fragment of bone, or a bit of old hide.

<sup>1</sup> Carol Hepper admired tepees, celebrated at community powwows, and attended Sioux rituals.

<sup>2</sup> See the Carol Hepper and Patterson Sims interview within this publication.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, “Linear and Painterly: General Observations,” in *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1950), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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Seven Stroke Roll, 1984. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

