

Barbara Cooper Fassbender Gallery, Chicago

Barbara Cooper has been exhibiting her emotionally evocative sculptures in Chicago for slightly more than a decade. During this time her work has continued to grow and evolve, like the biological forms and processes that inspire it. Cooper seems to have internalized French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's ideas about the poetics of space, and her work has consistently suggested the psychological resonances of the shell or the nest, without

attempting to depict these objects literally.

If Cooper's previous sculptures used techniques associated with basketry, weaving long strips of wood into large engaging shapes, her newest body of work uses wood in ways suggestive of overlapping layers of fish scales. Her process involves gluing small bits of veneer wood to create larger sheets, which are then used to form her objects. As a result, the new works have a greater solidity and sense of presence that show less relation to domestic objects, such as baskets, and a closer kinship to the original source of her material, namely trees. This is most strongly felt in *Column* (1998), a large upright form that evokes a limbless tree trunk. Cooper has allowed the wood glue that she uses to drip down the sides of the work like sap, suggesting the arrested vitality of a living thing. The tension between the natural and the fabricated is found in the reclining floor piece *Columna* (1998), which evokes both a fallen tree and a provocatively arranged sheet of flooring material.

Cooper has also begun to incorporate metal into her sculptures, and the slight dissonance between wood and metal imbue these works with a shiver of dark emotion. Although *Burl* (1997) almost literally represents a redwood burl, Cooper's version sprouts blackened steel at its edges instead of roots.

Cresceve (1997) recalls the curved body of some ancient sea creature, with a mouth and tail made of steel. In the more humorous *Integumen* (1998), a large pod-like structure appears to be sprouting an old car muffler at the top. The piece suggests that, if left out in the rain and sun, it would eventually blossom into a full-fledged wrecked car.

With these new works Cooper virtually inverts her earlier metaphoric agenda. Instead of objects that are clearly fabricated, but that have organic shapes, these objects appear to be actual organic objects that only closer scrutiny reveals to be constructed. This kind of poetic mystery feels genuinely new in Cooper's already distinguished oeuvre. Also exhibited were two charcoal drawings, part of a series called *Flow*, all inspired by the rush of water over rocks and other objects. The drawings generated a dialogue with the sculpture, emphasizing the fluidity of shape that Cooper manages to bring to even the most solid of objects.

Jeff Abell



Barbara Cooper

Left to right: *Integumen* (1998), wood and steel, 57 x 16 x 20 in; *Column* (1998), wood, 22 x 22 x 77 in; *Burl* (1997), wood and steel, 26 x 43 x 18 in

Photos courtesy Fassbender Gallery

