

## Sculptures by Barbara Cooper

With her recent sculptures, Barbara Cooper took the next logical step in the steady evolution of her art. But she also let loose, allowing things to well up from inside, to break out and surface in actions that revealed

a vulnerability and healing, a personalness and universal concern that made the new work even more compelling than her previous sculptures.

Exhibited from April 12 to May 20 at the Sybaris Gallery in Royal Oak,

Michigan, the new pieces had a specific identity—that of the tree form, which Cooper began exploring in 1998. The specificity was used as the top layer of meaning, but the tree here also referred to a generic natural form and human construct. *Mast*, for instance, stood like a tree with vertical folds in the surface that conveyed the appearance of a growing shape, folds that also gave a sense of flow of a garment on the body, a body moving. The lack of branches or a top made it very clear that this was a piece about the idea of a tree, some sort of neo-Platonic shadow of the physical reality. But it was also a brutal cutting, a cropping of the spine of the tree and in turn that of the human form, both suggested by the sculptural shape. Cooper explained, “The tree carries its history in these gestures grown over time, just as the body becomes an accumulation mirroring where we have been.”

The work’s title provided a dual meaning, because a mast, shaped from a single tree, is the tall part of the boat without which you can’t sail. *Mast* also referred to the next life, the man-made life given this natural form, leading to a subject that preoccupies Cooper. Both recklessly appropriating nature for our own uses without considering issues of extinction and not respecting the given genes in this age of bioengineering are practices that can lead to a point where the tree as we know it is a relic, a sense *Mast* had, as did other “trees” in the exhibition. The metaphor here relating to the human condition was equally strong, for the same can be said of human genetic engineering. Also, the sculptures are made from wood veneer strips, veneer being a thin fragment used to represent or to be passed off as solid wood. Using a natural material that has undergone an industrial processing was a way Cooper broached the ideas of recycling and transformation, with their positive and negative aspects.

*Mast* was also about the succession of life. The barklike surface of the upper torso was split open, as if a swelling of life from inside had burst



out or lightning had struck, fracturing the structure to expose and destroy the interior, a vulnerability that humans and nature share. Cooper said, "I am layering in references to time and history like the rings on a tree.... A tree dies and it becomes nutrition for the next life cycle of trees."

The glue Cooper used to put the wood veneer sections together in an additive process dripped from them like sap or syrup, identifying the tree as a source of nourishment. But it was also a reference to the tree healing itself from its wounds, as occurs in the process of human emotional growth.

Other strong pieces in the exhibit, such as *Fragment*, a sacred-looking cache of coiled wood scrolls in a tree stump, and *Buttress*, a whitish columnar, almost naked tree form, revealed the variousness of this work and Cooper's probing of these relationships. Meaning was embedded clearly yet subtly in sculptures that had their own curious mute beauty.

—Marsha Miro

*Marsha Miro is a freelance art critic living in the Detroit area. She also works at Cranbrook educational community documenting new architectural activities.*

Opposite: *Mast*, 2000; wood; 84 by 55 by 32 inches. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Greg Eitelman.

Right: *Fragment* (side and top views), 1999; wood; 18 by 24 by 24 inches. Photos courtesy of the Sybaris Gallery, Royal Oak, Michigan.

