

**BARBARA COOPER**



# An Art of Essence: The Sculpture and Drawing of Barbara Cooper

*Simplicity is not an objective in art,  
but one achieves simplicity despite  
oneself by entering into the real  
sense of things.*

—Constantin Brancusi

Barbara Cooper creates large-scale drawings and sculptures that simultaneously speak to the physical and the transcendental. Like the early modernist Constantin Brancusi, Cooper creates abstract bio-

morphic objects inspired by the poetics of nature—the bow of a tree, the spine of deer, an overgrown gourd, a tortoise shell—and by the underlying systems, whether aesthetic or scientific, that define a given form. Drawing upon the diverse principles of taxonomy and geometry, Cooper's constructions are suggestive of anthropomorphic figures spiraling through space or objective proof of some mathematical theorem. Blurring the boundaries between the romantic and the rational, Cooper's work imparts a yearning for nature unspoiled by humanity, yet informed by scientific modes of understanding.

The works in this exhibition represent a continuum of the ideas the artist has been exploring for the last seven years, which have given birth to a seemingly endless vocabulary of visual forms. Cooper builds her protean structures using unfinished wood veneer strips (often cherry or maple), which she methodically layers as a series of intersecting lines that lovingly twist and fold to encase a hollow center. Loose interlocking weaves form a penetrable exterior or skin that reveals an empty interior. This void does not signify absence, however, but rather the possibility of (human?) presence: an armor for protection, a vessel of containment, a sanctuary for nurturing and contemplation. Thus the cycles of life—birth, growth, death, reincarnation—are metaphorically garnered in Cooper's labor-intensive process, whereby the fragility of her humble medium is transformed into an object-organism of strength, stability, and possibility.

Cooper's symbolic forms are human in scale, and intimate in their richly-worked surfaces and materials that reflect the "handmade." They recall the finely-crafted sculptures of Martin Puryear in their aesthetic resonance. Yet one is reminded of the domestic activities of bandaging, braiding, and needlework, acts descendent from the artist's background and

Cover: *Cyclus*, 1994, 44" x 46" x 26", wood

Right: *Ova*, 1994, 74" x 34" x 40", wood

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training in the fiber arts. The roots of Cooper's investigations can be found in the tenets of the postminimalists, such as Magdalena Abakanowicz, Eva Hesse, and Jackie Winsor. These artists challenged the hierarchy of monumental sculpture by merging a feminist concern for craft, with its emphasis on process and organic, malleable materials, with the minimalist codes of repetition, geometric purity, and restraint. However, Cooper's elegant sculptures are also imbued with the religiosity of Shaker furniture, where form and function intertwine.

Like Brancusi, Cooper shares a spiritual belief in the essence of things, as cued by her objects' Latin titles and by their physical referencing of the natural world. The cocoon-like *Plexus* folds in and upon itself as if caught in a state of suspended animation. In *Cyclus*, a coiled limb flows within a continuous vortex. The free-standing *Ova* is suggestive not only of a large seed or pod (where all life begins and is regenerated), but also of the female body. Undulating contours spill into sensuous chambers and orifices, recalling ancient fertility statues or private totems.

There is a formal kinship between Cooper's charcoal drawings and sculptures: they both possess a commanding, yet lyrical physicality. However, her drawings do not function as studies for their three-dimensional siblings, but rather as parallel acts of creation. These blueprints unlock a genetic code from which the artist builds her hybrid forms, while her sculptures reveal their dependence on gesture and line. The graphic works in this exhibition are part of her *Gyration* series, and take their inspiration from the rich foliage the artist discovered while traveling in rural France. Bold marks and leaf-like shapes become morphic bodies that writhe through ambiguous backdrops. Here, the minutia of nature unfolds in glorious rapture.

While the feminine is an animating symbol, as well as a site for personal reflection, Cooper's ascetic self is invariably universal. It sees art and life as a series of opposing forces—external/internal, movement/stasis, illusion/representation, organic/constructed—and is motivated by the inner necessity to create order from chaos. Her work successfully braces (and embraces) these polarities. Self-consciously environmental, it exudes a human desire to live in harmonious balance with nature and expresses the need to connect art to a larger ecological whole.

Susan Snodgrass is a Chicago-based writer and critic. She is a corresponding editor for *Art in America* and *C Magazine*. She teaches courses on women artists at DePaul University and Columbia College, Chicago.

**NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
ART MUSEUM**

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Artist's Gallery Talk, Monday, September 18, 6 p.m.

