

## reviews

Barbara Cooper

Fassbender Gallery

835 W. Washington St., 60607

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In this show of Barbara Cooper's most recent work the artist seems to have developed a new path of anthropomorphic sculptural engagement using the commanding forms of trees. Different in feeling from the more introverted organic tuberos forms of Cooper's previous work, these works' torso-like presence and bold, bigger-than-human scale—most

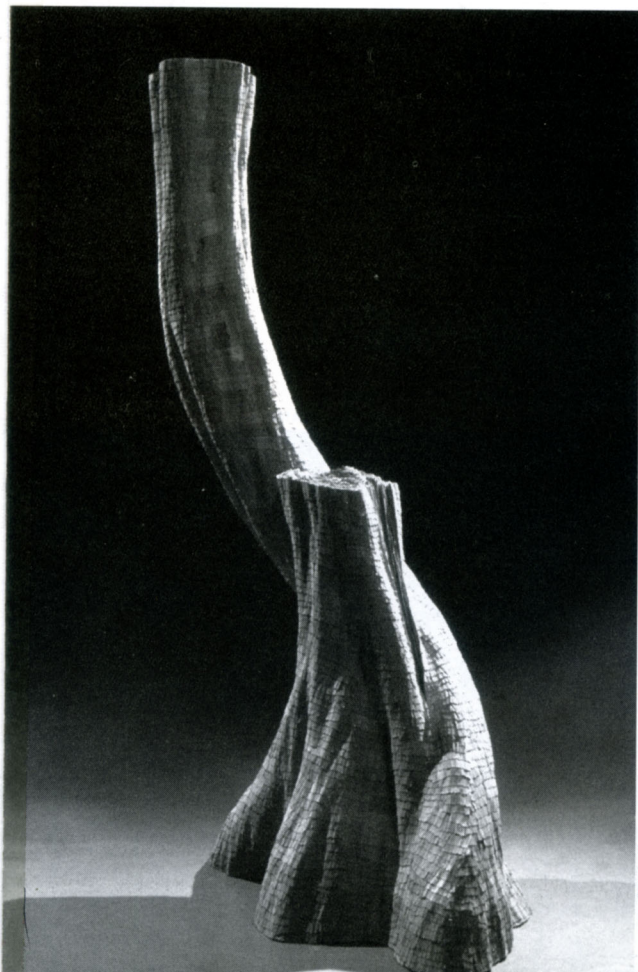
are almost seven feet high—address the viewer with surprising frankness.

The work still reflects the full measure of Cooper's weaving and fiber arts background, which leads back to an artistic heritage established during the 1960s and '70s by artists like Eva Hesse and Magdalena Abakanowicz. Here more like Abakanowicz than Hess, Cooper seems to embed a forthrightly engaging allegory about the human body and a canny sense of its presence in her tree trunks. They were "grown" by the artist out of bundles and rolls of thin wood veneer, which, as they were layered, started to buckle and swell on their outer surfaces like the rippled organic undulations of bark. These sculptures have a ghostly presence, curiously imposing and fragile at

once. An outer layer of shingled veneer "bark" showing drippings of carpenter's glue does more than expose the process of construction. It seems to imply the leaking of sap from a wounded tree now healing itself. The trunk is split in *Schist* and has been cut off in *Brace*, in which a larger trunk winds around a smaller stump as if to support it. Wherever breaches in the trunks appear so do exposed rings and frayed layers of wood. Similarly the six charcoal "Currents" drawings on display seem to merge the image of tree rings with rippling currents of water, made particularly effective through the artist's use of eraser smudging to blend charcoal patterns.

True to form, Cooper's work still reflects, from show to show, a sincere approach to her experiment in craft. Her belief in nature as a life force, inspired by extended stays in Iceland, France, and other places, is what graces her work with a believable future. Cooper's exhibits using fiber arts, craft, and the theme of nature parallel the work of other significant Chicago artists of past and present such as Martin Puryear and Tom Czarnopys contributing to an important humanistic Chicago sensibility that underlies it.

*Diane Thodos is a critic and artist who lives in Evanston, Illinois.*



Barbara Cooper  
*Brace*, 2000. Wood, 84" x 44" x 28".  
Courtesy of Fassbender Gallery.