

Royal Oak, MI

Barbara Cooper

The Sybaris Gallery

The sinuous, muscular forms of Barbara Cooper's recent sculptures are elegant, abstracted depictions of biological transformation. The growth of a tree outward in rings, the layering of cells in an embryo, the structure of genetic code—all of these inspire her immediate, visceral forms. She says, "My construction method has been gleaned from observations of building processes in the natural world: our bodies build cell by cell, fibers bundled into muscle; birds build resilient nests, accumulated twig by twig; shells grow linear accretions, secreted year by year. This process of slow, constant growth is ultimately a transformation of the small, the fragile, the insignificant, into something of strength and resilience as the individual establishes a state of balance with the forces of its environment."

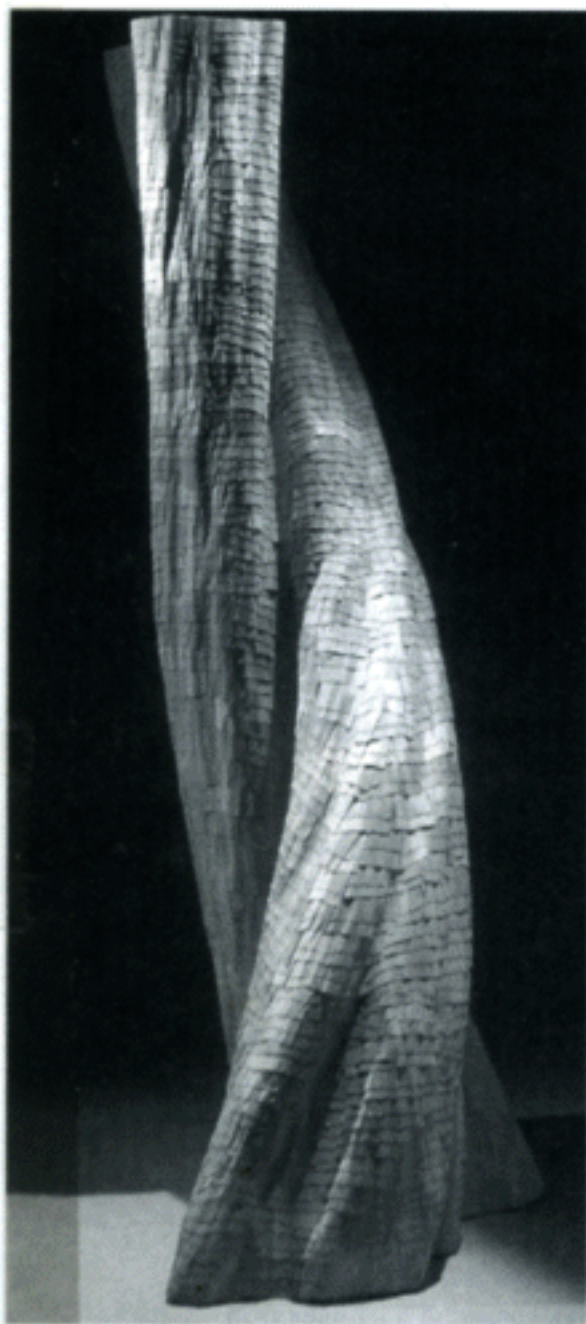
Cooper responds to her industrial, urban environment by recycling its detritus into a ready supply of sculptural materials, which continue to refer back to their origins. The wood veneer furniture factory scraps that she began using in the late 1980s allowed her to make twisting, plaited forms using basketry techniques. The splints of milled veneer were built into hollow biomorphic forms that reference human scale, particularly our most private spaces and chambers.

But these earlier structures, which appear simultaneously organic and constructed, do not command the intensity of Cooper's latest work. Her incremental, laborious process of construction defies a machine aesthetic, yet the machine produced the material's smooth regularity. Processed scrap wood is built up in layers, regeneratively, referring back to the circular growth pattern of the tree, while the glue drips that appear in the surface suggest both an indus-

trial process and sap leaking out of bark. The rapid consumption of forests to feed the production of cheap furniture is the subtext of these eloquent forms, which seem to twist upward toward the light. Though the trees appear natural, it is impossible to ignore that they are artificial,

Below: Barbara Cooper, *Buttress*, 1999. Wood, 85 x 40 x 26 in.

Below right: *Fragment (detail)*, 1999. Wood, 18 x 24 x 24 in.



that their growth is stunted at seven feet tall. The concept of limited resources is Cooper's subject, whether specifically in the growth of a tree or more polemically in the suggestion of the possibilities, limits, and responsibilities of human interventions such as genetic engineering.

Their ambiguity reinforces the forms' physical and spiritual power. While some titles reference architecture (*Buttress* or *Column*), the organic forms seem to refer to a natural force caught in momentary suspension rather than a mechanical stasis. Cooper's explicit statements about the resilience of nature and the wisdom found in the burl of a tree also reflect a sustained inquiry more consistent with geologic or evolutionary



time than the short cycles of human gratification. In works such as *Fragment*, the infinite trajectory of natural forces (the forming of the Grand Canyon or the air displaced by a butterfly's wings) is distilled into ecological lyricism.

—Gerry Craig