

dimensional, are paralleled by the forces depicted in Cooper's *Currents* drawing series. They evidence, too, the hand of the artist as sculptor; they are the product of a very physical process, at once capturing the process of their making and representing movement itself. Lines drawn are then erased, building up incrementally a dense and activated surface; erasing, too, produces a sense of light. Inspired by the artist's observation of California Live Oaks, these works are studies of trees and much more. They are that part and yet a whole; the structural forms of tree trunks, vast land formations as well (meandering canyons, gullies); and of the very forces of formation (ripples, currents, vortexes). Some drawings describe swelled, dense forms, like muscle, tendons, tentacles, the impacted growth of the burl on a tree, others describe swirling, dissipating forces like whirlpools.

Nature is a spiritual and emotional force. Skin, shell, burl, and callus are nature's protective coverings, as human beings, we, too, take on physical and psychological coverings. Curiously, these shells and scabs work in contradictory yet complementary ways; they are simultaneously devices of closure for healing, even survival, and of opening that allow for renewal and re-growth — a retrenchment that makes itself vulnerable again. Cooper's most recent sculptures are trees cut off at top and bottom. They reflect, in part, the artist's concern with the fragmentation of existence, isolated and threatened ecologies whose lack of cohesiveness puts systems of sustenance at risk. Imbedded in metaphorical terms, her work points to the need to reestablish a balance of nature and life. It is a personal vision, a need felt but only revealed over time, not consciously perceived in the planning or making; it is dependent upon working from a center of self and of art to achieve a balanced result; it emerges over time through a discovery process of working from the inside out.

"My aspiration is to reference the subjective nature of time: that is, the timelessness that lies at the heart of small moments of revelation upon which the evolution of an idea grows as we come to understand our own place in the greater context of our ecological and spiritual environment," the artist has said. Barbara Cooper does not profess to know the way for others, so she does not make art in didactic terms. Hers is an individual approach to larger questions — a ripple. But such ripples stir the movement of waters and of beings in the world. In its beauty, her art has a rippling effect and the potential to move viewers to ponder and glimpse and imagine a world in balance.

Mary Jane Jacob, Independent Curator
Chicago, January 2000

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Barbara Cooper

SCULPTURE

APRIL 14 - MAY 20, 2000

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Undulating Memories of Time

The whole to the part, a wholeness made of parts, a part that stands for, even embodies, the whole. Barbara Cooper focuses on parts of nature, individual elements, never a wide, undifferentiated landscape. Yet, at the same time, she creates a whole picture of nature. Recognizing the essential correspondences — in both formal appearance and actual processes of creation — her viewpoint crosses place and time, connecting the micro, invisible to the eye, the detail, the part to the macro, the aerial, the whole, and creating a concentricity of life forms.

A concentrated, coherent vision, across categories of things in art and life. Barbara Cooper sculpts mounds in her garden, molding the earth between four elder Siberian elms, she plants, nurtures, harvests, ingests, and then preserves gourds and vines of the vegetables she grows. She fills studio and home with pods, branches, shells, and re-articulated bones; for her art, she accumulates wood veneer, slices of trees “catalogued” by color and type. She studies the representation of water patterns, internal and external anatomies, and trees; she experiences nature in different places, attuning cognitive and somatic realms of learning in order to grow, visually and mentally, intuitively and spiritually.

A chronology and a morphology of forms and processes. Abstract constructions of pieces of milled wood — some juxtaposed to lengths of steel rod (1982–84) — gave way to the more malleable material and directly referential forms of her bronze castings, fantastic assemblages of actual material elements (1985–86). An art of unique personal character and maturity emerged with the use of veneer strips, an idiosyncratic use of basketry, to construct sculptures of body-like scale and reference (1988–98). A return to organic forms, long strips of veneer encircle in layers to make pod or bulbous shapes, the wood surfaces now ground and heavily reworked (1997–98). The industrial found its way into these mythic growth forms, seeking to become one; in opposition to her earlier use of stock metal rods, found automobile parts tell their own history, like the rings of a tree: once a car muffler, now an armature, and, illusionistically, part of nature. By the late 1990s, when earlier cast forms became the source and core of larger veneer-built forms, their imagery was extended in meaning through a fusion with wood.

Nature forms and conforms, not in arbitrary ways according to an ideal symmetry, but through the evolution of essential forms; the result of trial and error. Barbara Cooper is fascinated by the “brain”

of nature, the way species comprehend need, producing particular growth patterns and unique distortions in order to build strength and resilience, to respond to external stresses, and to repair and balance itself. A tree’s growth can reflect the normative (as it acquires a certain orientation to the light or by force of wind) and the extraordinary (developing burls around an insect hole or calluses around a dying limb to heal and protect). Other species, such as sea life, correspond to the movement of water. These stabilizing, regenerative actions, as Cooper keenly observes, also characterize the interaction between the natural and the manmade — blades of grass pop up through an asphalt parking lot — and attest to the fortitude of nature.

An incremental, cumulative process of construction shared by all nature. In layers, folds, bundles, and parts, nature builds the inner structure and outer shell of the whole. It is a laboring process of steady repetition — one might say, obsession — but one which, at the same time, builds intensity, investment, and meaning. Barbara Cooper uses scrap materials collected from woodworking shops and, with an economy of means, seeks to bring about a new stage in the life of this material. She takes the many parts into which this tree has been shaved and treated to make, say, furniture and, once discarded, cycles them back into a whole organic form. Like in the processes of nature, through her art-making process, form grows and becomes invested with intensity and meaning.

Barbara Cooper’s latest body of work. Beginning in 1997, she used veneer like a skin, built up layer upon layer, like the scales of a fish. In most instances, built from the inside out, their construction has formal and conceptual parallels to architecture columns, the body’s spinal column and the conduits of nature that support or transmit sustenance. *Columen* and *Columella* are trees that seem human in their gesture, assuming a height of about seven feet — a very tall person, a small tree. *Columna*’s many folds give this prone work a sense of sinuous linearity, while the layers of veneer wrap around in an alternate flow like the result of an opposing force. *Buttress* (ill.) takes on a more serene state, its whiteness integrating the many pieces from which it is made into a delicate pattern of squared patches with a tracery of subtly yellowed drips. *Mast* (ill.) incorporates a different use of veneer as sheaths, folds, or pages, and with its title alludes to the winds at sea that shape the cloth of sails and create movement across the water. This layering of sheets of veneer in a more open and revealing fashion may point, too, to a future direction — a new growth in the artist’s oeuvre. The circles of energy, bunched together at the inner core of *Fragment*, like a slice of burl wood made three-

