

# Art in America

APRIL 2007

## CHICAGO

### Barbara Cooper at the Chicago Cultural Center

Nature is Barbara Cooper's starting point. She returns to it again and again, but always from different perspectives and with fresh energy. Her recent exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center—three cast-iron floor sculptures and four 5-by-10-foot charcoal drawings—marks a dramatic change and renewed initiative in her work.

For many years, the artist has glued together layers of wood-veneer scrap to construct hollow sculptures whose compact, rounded and twisted forms suggest wasp nests, fungi, pods and tree trunks. The surfaces of these works recall bark, fish scales and the lines on seashells. These multiple references result from her strategy of paring forms down to their essence. In this she follows Brancusi, whom she has admired since childhood.

Residencies in Iceland during 2000 and 2003 led to new sculpture that suggests geological forces at work. Initially overwhelmed by the magnitude of Iceland's environment, Cooper made the four charcoal drawings that were shown at the Cultural Center. Collectively called "Processes of Change," they suggest wave action, river rapids and earthquakes. In 2004, she translated one of these drawings into *Fall*, a veneer

wall sculpture that's more than 7 feet high and spills out onto the floor an additional 6 feet.

Cooper created the cast-iron sculptures in 2006 during a three-month residency at the Kohler factory in Wisconsin. The largest of these is *Trace*, a 10-foot-long floor piece in nine sections that looks like earth strata being forced together under tremendous pressure. "I wanted to suggest a geological domino effect," she told this writer, "where one piece moves, causing a second to change position, then a third, a fourth, and so on." The artist began making *Trace* with nine slabs of clay. A fabricator cast the piece, and Cooper finished it. Roughly 10 inches wide, the individual castings take different forms—dish-, bridge- and tunnel-like—that make the overall piece seem to writhe when all are laid down in a



Barbara Cooper: *Rupture* (detail), 2006, cast iron in three sections, 7 by 73 by 15 inches overall; at the Chicago Cultural Center.

line. The castings have rough, terrainlike surfaces and smooth edges that Cooper made by cutting the clay with a knife. There is tension between the organic, fluid energy in the individual castings and their cut edges, which Cooper relates to manmade landscape corridors between natural areas that ecologists say encourage plant and animal biodiversity, giving her work a subtle environmental touch.

—Victor M. Cassidy