
Barbara Cooper



Dean Jacobson

SPIRITUS, 1990, Wood, 74 x 22 x 22"
Courtesy Esther Saks Gallery, Chicago

The sculptural sensibilities of Barbara Cooper and Joan Livingstone are distinctly organic. Both artists address life and its animating forces as their subject. Although manifested differently and individually in each sculptor's work, this vital consciousness informs and renders potent the curvaceous, sensuous, biomorphic forms which they derive from nature. They employ organic materials—untreated, paper-thin strips of wood by Cooper, stained felt stiffened with resin by Livingstone—that are integral to the emotional pitch and meaning of their art.

Unrestrained by their dependence on the wall, Cooper's twisting, voluptuous forms, constructed from crisp but pliable wood veneer, curl and turn in dynamic animation. Orifices opening into their darkened interiors are seductively alluring. These assertive, energetically composed sculptures seem to be temporarily arrested in the act of thrusting themselves into being. Their human scale makes them seem like our surrogates as they bravely strive to take up an independent existence by spiraling daringly into space.

Livingstone's majestic, swelling forms, emblematic perhaps of larger-than-life forces, may seem somewhat daunting when compared to Cooper's works. Their interiors, though hollow like Cooper's, are in general less easily accessible. Nevertheless, these large-bodied shapes with their gently undulating profiles, sewn from thick but flexible industrial felt, are subdued, self-contained, even vulnerable. The ostensible self-sufficiency of these pieces is undercut by their tentative stances of leaning or reclining. Conceivably they could slip or tumble over and break open. Although quiescent, these organic structures exude a latent vitality. Like living forms, they appear to be momentarily inert, about to become engaged or shriveled; poised between growth and decay, life and death.

The personal visions of Cooper and Livingstone stimulate ideas about the beauty and potency of natural forms and our spiritual/visceral identification with them. As within any life cycle, the drives to grow, metamorphose, reproduce, or embrace stasis wax and wane; so too we may be drawn now to one viewpoint, now to the other and perhaps lose our footing between them. Indeed, these powerfully provocative sculptures made from simple materials by Barbara Cooper and Joan Livingstone embody elementary, vitalistic forces that may initially startle and discomfit but ultimately engage and exhilarate the receptive viewer.

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