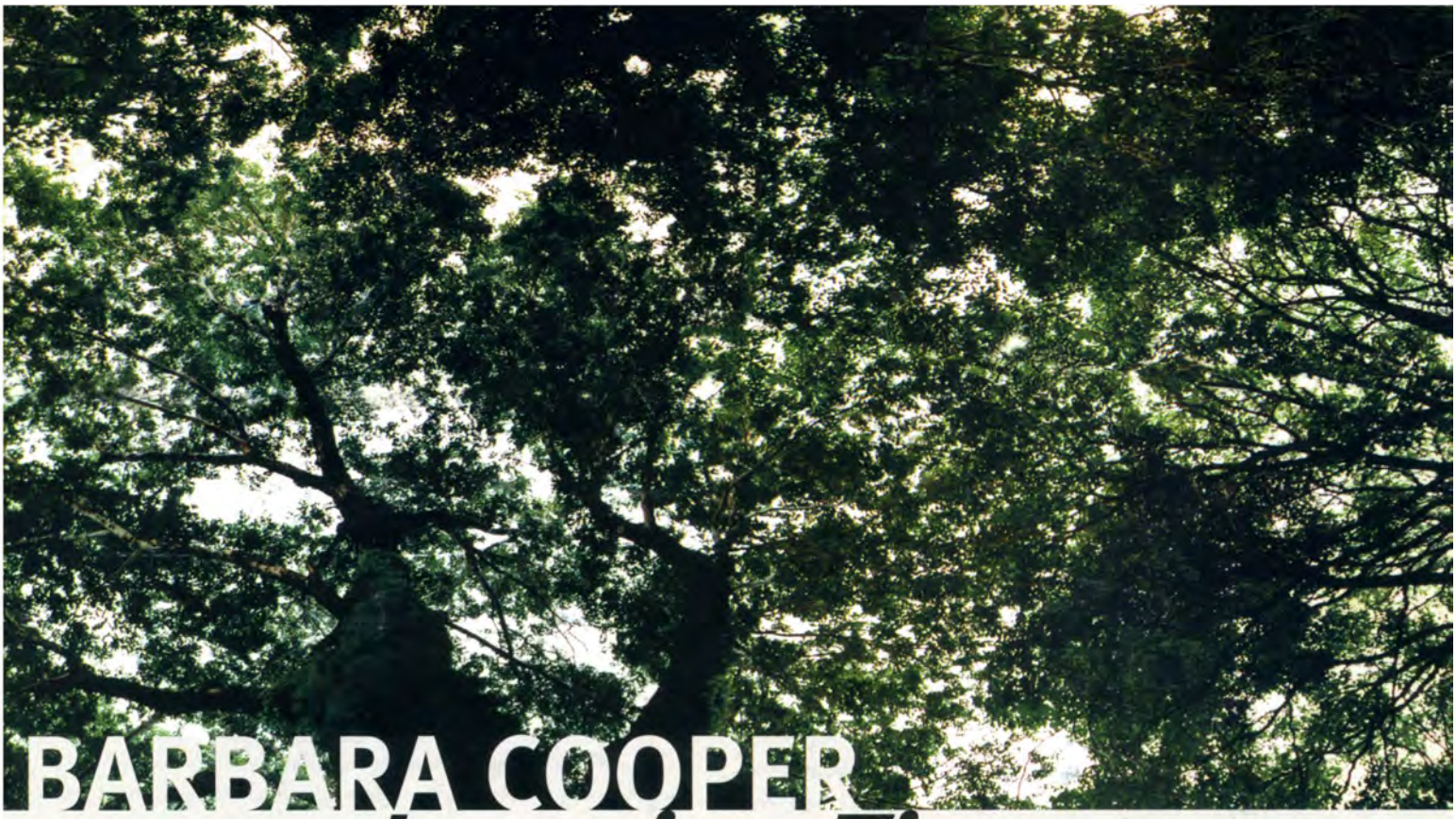

BARBARA COOPER
Layering Time

By POLLY ULLRICH

> The essence of life is not a feeling of being, of existence, but a feeling of participation in a flowing onward, necessarily expressed in terms of time, and secondarily expressed in terms of space.
>
> —Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Open the latch on the front gate to the sculptor Barbara Cooper's garden. Inside this magical place—located on a standard city lot in the middle of Chicago—the density, texture and multiple layers of greenery exude a verdant aroma. Tall lattices of tomato vines dwarf the visitor, with beets, kale, squash, chard, carrots, string beans, raspberries, blueberries—17 fruits and vegetables in all—15 herb plants and seven different kinds of lettuces, neatly crowding every square inch of the soil. Cooper has planted pounds and pounds of bulbs, too, and the garden evolves constantly from one week to the next as some of the more than 100 different kinds of plants spring up and others wilt and fall back until the next cycle of growth.

Walk to the back of Cooper's property, past her narrow, witchy 105-year-old house, with its dark red front door and green steps with purple banisters, and look up at the towering 50-year-old Siberian elms which canopy the winding, slender paths crisscrossing the garden. Can this site really be a meager 30-by-125-foot piece of urban land? The only sounds seem to be the exhalation and rustling of trees. Through the bright window of Cooper's studio, overlooking the garden at ground level, you spy the artist hovering over what looks like a rough-hewn tree trunk. Inside the studio, it becomes clear that the torquing seven-foot-tall structure is not another Siberian elm but a hollow sculpture shingled up from the inside with thousands of hand-shaped layers of paper-thin wood veneer. Cooper staples and glues each small piece, then removes the staples when the glue sets. The process takes months,

terminating only when she has developed and refined an idea to its essence. A cross section of this 1999 work, *Buttress,* would reveal rings of growth layers almost down to the core, just like one of her elms.

Cooper's art—and her garden—come from the same intention. Like a garden, her sculpture embodies growth; it is the physical manifestation of time. By taking the flow of time and growth as a subject, Cooper conflates meaning and technique: labor or process equals—*is*—concept. Like much postmodern installation art, these are sculptures to be deciphered slowly, part by part. They cannot be taken in at a glance. But Cooper's hand-intensive art is also, paradoxically, an art of condensation, of time as essence, not as sequence.

"I think what I'm doing is translating a certain kind of energy," says Cooper as she glances up from her sculpture during an interview. "I'm interested in how a form, even though it might be solid, reflects the process by which it was made. It's almost as though fluid movement becomes frozen."

An emphasis on compactness, on density, means that nothing is squandered either in Cooper's art or her garden. "For the garden, I have the same values as I do with my art," she says. "I'm trying to be really efficient. Everything in the garden is functional. I get the maximum use out of the space, and it's the same kind of efficiency I try for in my sculpture and in my form."

Cooper is an avid recycler (she maintains a large compost heap at the back of her lot). The sheets of wood veneer for her sculpture are from furniture factories in Ohio and Illinois, companies that save their throwaway materials for her. She scavenges city alleys and gutters as well. Cooper spotted a rusted, battered muffler in a Chicago street, carried it back to her studio and layered it repeatedly with the veneer strips to create the sculpture *Burl,* 1997, for example.

"A burl is a growth around an injury to a tree, either from an insect infestation or a cut," Cooper adds. "You can see growth rings, like waves, growing around obstacles in the tree." A more lyrical work, *Pome,* 1998, includes a bronze cast of vegetable roots from her garden sprouting from layers of veneer shaped into a pearlike form. Cooper's striking, organic forms composed of harsh, manufactured human leavings convert the manmade, or unnatural, back to the natural. Veneer—associated with the false, the inauthentic, the merely skin deep—becomes solidly substantial in her art. Cooper's sculptures are industrial injuries circumvented, or healed, like a burl. *Fragment,* a 1999 tree form, is clearly lopped off, showing a less optimistic slant on ecological issues, and a despair that humans continue to truncate or isolate the natural environment.

These themes place Cooper within a social activist tradition in art. Her message about environmental degradation may be mediated by the clear beauty of her sculpture, but this, too, is a subversive strategy. "Beauty allows us to see things that are ugly," Cooper says. "It's a way to draw people in to difficult issues. If something slaps you in the face, however, you're more likely to get turned off and just walk away."

Cooper, 50, grew up in Philadelphia, the daughter of a biochemist who organized fruit fly experiments for his daughters when they asked questions about the natural world. Her mother, a weaver, introduced Cooper to the tactility of materials. Cooper acquired two degrees in fiber, a B.F.A. from the Cleveland Institute of Art and an M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art, before turning to sculpture. She teaches sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has recently been awarded a visiting fellowship/residency for next summer from the town of Akureyri in Iceland. Her academic lineage in fiber, however, can still be traced in her current work. "My immediate rapport is with things that are malleable," she says. "Even when I did pieces of welded steel and wood, I worked in a fluid kind of way because I could cut the material off and curve it and build it up layer by layer, line by line. That's how I started working with this wood veneer, building line by line, which basically is how you build with fiber. You start spinning a line, which I used to do all the time. I loved spinning, vegetable dyes and basketry techniques or off-loom techniques. They're all built with line. And so this"—Cooper gestures toward her sculpture *Buttress*—"is just improvising on those techniques." ■

Barbara Cooper's work will be shown at the Sybaris Gallery, Royal Oak, Michigan, April 15-May 20.

Polly Ullrich, a writer and ceramist, lives in Chicago.

Fragment, 1999, wood, 18 by 24 by 24 inches. Photo/James Prinz. OPPOSITE PAGE: Views of the artist's garden located on a 30-by-125-foot lot in the middle of Chicago.

Buttress, 1999, wood, 85 by 40 by 26 inches. Photo/James Prinz. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP AND BOTTOM: *Burl,* 1997, wood, steel, 26 by 43 by 18 inches; *Pome,* 1998, wood, bronze, 30 by 28 by 20 inches. Photos/Dean Jacobson.