

Insights: *Carol Hepper*

Worcester Art Museum

February 6 to April 26, 1992



Carol Hepper

Despite the seemingly disparate styles of Carol Hepper's recent output, all her sculpture has in common a unifying desire to understand our complex and often uneasy relationship to nature. The collision of the natural and the manufactured is made palpable in Hepper's inventive mix of materials. Willow branches grow out of industrial plumbing joints; found objects are shrouded in animal hide. Equally compelling is the way a single object can simultaneously embody the organic and the synthetic. A boxing glove is what it appears to be, but also reminds us of a heart. And in this multivalent character — wherein objects are many things at once, and are both personal and universal — resides the transformative power of Carol Hepper's eloquent art.

For Hepper, who grew up on a ranch located on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, nature was a vital and immediate presence. This direct experience of nature, the land, and the unceasing cycle of the seasons informs much of Hepper's work from the early 1980s. These sculptures, the first to win her critical attention, are composed of hides stretched over skeletal structures of tree branches. As with most of her subsequent work, these pieces are in part autobiographical. Reminiscent of Native American shelters, their stark, dancing forms capture the essence of the spare vastness of the South Dakotan landscape. These works also investigate basic sculptural issues: volume, form, rhythm, and the interaction of surface and interior space. Hepper has said of these early pieces: "They were more directly about creating a sense of the body and a sense of enclosures where one could project oneself into psychological spaces. . . . At the time I was

thinking about how architecture patterns itself after the body, you know, under the skin. . . . I was trying to find for myself the origin of form and content." The artist maintains an ongoing interest in the way we model our constructed world after nature, and especially after our physical selves.

The body is a fertile subject for many artists working today. Hepper's initial interest in the body derived in part from two early, indelible influences: Catholicism and Native American rituals such as the Sun Dance. In both, the mutilated body becomes a vehicle for the expression of spirituality. The artist's current fascination with the body and its processes is motivated not by religious impulses, but by a restless desire to understand her place in the world, her relation to nature, and her sense of self physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Though Hepper now lives and works in New York, she still draws inspiration from the prairie. Perhaps one of the most significant impressions she formed during her early years was of man's continual attempt to tame or shape nature, whether by domesticating animals, fencing off land to create artificial boundaries, or building roads and dams in the wilderness. Again and again, Hepper witnessed the impulse to make nature conform to human will.

Hepper's large-scale sculptures *Lariat* (1991) and *Physical Geography* (1991) in many ways represent her own struggle with the forces of nature, though as she says, making these pieces was "probably a battle with my own nature." To create these dynamic structures, Hepper

bent willow branches (which she collected in South Dakota) — either when they were still green or after they had been soaked and softened in water — into arabesques of twisting and curving lines in space, and then anchored them in steel or cast-iron plumbing joints. Because of the “memory” of the wood — its natural will to return to its original disposition — this was no easy task. Harnessing *Physical Geography* into the shape she envisioned required thousands of pounds of pressure applied over several months. Even now, this tall, graceful sculpture seems poised to burst apart with great force. That same sense of potential energy is felt in *Lariat*. Constructed of stacked loops of willow branches joined in the center with four steel elbow joints, *Lariat* is a continuously flowing closed system, a metaphor for organic processes: the movement of water and nutrients through the willow branches, or the flow of blood through the human circulatory system. These wood and metal pieces are, along with *Double Return* (1989), among Hepper’s most sparsely abstract sculptures. In them the artist’s love of materials and process has been subjected to a rigorous, formal simplification; at the same time, they maintain their metaphorical content: an opposition of the natural and the man-made.

Standing X (1991-1992) is one of several recent sculptures that marks a shift to wholly industrial materials. Using copper tubing and cast iron, Hepper pursued the ideas she explored in the willow pieces. In contrast to the obduracy of the wood, the “liquid” quality of the copper gave her new freedom to create even more complex configurations. There is moreover, an added element of surprise: the partially unpredictable chemical reactions that transform the shiny surface of the copper into a rich, variegated patina.

Concurrent with her work on the willow sculptures, Hepper began another series, in which she reintroduced hide, this time using animal skins to veil objects. These objects frequently have personal significance for the artist and reinforce the autobiographical component of her work. *Pow-Wow* (1991), a complex sculpture synthesizing many of Hepper’s diverse interests, is constructed from a John Deere tractor tire rim filled with a pair of mannequin fists and several wooden boxes on which the artist has painted targets. Hide stretched across both sides of the tire rim contains the disparate objects within. *Pow-Wow* attests to Hepper’s love of punning. The title of the work recalls Native American festivals, as does its shape, which is reminiscent of the drums used in these celebrations. (The fact that Hepper once played drums in a rock band adds to the layers of reference.) “Pow” suggests the potential power of the poised fists. It also alludes to the early, comic-book-inspired Pop paintings of Roy Lichtenstein (b. 1923), and a parallel visual reference may be found in the painted targets, which echo one of the signature images of Jasper Johns (b. 1930). *Pow-Wow* successfully interweaves influences on the artist from two distinct cultural heritages: Native American ritual and western art history.

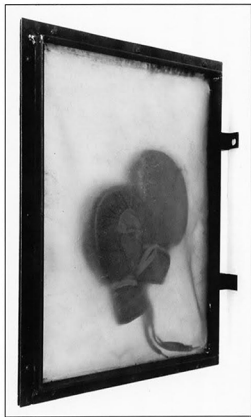
In the series of wall reliefs that Hepper has been creating since 1989, she uses deer, elk, buffalo, and cowhide. These skins, which the artist tans herself, often retain the history of the animals. Bruises, gunshot wounds, branding marks, and barbed wire scratches create intriguing patterns in the tanned hides and Hepper uses these incidences to maximum effect. For example, the title *Wind* (1990) describes the function of the fan

Continued on Page 4



Left: *Lariat*, 1991
Photograph courtesy of the artist © Nicholas Walster

Cover: *Standing X*, 1991-1992
Photograph courtesy of the artist © Nicholas Walster



Heart Attack, 1991

Photograph courtesy of the artist © Nicholas Walster

blades. The piece itself physically evokes an atmospheric condition that might give rise to the cloud formations suggested by patterning in the hide.

In contrast to the self-contained character of Hepper's willow pieces, her wall reliefs seem open-ended — more free-floating fragments than finite thoughts. The reliefs, unlike the airy interiors of the earlier sculptures, are compressed and filled with objects shrouded from clear view. The skin acts as a hazy, translucent boundary, blurring the distinction between dream and reality. These mysterious, surreal sculptures evoke the sometimes suffocating atmosphere of dreamscapes, where one image continually dissolves into the next, and meaning is in constant flux. The ubiquitous allusions to the body in

these oneiric reliefs are, in part, surrogates for the artist's persona. Hepper envelops in these works common objects — miniature bowling pins, gloves, marbles, helmets — that have personal significance. In one piece, she even included a literal trace of herself in the form of a plaster cast of her teeth. The artist transforms these objects into charged, often anatomical images that resonate with psychological power. *Split* (1990), for example, is at once descriptive of a bowling configuration, suggestive of splayed thighs, and evocative of a rift between two individuals. And the enigmatic form pressing against the hide in *Untitled* (1990) can be interpreted in numerous ways, each with its own emotional weight: is it a face, a pregnant belly, a breast, or a riding helmet?

Recently, the desire to work more three-dimensionally has led Hepper to create works that hang perpendicular to the wall and project into the viewer's space. Still using found objects and hide, Hepper has opened up the interpretive possibilities by offering the viewer multiple vantage points. In *Heart Attack* (1991), a pair of boxing gloves (objects laden with memory, since the artist's father was an amateur boxer) elicits contradictory associations. Seen from one side, the gloves retain their pugilistic qualities, implying both play and violence, as well as the nebulous region in between. From the other side, they appear to be a heart, symbolizing nurture and life-giving forces. Held in taut equilibrium between the skins, they symbolize the struggle to find a sense of balance between polarities.

The glove here, as in other pieces, also signifies the hand of the artist. A vehicle of expression, it is the tool with which Hepper transforms thoughts and feelings into potent, concrete form.

Donna Harkavy
Curator of Contemporary Art

All quotes are from an interview with the artist on December 2, 1991.

This exhibition was organized by the Worcester Art Museum as part of its *Insights* program, a continuing series of contemporary art exhibitions supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency; Flagship Bank; the Members' Council of the Worcester Art Museum; and The Amelia and Robert Hutchinson Haley Annual Lecture Fund.