



C A R R O L H E P P E R

Carol Hepper

Portland Paintings

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This book is dedicated to my Grandmother, Ida Schatz. Born in South Dakota in 1907, she was a fearless pioneer with a generous spirit. She was a rancher, farmer, gardener, restaurateur, postmistress, grocer, hair cutter, quilter and fisherwoman. She was everything she set out to be. She shared with me her love of the world around her and all the people, plants and animals in it. She was a wise and loving teacher and my most enthusiastic supporter.
-Carol Hepper.

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Red Snapper ©1996; clay, fish skin, fishing line, pigment, 5"x10"x7"







Ocean Chinook ©1996, detail

Cod Piece ©1995; fish skins, fishing line, pigment, 64"x 38"



Ocean Chinook ©1996; fish skin, fishing line, pigment, 48"x 22"













Carol Hepper's sculpture stems from a long standing and highly sophisticated exploration of material possibilities used in service to her ideas. I have frequently marveled at her acumen in determining, then emphasizing, their inherent idiosyncrasies for the purpose of expressive detail. Her sculptures, considered structures unto themselves, contain history and a connection to the real world. She describes her process with both materials and objects as collaborative in nature. Although equally noteworthy is her ability to command anything to bend, stretch and accept reorganization. The physicality of the work is unmistakable - both as evidence of her process, and as a source of content. As formal inventions, her sculpture is suggestive of various systems at work in and on the body, and meaning is excavated and manipulated to facilitate her ideas and questions. Her sculptures are not achieved through randomly "found" objects, nor are they intended to function at a purely visual level. Rather, they are careful instructions centered around how one makes, builds and integrates the rest of the world through the body, whether it be natural or man made.

During one of my visits to her studio, I noticed a small sculpture placed off to the side on a shelf. Amidst her studio tools, reams of copper tubing, branches, clay molds and various works in progress, the sculpture caught my attention immediately. It was elegant and delicate, and contrasted sharply to the signs of highly concentrated activity. Characteristically, she had built a fixed structure, skeletal in nature, and stretched an opposing surface material around it, in this particular case, fish skin. The translucence of the skin enabled one to simultaneously see the structure and its partial envelopment. The formal shape embodied a drama of competing forces - a tension between push and pull, from the inside (internal) and the outside (external). She said the piece was called "Red Snapper"- and as is also the case with much of her work, the humor did not escape me.

She had become interested in working with fish skin, and as her studio sits in the heart of New York City's Chinatown, she had a plentiful supply. Carol has a propensity for incorporating aspects of place in her work, and I was curious to what she might create if given extended time and studio space in the Northwest, and I offered her a Residency through PICA's newly launched program. In the months of preparation, she asked if I could locate a source for salmon that she could work with when she arrived. She wanted to experiment with the skin in an effort to achieve a series of paintings. Essentially, she was interested in making paintings from a sculptor's perspective, through the use of materials and objects existing in the real world.

Throughout August and September (1996), Carol did indeed work with the skin of various species of salmon, including Coho and Chinook, as well as Sturgeon and Halibut. Her "Portland Paintings" were the result of extensive research and exploration into the processes necessary for tanning, stretching and preserving the skin itself. Sutured together, they achieve complex arrangements and patterns, in fantastic shapes of varying size. The paintings can also appear as tableaux of tightly locked schools of fish; in one instance frozen in energetic collision, while in another they seem at rest or holding beneath the surface of the water. She accentuated their natural coloration by hand painting each cured section of skin. Mounted directly to the wall, the completed paintings are as beautiful as they are unsettling. Hepper's careful craftsmanship with a material as seemingly fragile as skin, combined with its retained shimmer, has a seductive allure. The violent undertones - an association to skinning, or being skinned - are also unmistakably present in the work. With the "Portland Paintings" Hepper strikes a fascinating balance between the experiences embedded in the remnants of once living fish (traces of scars, changes in pigment, etc.), and that of her own, both real and imagined. In so doing she imprints herself onto the skin, and reconstitutes their associative meanings. The visceral quality of the work is stunning. While conveying extensive visual information in a compelling aesthetic frame, and through her use of these "bodies," she has also captured an uncanny essence of lives deeply and uniquely lived, including aspects of her own.

-Kristy Edmunds



Fish Box ©1996; fish skin, 10"x 8"x 9"