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## In and Out of the Sculptural Body

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## In and Out of the Sculptural Body Leda Cempellin

**W**hirlywind *Dancing* visually wraps us into its tornadic dance. *Hot & Cold Running Water* twists into a powerfully complex embrace. *Island* fascinates us with the ever changing light and color dynamism, coupled with flowing dance that becomes the ritual of the flesh. The flexible *Around a square* awaits its multiple structures to be discovered by the audience walking around it. The sensual fur running through the bare wood and the powerfully sexualized semi-open glass orb in *She* invite our indiscrete curiosity, between mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion that echo the experience of Meret Oppenheim's 1936 fur-covered *Object*. *Blister Pack* invites us to visually ride on it through its fragile structure of wooden branches and colorful glass forms.

As bodily metaphors, whose choices and assemblages of materials evolved through decades, Carol Hepper's mixed-media sculptures not only affirm their presence in the surrounding space, but transcend it by activating a physical and emotional connection with the audience.

Hepper's early body metaphors using willow and animal hides come from the intersection of biography and geography in her native South Dakota. Her pieces exhibited in the 1983 exhibition

*New Perspectives in American Art: 1983 EXXON National Exhibition* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York imply a human-centered vision. The shelter of *Three Chambers* and the leathered torso of *Wall Piece* draw the association between architectural forms and the human body.

In the 1986 exhibition *The Sculptural Membrane* at the Sculpture Center in New York, Douglas Dreishpoon recognized a common pattern among some major contemporary women artists (Lee Bontecou, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Louise Nevelson, and Ruth Vollmer), in making experimental sculptures that "evolved out of Minimalism, but subverted its formal purity through varied materials and associative images."<sup>1</sup>

The following year, John Day used the term "Post-Minimalist" to describe the organic quality and individualism of Hepper's work. The distance of Hepper's sculptural metaphors from minimalist literalism was described by Day as "an impulse to explore real space from a highly personal, subjective point of departure – her own physical presence, the relationships of skeleton, skin, and environment."<sup>2</sup>



*Around a square*

As the pieces grow in complexity and size, the organic form is counterbalanced by the use of manmade materials, such as copper and steel. This culminates with *Vertical Void* (1994), where two twisting forces (yin and yang, male and female, creation and destruction) envelop a void that becomes physical presence. Hepper has employed whirlwind forms since the early 1980s. The difference is the elimination of animal hides to reveal the underlying willow twisting like "elegant drawings in space."<sup>3</sup>

This was anticipated in 1988, in the powerful *Comet*, described by Jennifer Borum as "a sophisticated, abstract esthetic," and "a visually exciting development that wittily suggests a metaphorical shift from the bodily to the technological,"<sup>4</sup> in a paradoxical form that seems "to be imploding and exploding all at once."<sup>5</sup>

However, Hepper still sees the technological world through human eyes: "I saw the copper tubes as a manmade interpretation of the circulatory and digestive systems (...). There has been an enormous amount of construction since I've lived in Chinatown. Often, during construction, I would see the skin of the street pulled back to expose plumbing joints, the circulatory system and the electrical pulse of the city. Those were

very powerful images that had a profound effect on my work."<sup>6</sup>

In the exhibition *Skin/Deep* at the Orlando Museum of Art in 1995, Sue Scott points to the innate tendency of humans to shape "their world after the body."<sup>7</sup> This definition becomes visible in *Physical Geography* (1991), where the human and manmade dimensions are interlocked in the assemblage of willow branches bent and inserted into steel tubing. The powerful structure rhythmically and gracefully twists inward and outward in an infinite dance in space, becoming a synthesis of human structure and actions: a shelter, a body, a gesture, an emotion.

The 1999 copper and bronze series *Untitled* (from *Hot & Cold Running Water*) retains a quintessential dualism in both title and structure, enriched by the introduction of vivid colors for the joints, which recur in later, more geometric-looking structures such as *A part Together* (2007). Soliciting genuine emotional responses, the daring introduction of synthetic Pop colors strategically placed at the joints facilitates metaphorical exchanges between organic and manmade.

In pieces from the late 1990s, with twisted metal forms, color becomes a fundamental





*A part Together*

ingredient, with a surface treatment comparable to the best painting. In 1998 Stuart Horodner associated Hepper with the tendency, started by Frank Stella, to explore the ambiguity of sculpture and painting: "while many painters love the wall, they have also consistently attempted to get beyond it by developing strategies to *make* paintings as opposed to *painting* them. Perhaps in response to this, sculptors have felt free to poach on the painterly, employing riotous color and readymade skins in exciting new ways."<sup>8</sup>

While Hepper progressively abandoned the animal hide in the late 1980s, her introduction of fish skins in works such as *Three Stroke Roll* (1986) added another autobiographical element: fish skin becomes more available to the artist, living in New York City since 1985, than the animal hide of her native South Dakota. The fish skin disappeared in the bare forms of the early 1990s, but was reintroduced in 2000 in the collaborative piece *Island*, and then in other works, such as *Tsunami* and *Percussion* (2000). In the 1996 exhibition *In the Flesh* at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Jill Snyder viewed "the body's skin as a boundary, a container, a barrier, and a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring."<sup>9</sup> In *Island*, the association "between skin and self-representation" was drawn by Nancy Princenthal in a wide range of

possible associations: "as metaphorical mediation between inside and out, the exposed and the concealed; and skin as the body's shield and its biggest sensory organ, tough, resilient, waterproof, stain resistant."<sup>10</sup>

*A part Together* shows Hepper's tendency to "bring different orientations together."<sup>11</sup> In turn, a work such as *Iris* develops a strong and unifying structure, while at the same time allowing the audience to experience the piece at multiple levels encouraging visual stimuli to be translated dynamically and personally: "I started exploring how the various elements in the piece interact; for example, the size and type of stitch in relationship to the parts being connected; in turn, the size of the void created by these relationships, as well as the drawing that was incorporated into the piece by the fishing line I used to stitch the piece together. (...) As you approach and walk around it, your movement and relationship to the piece changes your perception of it, so you're constantly rebuilding it. You are rethinking it as you consider it from different vantage points."<sup>12</sup>

*She* (2007) shows the concern of the artist with the way the audience approaches the piece: "I wanted the glass element to be at head height: you relate to it as a head, because of proximity and scale, though it encourages you to come up



*Three Stroke Roll*



and look inside because of the opening which reveals a cavity and the reverse of the outside form. Inside it looks like endoscopic images of the human body, so you get a visceral experience of both the inside and the outside."<sup>13</sup> Such post-modern consideration of the audience's own experience of the pieces comes to the artist from an evolution of interest beginning with the vast open spaces of her origin to the observation of the complex human dynamics in the busy streets of New York City.

Carol Hepper's "distinctive and unconventional approaches"<sup>14</sup> to sculpture have continuously evolved as she has explored aspects of the human experience at the physical, visual, and emotional level: from the use of elusive symbols hidden under semi-transparent membranes; to the dynamic coordination of artificial light and physical movement; to the changing effects of natural light; to the painterly use of color and through the transformative power of human touch.

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<sup>1</sup> Dreishpoon, "Introduction." *The Sculptural Membrane*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Day, "Carol Hepper: An Academic Perspective," n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Kosinski, *Women of the American West*, n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Borum, "Carol Hepper. Rosa Esman Gallery," 136.

<sup>5</sup> Melrod, "Carol Hepper Sheds Her Skin," 27.

<sup>6</sup> Hepper, interview by Cempellin, 2010, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, "Carol Hepper. Skin/Deep," n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Horodner, "All Together Now," 4-6.

<sup>9</sup> Snyder, "In the Flesh," 6.

<sup>10</sup> Princenthal, "A Local Abstraction: Recent Work by Carol Hepper," n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Brenson, "Carol Hepper, in Wood: A Supple Synthesis," n.p.

<sup>12</sup> Hepper, statement 29 July 2005, in Trinkett, *Some Assembly Required*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Hepper, interview by Cempellin, 2010, n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Heartney, "Emerging Artists 1978-86," 206.

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*Weightless*