



Rebecca Hutchinson
Working With Dilemma

*Article by
Jessica Knapp*

*Sharadin Art Gallery,
Kutztown University,
1998. Non-fired clay
forms, site installed.*

MY SURROUNDINGS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY AS I drove across Pennsylvania to the state's northwest corner to assist Rebecca Hutchinson with an installation at Allegheny College's Penelec Gallery. The fall foliage dropped behind me as I drove north; mostly bare branches and a wintry blue sky greeted me. As I drove through Meadville, on my way up to the small hillside campus, I noted the contrast between the 1950s feel of the main street and the modern architecture of Allegheny's campus buildings. As we started to unload the half finished work, Hutchinson pointed out the details she had changed since I helped her with a similar installation the prior year. The first set of forms I had helped with used local tree branches as an anchoring system. In contrast, the five elongated cocoon-like forms we worked on at Allegheny were half finished when we unwrapped them; baling twine surrounded the lower half of the support system – a long tree branch captured within the form.

Life experiences and her research on both animal and human architecture and behaviour inform Hutchinson's work. While their expression creates variables, these concerns remain a constant through her recent body of work. Hutchinson had already decided on materials and some construction methods for this new installation, which she later titled *Ceiling Stretch*, so she relied on how the pieces responded to the gallery architecture; how their shapes echoed regional animal architecture and how the forms interacted with one another to integrate them with the site.

Hutchinson is fascinated both structurally and behaviourally with nesting habits. She explained that instinctively birds build differently with variations in attachment styles. Some nests are built wedged between two supports in the crook of a tree, while others attach precariously to a limb and are constructed as they dangle downwards – as in the pensile style nests made by orioles. The needs of each species determines nest materials, nest site and colonising or singular nesting habits.

Her newer work incorporates this research and observation with extended interests in the structural individuality of spider webs and tent worm cocoons. This combination of interests gives Hutchinson a variety of attachment choices when building her forms.

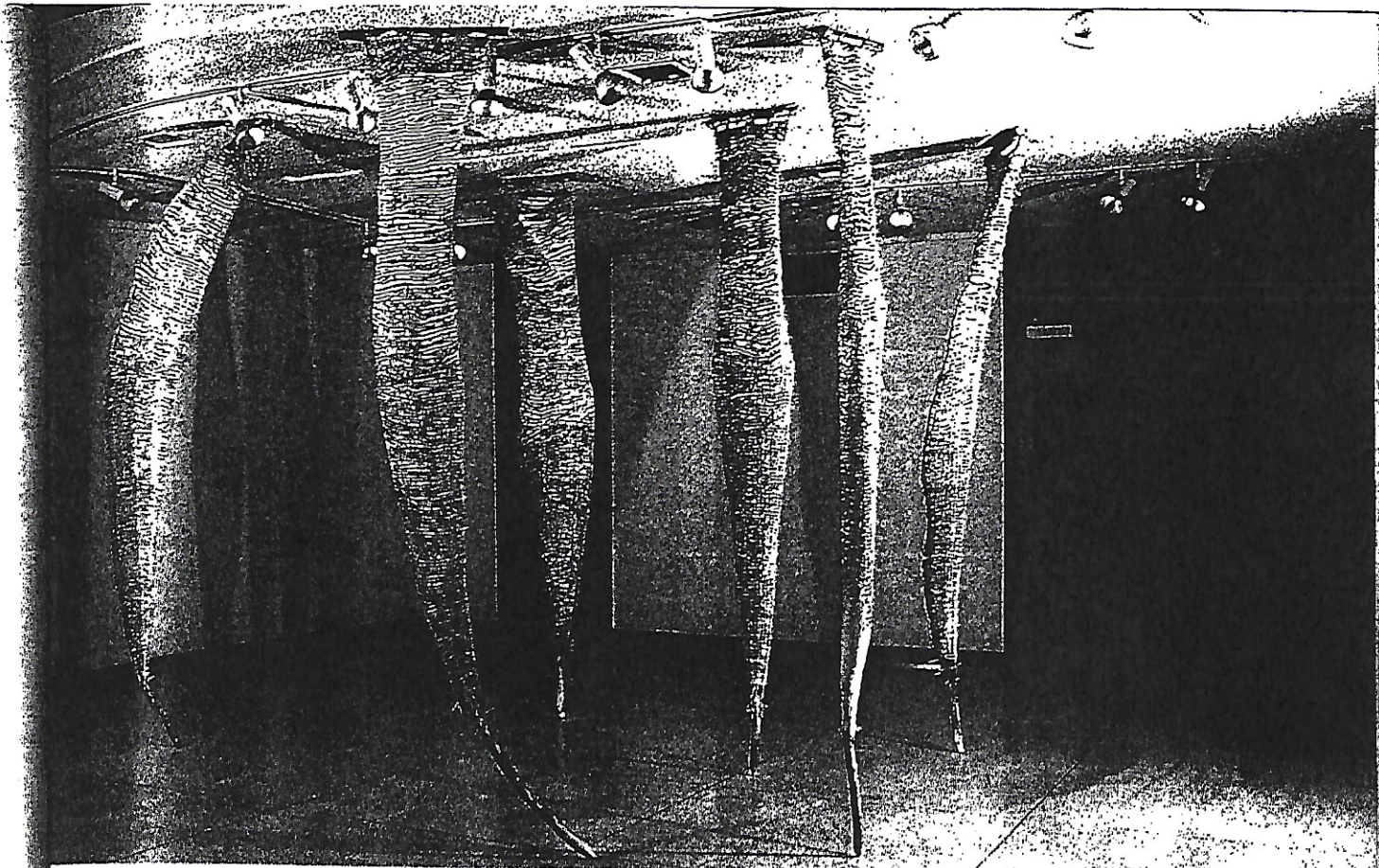
Once she connected the support branch to Penelec Gallery's ceiling with a system of pegs and screws, we worked from the bottom of the half-finished form and wove our way up. Hutchinson had started the process in her studio, tying off hundreds of upholsterer's threads knotted around wooden pegs secured to the internal support branch. On many of her other forms, she gathered and weighted the warp threads at the bottom of the piece with a small porcelain pinch pot suspended a few inches to a few feet off the ground. However, this grouping gently touched the gallery

floor, making them seem more like entities than nests. The dual connections gave the forms a sense of movement, a graceful stretch towards the ceiling. She described her working methods as part wattle and daub and part wet adobe weaving. She wove fibre coated with paper clay through the warp threads, building more layers of clay on the final form using a stucco process in which she worked paper clay slip into the fibres, creating a thin shell.

Hutchinson made her clay mixture as she went along, combining 30 to 40 per cent reconstituted commercial paper pulp with 60 to 70 per cent porcelain slip. This contributed to the look of the final form; the clay covering gave it a solid appearance, while the whiteness, the thin application and the paper content lent visual and physical weightlessness. In this show, Hutchinson left the weave exposed in spots rather than coating it with slip; the form enveloped a branch rather than being built on or under it; and she omitted the opening or entrance at the top of the form, choosing instead to weave it to within an inch of the ceiling. An internal woven form – made visible by stronger, more direct lighting – added additional depth.

The complexity in Hutchinson's work comes from the conceptual framework from which the forms evolved and the many decisions she must make at each installation from the initial placement of the objects to the lighting that will impact the appearance of the finished pieces. As we worked on the forms, Hutchinson talked about how she feels the layers of meaning and the changes in the work relate to her own life experiences: "My work has always been autobiographical, centred on a study of site, an understanding of place and my involvement with my surroundings. My parents were scientists so when I was growing up our family always talked about the study of environment, on a behavioural as well as biological level. This sensitised me to the point that it became an inherent thread throughout my work.

"Five years ago, I was a resident artist at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts in Montana. My work took a dramatic new direction, moving away from a hard castable object to a concern for the site specific and working with researched observations of the dilemma of place. While in Montana, I started looking at my physical surroundings, in addition to my internal environment. It was the first experience I had where the natural environment was the strongest dynamic, more dominant than a developed culture. It was phenomenal on that level. I think that experience created a new perspective for me. Consequently, I started studying the environment in a more scientific way. Learning to understand my environment and building with this sensitivity led me to look at vernacular architecture from around the world, specifically adobe architecture. Cultures from around the world, whether in the Southwest, Africa or India, use a com-



Ceiling Stretch. Pendec Gallery, Pennsylvania. 1999. Porcelain, adobe weave.

combination of indigenous clay and raw fibres. They use what is available to the area, including chopped straw or meadow grass, rice or cornhusks. Without the fibre, the unfired clay doesn't have half the strength. I experimented, combining clay with what I had collected, using it in pulp form, boiling out all extra organic material."

Since ecosystems and the surroundings strongly influence Hutchinson's work, environmentalism and recycling issues are also important. Hutchinson is committed to re-using her own materials as well as making what feel like appropriate decisions about material choices. "The way in which I build – the temporary nature of it, the fact that outdoor pieces are built with materials from the site and left to erode, while indoor pieces come back to my studio where I reuse parts – reflects environmental concerns. Installation is temporary, and it is about the space as well as the extended place you are building in. Recycling, and reusing the materials or parts of the pieces feels appropriate.

"I recycle the indoor pieces, which are more temporary, in different ways. I strip off the warp structure and use the fibre again by unweaving the form, or soaking it in water to remove the clay. More commonly, I bring the piece back, cut a portion of the basket form off and add to it or reweave it. Within the past three years I made 10 outdoor pieces, a project that I

called *Ten Sites, Ten Situations in the Rural American Landscape*. I did an ecosystem study of each area for these pieces and the information I gathered helped me make choices to use either invasive plants, contributing to the restoration to the ecosystem, or using other abundant fibrous plants particularly suited for weaving. The outdoor pieces remain at the site for one year, going through cyclical changes. I allow them to move back to the original state of clay and fibre back into the site. Then I go back and actually pull up poles and warp threads and bring the skeletal structure home with me. I constantly think about situation in the desire to understand the dynamics and my perceived dilemma of place."

When Hutchinson uses the word dilemma, she concedes that the anxiety most people associate with the word is involved. "Stress plays a part in an installation, especially during the first 10 hours, because you are dealing with all kinds of decisions. That stress seems to be important to the work, again in an autobiographical way."

Jessica Knapp is a writer from Kutztown, PA. She assisted Rebecca Hutchinson with her installations. Hutchinson also built a multiple-piece installation at the Edge Gallery in Denver, and led a topical discussion session on installation at the National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts Conference (NCECA) in March, 2000.