

**"Rebecca Hutchinson's Northern Stretch"**  
**by Glen Brown**

Analogous to the elongate silken nests spun by tent caterpillars or the pendulous structures that weaver birds meticulously craft at the tips of bobbing palm fronds, the pale, gracefully tenuous forms of Rebecca Hutchinson's Northern Stretch reflect a process of construction for which the requisites of utility seem the prime inspiration. The beauty of these forms, as a consequence, appears to evolve naturally out of their capacity as habitations, although they do not actually function as such. Their attraction is that which humans have always felt for the intricate creations of species acting on instinct, and the knowledge that Hutchinson's installations are in fact planned and executed according to a rational strategy does not diminish the effect of acquiescence to a larger natural scheme.

Installed at the Rowe Arts Gallery at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in January of 2001, Northern Stretch evolved partly in response to characteristics of both the region and the particular site the work was to occupy. Her colossal woven forms, consisting principally of fiber dipped in a porcelain slurry, have normally incorporated local materials. Paralleling the manner in which birds or insects forage in their surroundings, Hutchinson obtained tree limbs cut by a Charlotte power company and mill ends discarded by a local textile factory. The endemic nature of the materials is significant to Hutchinson because of her concern for what she calls an "aesthetics of success", a meetness of the visual and practical aspects of design within a specific environment.

In common with most of her installations, Northern Stretch was constructed through rudimentary basketry techniques that Hutchinson, a professor of ceramics at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, taught herself as a variation on coil-building in clay. Situating a tree limb vertically, she creates a warp by attaching a series of strings about a foot above the floor

and running them toward the ceiling. To keep the strings evenly spaced and to control the shape of the evolving form, she ties the warp to a sapling hoop centered around the limb at its upper extremity. The weft is then fashioned from a simple adobe of twisted fiber and clay. Weaving at a rate of 12 to 14 inches an hour, Hutchinson slowly develops the diaphanous surfaces, altering them concavely and convexly as she proceeds up the form by replacing the hoop with others of varying sizes and shapes. Sometimes, as in Northern Stretch, she weaves as many as three layers in each form, creating an internal complexity that is matched externally by the multiplicity inherent to the installation. Always, her goal is a sense of connectedness: the visual meshing of forms, the psychological integrity of community and the material unity of ecology.