

Rebecca Hutchinson

by Glen R. 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, diaphanous forms of Rebecca Hutchinson's adobe installations reflect a process of construction for which the requisites of utility seem the prime inspiration. A student of both the techniques and motivations of nature's most industrious builders, she brings to her own works the sense of efficiency, suitability and even necessity that is much more typical of the highly evolved designs of birds and insects than of the purely autonomous forms on which human beings have based a modern tradition of sculpture. Hutchinson's forms appear to develop naturally out of their capacity as habitations, although they do not actually serve as such. Their attraction is that which humans have always felt for the intricate creations of species acting on instinct. The knowledge that Hutchinson's pieces are in fact carefully planned and executed according to a rational strategy does nothing to diminish the sense of their place within a larger natural scheme.

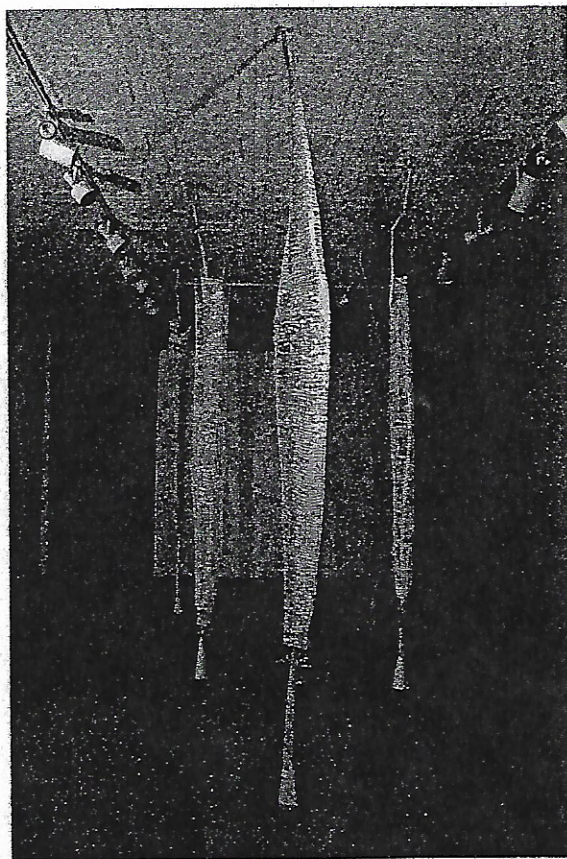
A professor of ceramics at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, Hutchinson brings to her teaching and her family life the same sensitivity to a complex harmony of interactive elements that characterizes her sculptures and their inspiration in the perfect balance of natural ecosystems—what she describes as a “dynamic of success.” In part, she traces her receptiveness to this dynamic back to a childhood as the daughter of a medical technologist and a psychologist. “My mother was involved in the study of the internal body and its functions,” she explains, “and my father was a specialist in human behavior, in how our experiences shape our decisions and consequently the possibility of function in the world. This developed awareness of human activity has made me conscious of its similarity to ecosystem dynamics and the ways in which species thrive through awareness of all the other elements within their environment.”

As site-specific work, whether constructed within a gallery or outdoors in a natural environment, Hutchinson's sculpture is always intimately connected to the distinctive traits of the space that it occupies. The installation—which as an art form consists as much of

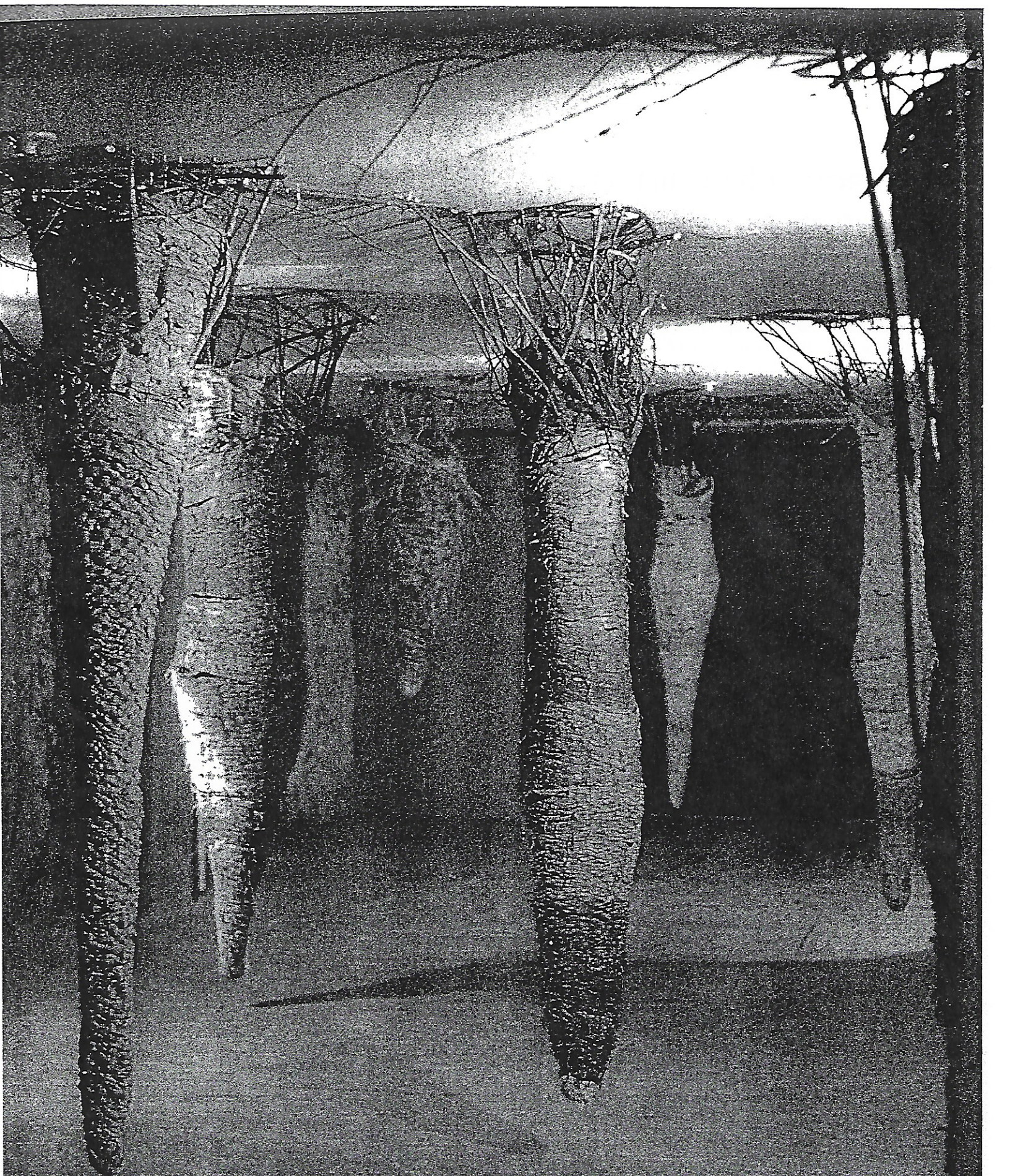
space itself as of the physical elements that articulate spatial dimensions—is inherently conducive to an awareness of complex relationships rather than discrete objects. Hutchinson, however, has focused specifically on the consequences of particular relationships of parts, the benefits to a living system that accrue from the actions of all the elements that compose it. Consequently, the first step in all her projects has involved intensive research on the flora and fauna, climatic conditions, geology and history of the area in which the proposed piece will evolve. Each site on which she has worked over the past decade has offered different resources and has presented unique problems.

The challenges offered by this variety have stimulated rather than hindered Hutchinson, who,

for four years in the mid 1990s, tentatively sought a diversity of working conditions through a series of sculptures she called “Ten Sites, Ten Situations: Site Works in Rural America.” The titles of the individual pieces in this series suggest a survey of North America's discrete natural environments: “The Bray Meadow Project” at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, 1994; “The Mud Flats Project” at Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, 1995; “The Gulch Project” at the Watershed Center for Ceramics, Newcastle, Maine, 1996; “The Urban Lot Project” at



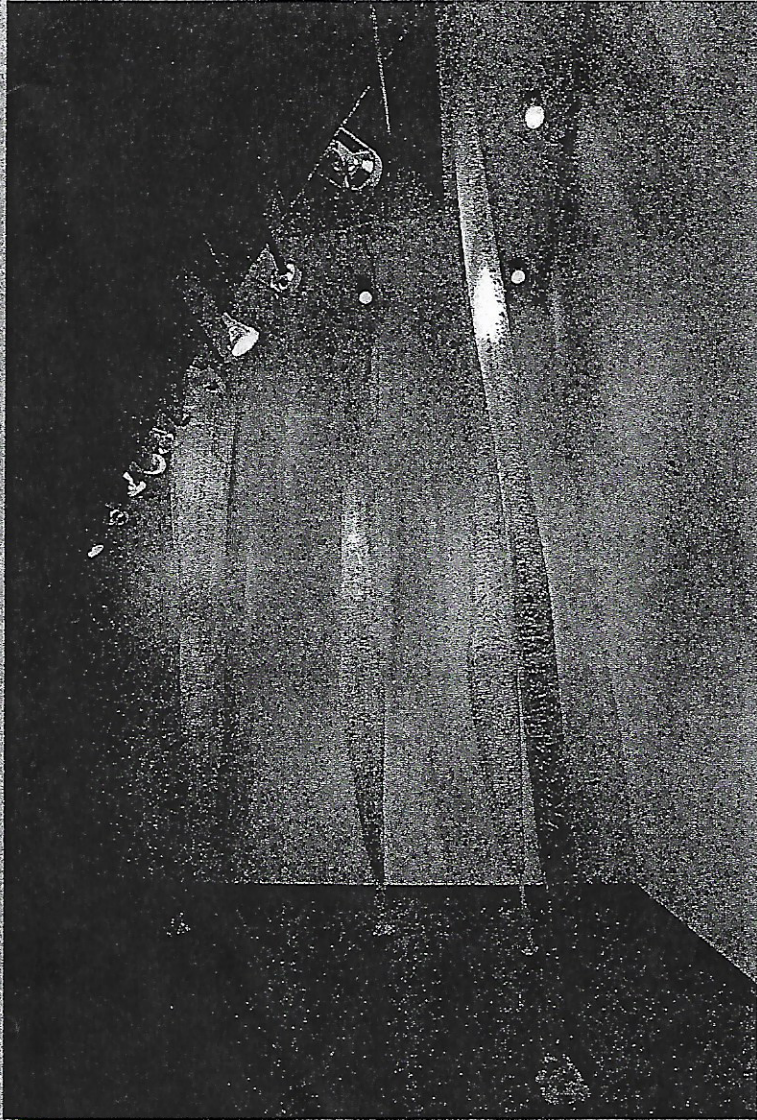
“Multiple Weave,” at Edge Gallery, Denver, Colorado, 2000.



"Stalactitic Sanctuaries" clay and fiber forms
installed on site in the Basement Gallery,
Myrna Loy Art Center, Helena, Montana, 1995-96

Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, 1997; "The Prairie Project," Marquette, Nebraska, 1997.

"I really wanted to understand different ecosystems," she recalls, "to figure out how the components within them fit together. Those projects have strongly influenced the work that I'm doing now, since I have a



"Northern Stretch," installed at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, in 2001.

greater sensitivity to natural systems and more experience with recognizing their principal components."

Although Hutchinson's subsequent sculptures have often been installations produced indoors, the processes that she developed in her earlier outdoor projects have continued to serve. Following the research stage, she determines which natural resources to incorporate into the adobe formula of fiber and slurry that will constitute the majority of the physical structure of the sculptures. Paralleling the foraging habits of birds and insects, she collects these materials in close proximity to the site itself. Ordinarily, the clay body is indigenous

and is selected for its ability to harmonize with the visual and physical characteristics of the site as well as other materials to be integrated into the work.

The fiber that Hutchinson combines with the clay has been even more varied. "I choose either organic materials that are plentiful in the area so that my choice in pulling or cutting doesn't interfere with a natural growth cycle on the site," she explains, "or I select something that's invasive, actually choking out natural biodiversity or health in the area. In that case, it's more a matter of pulling plants up by the roots so that I can make a positive contribution to that specific site. Also, I have in many cases chosen textile-mill surplus."

The environmentally conscientious aspects of Hutchinson's work, apart from fulfilling obligations to a personal ethic, have often proved the most significant point of contact with her audience. Frequently, her works have responded to concerns of the local populace for reversing the effects of pernicious developments in their immediate surroundings. In preparation for the 1996 project "Long Connected Installation" at the University of Washington in Seattle, for example, she contacted scientists in the school's horticultural department and learned of their involvement in returning sustainable growth and natural health to a wetlands area on campus. "They were identifying the invasive plants on that site so that they could eliminate them and bring back the natural biodiversity," she remembers. "We pulled up a plant called loosestrife, a long reedlike growth. I brought it back to the studio, dipped it into the clay slurry and used it to build up the forms in the installation."

Hutchinson's method of construction, a cross between rudimentary basketry techniques and coil building in clay, has evolved since the early 1990s. Each form begins with a large hoop, ordinarily fashioned from a bent sapling. Hutchinson then attaches hundreds of warp threads that hang vertically when the hoop is suspended from the ceiling of the installation site. Collecting the strings near the floor, she ties them together in a knot and weights them with a small pinch pot to create tension. Alternately, she may construct the form around a tree limb that stretches vertically from floor to ceiling. In that case, the lower ends of the warp threads are tied to pegs inserted in the limb near the floor. In both techniques, tension is secured and the hoop serves to space the threads and to determine the size and shape of the basket/vessel form that Hutchinson will begin to construct.

The weft of Hutchinson's forms is composed of twisted coils of the collected plant fiber and a clay slurry that has been bolstered with a high concentration of recycled paper fiber. "I've found that the higher content of fiber in my clay allows me to build really

strong forms," she explains. "There are other ways of doing that. I could combine the clay with Portland cement or some other kind of binder, but since I'm so involved in the manipulation process, the weaving with my hands, I've found that I really don't enjoy a chemical base. By researching traditional formulas from around the world, I found that if you increase the fiber content in the clay you get a really sturdy, hard adobe."

The durability of her working materials is not important to Hutchinson for reasons of preservation, since her installations are intended to have only a short life span. Rather, it reinforces an aesthetic that is as intimately tied to the tradition of the ceramic vessel as it is to the natural habitations of birds and insects.

Weaving at a rate of 12 to 14 inches an hour, Hutchinson slowly develops the gauzy surfaces, altering them concavely and convexly as she proceeds up the form by cutting the warp threads and reattaching them to hoops of varying sizes and shapes. "My process is strongly related to the understanding of making a vessel by coil building," she points out. "You build a swell into the vessel by placing the coils to the outside of the form, and you continue to go that direction with the coils until you decide that you want the form to move back inward. At that point you move the coils to the inside of the form and continue to build upward. That way you can control the flow of the form. That's basically what I'm doing by changing the size and shape of the hoop."

In addition to articulating swells and indentations in the contours of her forms, Hutchinson often adds to them a dimension of depth by layering surfaces—in effect creating two, or even three, basket/vessels in one. Upon reaching the ceiling with the first weave, she may attach a new set of warp threads and begin constructing a second form around the first. An open weave permits a view of the interior, and variations in contours bring the surfaces close together at some points and wider apart at others. The visual rhythms created by these undulations are in part a result of biology intervening in the creative process.

"I find that as I'm working I become very aware of my own breathing," Hutchinson says. "My own body plays a role in evolving the design, and my personal psychology becomes involved in the process at that point as well. I'm a part of what I'm weaving. I'm very aware of how I'm touching the material and how that affects my choice of a really tight weave or a loose weave."

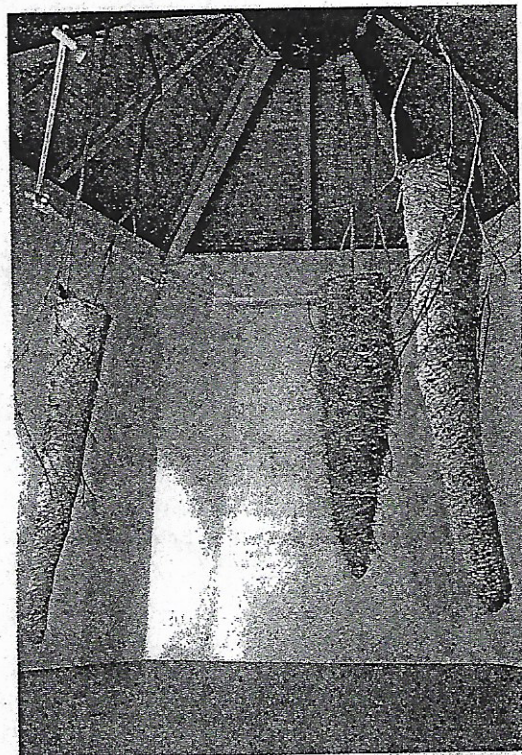
The protracted nature of her work and the repetitive motions of twisting the fiber, dipping it in the slurry and weaving the coils into the slowly evolving form, are conducive to this kind of reflection and its positive consequences. Intuition has time to modify

her initial conceptions for a piece. At the same time, the work can become tedious and the method a liability. Hutchinson's sculptures are carefully planned for specific sites, but often the space in which they are to be constructed is occupied until shortly before the opening of her exhibition. As a consequence, she is sometimes compelled to begin the forms in her studio and install them in a partially constructed state before completing them on site. The strength and rigidity of her adobe formula are in such cases especially important. In some instances, she has completed as much as the first 9 feet of these fragile forms before they are actually brought on site.

Another, more propitious consequence of combining a slow and methodical process of construction with the pressures of a deadline is that Hutchinson has accepted the necessity of joining forces with an on-site assistant. "Although I'm now much faster at weaving the pieces than ever before," she states, "I've actually found it enjoyable to have a helper on the other side of the form. I'll start the weave and have my assistant continue it on the backside. Then I pull the coil around and finish the weave instead of having to move around the form like a carousel."

Perhaps even more significant than the mechanical benefits of enhanced speed and efficiency, however, has been the sense of communal goals that collaboration with an assistant has brought to her work. Hutchinson, after all, has long recognized the incongruity of egotism with the dynamic of success. In an ecosystem, no single species dominates without casting the whole in jeopardy.

If Hutchinson's works are representations of a communal ethos, they are also enactments of it. Her installations are elaborations on the principle of cooperative use of an environment, and always her goal is a sense of connection: the visual meshing of forms, the psychological integrity of community and the material unity of ecology.



"Long Connected," as installed in 1996 at the University of Washington in Seattle, by Rebecca Hutchinson, Marion, Massachusetts.