

## Speaking Through the Branches: The Work of Sherry Owens

By Bradley Sumrall



Sherry Owens, *Waterhole*, 2017, crepe myrtle, dye and wax, 24 x 36 x 36 inches, loan courtesy of the artist, photography by Harrison Evans Photography, Dallas, Texas

The first time I walked into Sherry Owens' studio, I was overwhelmed by the space. It was as if I had stepped into a petrified bramble, a nest of wooden bones, a temple for a tree goddess. Completely surrounded by pieces of crepe myrtle - bound, piled, whittled, waxed and stained - I felt I had stepped inside of a Sherry Owens sculpture, and I had no desire to leave.

Artists through the ages have looked at a piece of wood and seen something within, something that they feel needs to be brought forth by the artist's hand. From ancient African and Asian cultures into the New World, root carving has been practiced throughout history. In the American South, there is a strong tradition of vernacular art based in this animistic practice of exposing the spirit within the wood, including artists like Ralph Griffin, Thornton Dial, Bessie Harvey and Jesse James Aaron. "Trees is soul

people to me,” said Bessie Harvey. “Maybe not to other people, but I have watched trees when they pray, and I have watched them shout, and sometimes, they give thanks slowly and quietly.”<sup>1</sup> These artists approached the medium with reverence, and Owens shares that spiritual view of nature. She brings her own contemporary aesthetic, however, to the process - a post-minimalist aesthetic tied to the Texas landscape and environmental concerns.



Sherry Owens, *Coming Forth*, 2015, crepe myrtle and dye, 24.75 x 17 x 12.75 inches, loan courtesy of the artist, photography by Harrison Evans Photography, Dallas, Texas



The recent work of Sherry Owens is a continuation of a longstanding exploration of expression through line and texture. With roots firmly planted in weaving, her practice moves through painting and drawing and into sculpture, allowing her to engage form, space and narrative in new ways, and to great effect. Her choice of material for the past twenty-six years has been primarily the crepe myrtle tree. “I keep thinking I will move on to another material,” she recently told me, “but I am just not done with all the ways to use it.” Through deconstructing the trees, whittling the branches, waxing, dying and manipulating the surfaces, she arrives at a place of pure gesture with the material, essentially drawing in space with the branches. It is a process-driven practice, constructed with pegs to highlight that process. It is narrative, though, that drives the composition of each piece – a narrative that ranges from the most private emotion to a transcendent awareness of mankind’s place within the natural world. “I can speak through the branches,” says Owens.

Perhaps there is something instinctual at work in her practice, like a bird building a nest, but hers is a nest built on storytelling, a woven wooden narrative. “I can’t just go in to the studio and start putting sticks together,” she recently said. “I have to have a story to tell to know what to do.” After choosing the sticks based on size, shape, texture and form, she makes complex compositional decisions to bend them to her will. She may choose to leave the bark on and wax over the dirt to create a natural story, as in *Coming Forth*, carving into the surface to convey new growth. She may dye the wood to remove it from the natural, transforming it into something new, as the coral in *An Ocean Between Us*. Just as the forces of nature defined the sensual, expressive forms of the crepe myrtle trees, Owens’ process of deconstruction and transformation serves as a metaphor for the flux of creation itself, the continuous unfolding of loss and growth.

With her works on paper, she is engaged in mankind’s most primal form of expression – a form of language that predates writing and offers an almost immediate transmission of thought – drawing. Her drawings are gestural, intuitive



and raw. Her mark-making shows a practiced hand, unflinching and confident. That same intuitive gesture is given form in space through her crepe myrtle sculptures.

The full potential of her narrative ability through sculpture is realized in her more complex installation pieces. In works such as *Every Breath You Take*, *Mantle*, and *The Big Four + One*, she conveys complex ideas through an economy of form. As with all great art, these pieces are the beginning of a larger dialogue. They pose more questions than provide answers. What is this natural world we live in? What are we doing to it? Where do we go from here? Perhaps, in these works she has given us a guide to protect the systems that sustain us here on earth, or perhaps the answers lie in the painted crepe myrtle bumps of *Mapping the Presence of Water on the Moon*.