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Hooked!

Artists are flocking to this industrial outcropping of Brooklyn for the cheap studio space. But for Carol Bove, Red Hook is not just a neighborhood, it's also a medium. Alix Browne is reeled in.

Alix Browne



Recently, the artist Carol Bove has been driving around in her royal blue 1993 Ford pickup with a laminated copy of the Kabbalistic *Tree of Life*, the mystical Hebrew diagram of God's creation of the world, on the seat beside her. "I'm trying to memorize it," Bove says, adding that she has been reading up on the ancient Greek concept of "artificial memory," a practice that prescribed mapping images and text onto physical space. To that end, Bove has come to think of her studio as Kether, the apex of the tree, and her house as Malkuth, the base of the tree's trunk. "Actually, it's the house two doors down from me," she says, correcting herself. (In one of those random coincidences that the universe occasionally offers up like a gift, it turns out a guy on her block

has a record label called Malkuth.) Red Hook, the industrial waterside neighborhood of Brooklyn where Bove has lived and worked for more than a decade, is the Tree.

Bove's work, which occupies the narrow, and sometimes precarious, space between sculpture and installation, is steeped in spiritualism and the pop mysticism of the '60s and '70s. Bove, 41, grew up in Berkeley, California, and many of her culturally dense, sculptural installations have featured the kinds of vintage paperbacks that were no doubt a dime a dozen in the bookshops on Telegraph Avenue. A little familiarity with, say, the writings of occultist Israel Regardie could go a long way in helping you wrap your head around a piece like Bove's 2007 tableau *Easter Everywhere*.

But her work is also very much a product of place. When she and her husband, the artist Gordon Terry, bought the creaky white clapboard house at the end of Coffey Street in 2000, Bove had just graduated from New York University with a degree in studio art, and Red Hook was not yet the creative enclave it has become in the past few years. Walking down the potholed cobblestone streets, you were more likely to encounter a pack of wild dogs than an assistant to Urs Fischer, who now has two studios in the neighborhood. Bove was attracted to Red Hook, she says, precisely because it was so inhospitable. "There is something nice about that sense of danger," she says.

Since then, a lot of artists have moved there, no doubt attracted by its apparent remoteness (Red Hook is cut off from genteel Brooklyn by the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, but it's just a 10-minute drive from downtown Manhattan) and its abundance of large and relatively cheap studio space. Bove's connection to the area is more complicated: "Something critical in my art relies upon this place," she says.

Once settled on Coffey Street, Bove began taking daily excursions from her house down to the water's edge to look for whatever junk had washed up on the shore. It was a familiar impulse, one that she recognized from her teenage years, when she discovered the work of California junk-assemblage artists like Bruce Conner and Ed Kienholz—and also one she tried hard to suppress. "It seemed very immature, something I would do in high school," she says. "But there was a point when I pulled some kind of driftwood out of the water and thought, Well, maybe I can do that."



Bove's indoor studio, with work for her upcoming show in progress.

On this bitter-cold morning in early January, she clambers over the rocks, looking for some bit of treasure worth removing her hands from her warm coat pockets for. “What’s this?” she asks, picking up a crude assemblage of foam-pipe insulation, sticks, and string, and briefly contemplating its past or maybe its potential before tossing it back. Over the years, Bove has found chunks of weather-beaten Styrofoam, strands of rusted wire, carcasses of dogs—some of which eventually become fodder for her sculptures. “I like not leaving the neighborhood and letting things come to me,” says Bove, who combines these found items with new, often shiny, elements produced in collaboration with artisans and fabricators, many of them located within walking distance of her house.

With her intense eyes, her tomboy looks, and her macho truck, Bove can seem tough, but her pieces have a built-in fragility that is both physical and psychic. She never glues the components together, and occasionally it seems that the only thing holding them fast is sheer force of will. “It’s effort for works to be installed,” Bove insists. “The invisible dimension is an important animating field—it takes a lot of energy. What I can’t work out is whether, when you disassemble the artwork and put it into a box, it is still a sculpture or just stuff. In a state of rest, maybe it just ceases to be.”



“The disgusting mattress.”

By the time superstorm Sandy hit this past fall, Bove had already begun quite literally to give her work nerves of steel. She had made an outdoor installation for last summer’s “Documenta 13,” the 100-day exhibition in Kassel, Germany, and was thinking about a couple of possible commissions in New York, including one for the High Line, that would have to be built with severe storm conditions in mind. “The engineering specifications for outdoor work are very stringent,” she says. “A sculpture has to be able to withstand sustained winds of, like, 100 miles an hour for up to four hours. At that rate, trees are going to be flying around, but the sculpture is going to be fine.”

Bove had acquired a second, outdoor studio—basically an empty lot between two buildings, shielded from the street by a roll gate—where she put in a gantry and a hoist that enable her to deal with large pieces of metal and petrified wood. And while many of her neighbors, including some of her fabricators, were wiped out by the storm, losing their valuable equipment, none of

her pieces were damaged—in fact, it took Bove a few days even to notice that she had been flooded.



A model of Maccarone gallery.

Today, back at her main studio, on the second floor of a nearby former paint and varnish factory, there is a scale model of New York’s Maccarone gallery, where Bove will have a solo exhibition in April. At this point, she has more work ready than she will be able to use. Among the found sculptures is a tangle of rotting wood, rusty metal, and disintegrating plastic that very likely came into the world as a box spring. “I had a moment of recognition when I saw it,” she says, describing how she and her assistants gently slid the carcass onto a foam board and transported it to the studio. (They now refer to it affectionately as “the disgusting mattress.”) Seeing this thing that had been subjugated to so much indifference, Bove says, gave her an understanding of outdoor sculpture. “I had a dream that an art handler cleaned it and packed it up. It was the worst dream I’ve had in years.”

Many of the pieces earmarked for the show are not new but will stand with other sculptures for the first time, creating, Bove anticipates, a new energy. In fact, she likes to think of her works as kits—they all come with elaborate installation manuals—the components of which can be adapted to different situations. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the difference between hanging a show and installation art, in curating my own work so that it has cohesion and something happens between the works that’s greater than the sum of their parts,” she says. Her 2011 Venice Biennale installation, *The Foamy Saliva of a Horse*, included shells, driftwood, a crumpled oil drum, and a large piece of Styrofoam and was just reinstalled in Los Angeles, in an abbreviated form, for a group show at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. Later this spring it will be reinstalled in yet another configuration at the Common Guild gallery in Glasgow, Scotland.

Bove recalls the first time she sent one of her shows to Europe and panicked when she saw it packed up in a box. “It was all just beat-up paperback books. It looked like a box full of junk. I was so stressed out. But by now, I have seen it happen enough times that I know it comes together.” It’s a confidence she chalks up to experience rather than to faith. “Faith would be moving to a different city and thinking, Okay, I can make something here,” she says. “Sometimes that prospect scares me so much, I think that I’m going to have to do it.”



A view of the Red Hook waterfront.