

Amherst, Massachusetts  
Olivia Bernard

Hampden Gallery,  
University of Massachusetts



For the past couple of decades, Olivia Bernard, a mixed-media artist with studios in Western Massachusetts and New York City, has been freezing fabric-into sculptural forms by using hydro cal. Earlier, her larger concepts focused on enigmatic containerlike shapes—bags, boats, or biers, supported by or hung from poles. In "Descent and Flight: Terra Incognita," Bernard's work goes in dichotomous ways, one more open, the other more tightly wound.

The poles, once just useful accessories, have become objects in their own right. Rough-hewn, they rise totem-like 12 or 15 feet toward the gallery ceiling. Some are wired or taped together in pairs or threesomes; some sprout galllike excrescences or a straw cranium wrapped with a turban. Some are painterly in a subtle way; *Black Pole* morphs from dark through ochre hues to pale.

Works from the "Bound" series take an antithetical approach, their cocoon shapes bandaged, wrapped, and swaddled in knots. As with all of Bernard's work, there is something disturbing about them, as if there were a body inside.

A score or more hanging semi-torsos—Bernard thinks of them as "skins"—served as the centerpiece of the installation. She begins these works, which are vaguely evocative of draped Greek figures, by slapping hydrocaldipped gauze onto volunteers, back or front, bent or straight; but this genesis is not especially apparent. She shapes the fabric as whimsy dictates, sometimes enough to form a shoulder or armhole, but much of the textural interest results from happy accident. The bottoms of some are left to waft in the breeze; others are knotted. Smart enough to listen to her medium, Bernard has no qualms about letting loose ends of the plastered fabric break and crack like dried mud. Think of these torsos as the obverse of George Segal's work: he made a mold on his models and cast a positive from it, whereas Bernard uses the mold (halfmold, actually) as the sculpture. The results echo both Magdalena Abakanowicz's figures and the Venus de Milo. The installation included a video, said to be a work in progress, of choreographers interacting with these torso fragments, slipping into them, wearing them, abandoning them; the images are quite beautiful. Occasionally Bernard begins with a body cast and creates a piece that doesn't hang.



*Limb* clearly expresses the organic nature of her work—a knobby, bony shank extending from an abstract mass. *Unfitted (Torso I)* is edgier still, a shell-like cavity containing pink and purple organs inside, forms evoking heart, lungs, and arteries.

Hung from a bent rod, *Nimbus* is the closest Bernard gets to a nature piece, a twisted rag whose ends taper and trail, more dragonlike than cloud-like. Considering that she is a [trekker](#) who once spent the better part of a year photographing skies, such restraint demonstrates an aesthetic maturity insisting on its own unique vocabulary of expression.

Bernard herself best describes her goal: "To join the edges of what is transient, ethereal, beautiful, with what is dangerous, grievous, or macabre." This is the work of a fearless, sagacious sculptor in her prime.

—[Marty Carlock](#)