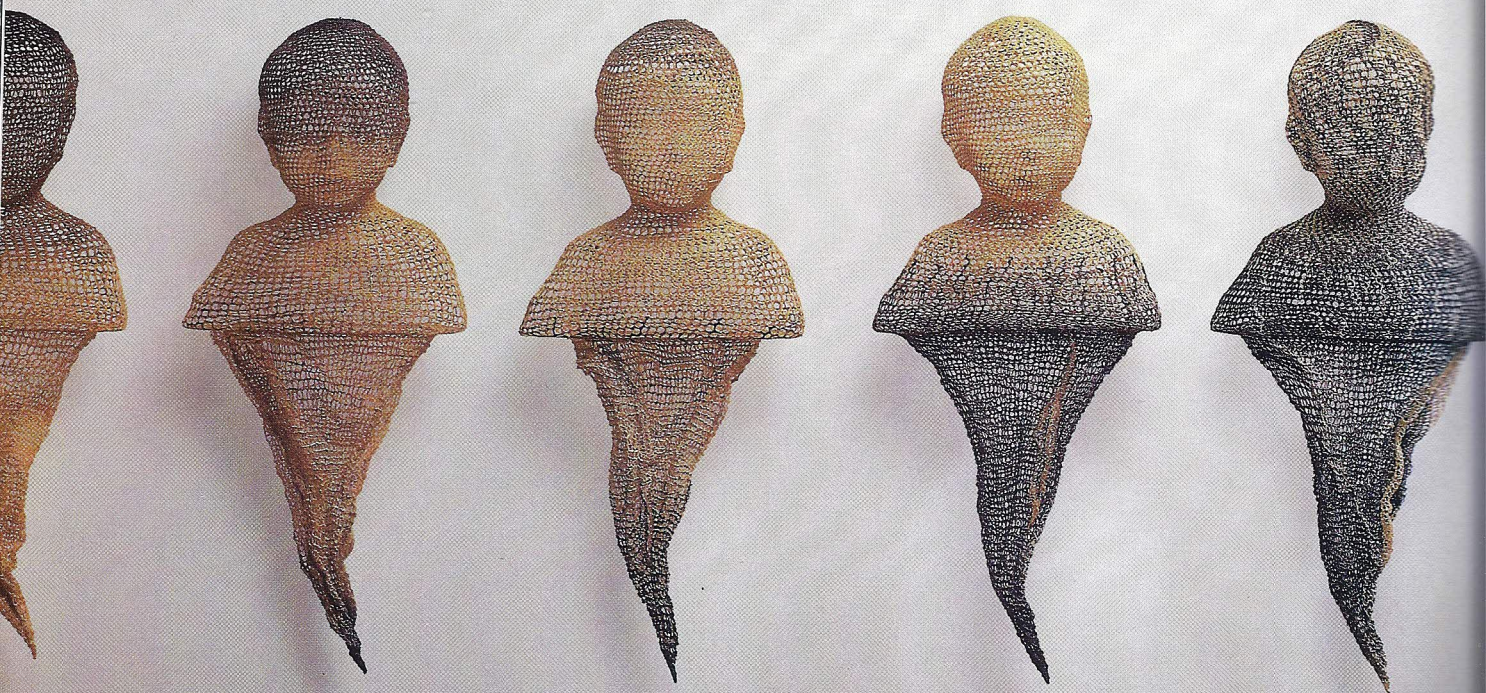




TOP: *A Story*, 1999, cast fibers, crocheted, painted, 24 by 55½ by 5 inches. BOTTOM: *Heads or Tails*, 1999, mixed media, 17 by 33½ by 22 inches. Photos/Joseph Kugielsky.



NORMA MINKOWITZ

BELLAS ARTES GALLERY

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

OCTOBER 7 - NOVEMBER 28, 1999

Beginning in the mid-1980s, when her work was shown in exhibitions of fiber art and basketry, Norma Minkowitz transformed the traditionally "feminine" art of crochet into a medium for sculpture. Since that time, she has utilized hard and soft materials in pursuit of analogies to human beings, animals and plants. Her crocheted three-dimensional hollow forms are powerful metaphors for containment, shelter and confinement. Neither traditional sculpture nor traditional craft, her work is situated between the genres.

Throughout her 30-year career, Minkowitz has been drawn to fiber because of its linearity. The thread and light wire she uses form delicate tracings that mimic the hesitations and irregularities of drawing: changes in pressure and direction, erasures, missed areas, hatching and cross-hatching. Minkowitz begins by crocheting a circular shape and then molds it around an object—a mannequin, the sculpted head of a child, branches, an abstract form. In some cases, she simply wraps the object in her mesh and shellacs it so that it stiffens. Her work involves the application of drawing technique to the description of space. In a number of the pieces on view she used twigs and roots to form the armature, a latticelike framework for the loops and whorls of her crochet/drawing.

The most significant parts of the sculptures are the areas where there is nothing—the holes in the mesh, the hollow spaces defined by the shell of thread. Even the material, the crocheted mesh, becomes a nearly theoretical web just barely defining the boundaries of there/not there. The beauty, intelligence and structuring of these pieces present an object lesson in the simultaneous importance and irrelevance of "craft" in the usual sense of the word.

Her work is neither abstract nor representational; her forms do not reveal themselves immediately, demanding time to be looked at for the richness of their delicate, irregular and unusual surfaces. Minkowitz communicates not through an instantly read graphic image but through the slow absorption of detail. Her vision is rooted in the mysteries of nature, including human nature. The exhibition emphasizes a dominant and persistent characteristic of Minkowitz's work—the simultaneous revelation of the inside and outside of a form simultaneously. Nothing is hidden or opaque; every aspect of a piece is permeable to the viewer's gaze. Minkowitz's references to internal organs, her insistence that we look inside the body cavity, create an odd intimacy. The ambiguity between interior and exterior generates tension and invites the viewer to enter the space of the work.

Sisters, 1999, depicts two preadolescent figures rising above a wood chair. They emerge from a single dress, an indefinite, smoke-colored, conelike form with a delicate yellow border. Their faces are barely defined, yet they stare at us with the boldness and lack of guile that typify a child's curiosity. The image says, "We are of one flesh." The girls seem to be separating and consolidating at the same time—an extraordinary visual metaphor for kinship, love and the complications of familial closeness.

In *A Story*, 1999, each of the five components was molded from an Italian bust of a young child, a reproduction that the artist found at a yard sale and was immediately attracted to for its simplicity and classicism. The busts she crocheted range from beige to deep gray-brown, blending greater or lesser amounts of the light and dark colors, and each tapers off into a ghostlike wisp. The intense little faces seem to comment on the fleeting nature of childhood, racial assimilation and the beauty to be found in universality.

Norma Minkowitz draws from a vocabulary of emotionally charged forms. They are the result of her struggle to articulate a visual language that is intensely personal though neither privileged nor private. She refuses to pander to the viewer. Rather, one is allowed to collaborate, to merge personal experience with the work, to combine imaginations within her transparent arenas.

—KATHLEEN WHITNEY

Kathleen Whitney, who lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is a contributing editor to Sculpture magazine.