



'Child of Our Time' (detail), 1993, floor casket, carved maple



'Container' (detail), 1996, carved poplar wood

NORDIC MUTATIONS

Beneath Elisabeth Engen's recent sculptural works in wood lie deep concerns about current developments in genetic manipulation. Text by Dr Widar Halén.



'Child of Our Time', 1993, floor casket, carved maple

ELISABETH Engen grew up in the deep forests on the border between Norway and Sweden. Here the trees grow tall and majestic, and they still comprise an important element of people's everyday lives and myths. A childhood in this wooded landscape, where most people are still employed in forestry, has left a deep impression on Engen's artistic consciousness. As soon as she had completed her studies, she became a member of the pioneer Golden Rain Group, which was established in Bergen in 1982. At the group's inaugural exhibition, "Step Forward", at Galleri NK, she exhibited chairs for



'With Stripes', 1997, chest in birch and lime. The Oslo Museum of Applied Art



'Green', 1993, container, carved and painted wood



'Billy', 1995, container, carved and painted wood

'Cow from Majak' (detail), 1992, carved and painted wood

body and soul. These chairs were in black-stained birch with high, sculptural backs consisting of asymmetrical compositions of geometrical figures and grille motifs. This tectonic technique, of building up structures piece by piece, is characteristic of her 1980s furniture. It is reminiscent of the asymmetrical furniture of the Orient and of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's designs, but it is freer and wilder in composition and expression. This approach has typified Engen's work up to the present day. However, in the mid-1990s she abandoned the tectonic structures to design and make furniture and chests that cannot be broken down into separate formal ele-

ments, but have a single holistic, organic shape. The Golden Rain Group and Engen's designs aroused much attention in Norway and Scandinavia in the 1980s. It was fairly unusual for craft artists to work in wood at the time, and female practitioners were rare. Their contribution might be said to have filled a vacuum. In the course of time, Engen produced cupboards, tables and clocks that challenged traditional ideas of furniture. In the post-Modernist style, she used historical references and pastel colours that challenged accepted notions of beauty and function. Engen wanted to experiment with the versatility and rich references of the object, and the 1980s allowed for this kind of openness. During this decade we experienced a new cultural situation, where the borders between craft and pictorial art became indistinct and it was possible to freely explore ideas and techniques from many different disciplines. Engen's work also questioned the traditional art of woodcarving in Norway. By employing unorthodox methods and tools, she achieves a style and a surface that are unique. She has sometimes pressed the pattern into the wood and used materials as simple as chicken wire to obtain a chequered effect, and she often uses a chainsaw and a disc grinder to obtain the rough, daring surfaces that characterise many of her pieces. She has reinforced the impression of roughness and immediacy in the 1990s because she works increasingly without precise drawings or preparatory studies, shaping the object and the ornaments as she proceeds. However, no detail is fortuitous and her colouring technique is subtle, requiring many layers of paint to achieve the desired depth and tension of colour.

In 1993 Engen made a breakthrough with her more holistic "floor caskets", shaped like large lidded troughs that were bent to breaking point. The forms are painted in almost sickly colours and the surfaces have growths, resembling warts or rashes. Engen's conversion to the organic has an almost disturbing physical and natural proximity that triggers associations with current developments in genetic manipulation. In her designs, new mutations and abstract shapes may arise that are entirely unrecognisable in Nature, but are bursting with intense sensuality. Behind these works lies a deep concern about the unpredictable consequences of genetic engineering and environmental pollution.

Dr Widar Halén

Dr Widar Halén is chief curator of the Oslo Museum of Applied Art.



'Container', 1996, carved poplar wood. The Oslo Museum of Applied Art

