



**THE FALSE SPECTATOR** INSTALLATION BY JOAN TANNER

SUYAMA SPACE, SEATTLE



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SUYAMA SPACE, SEATTLE | JANUARY 18 – APRIL 15, 2016

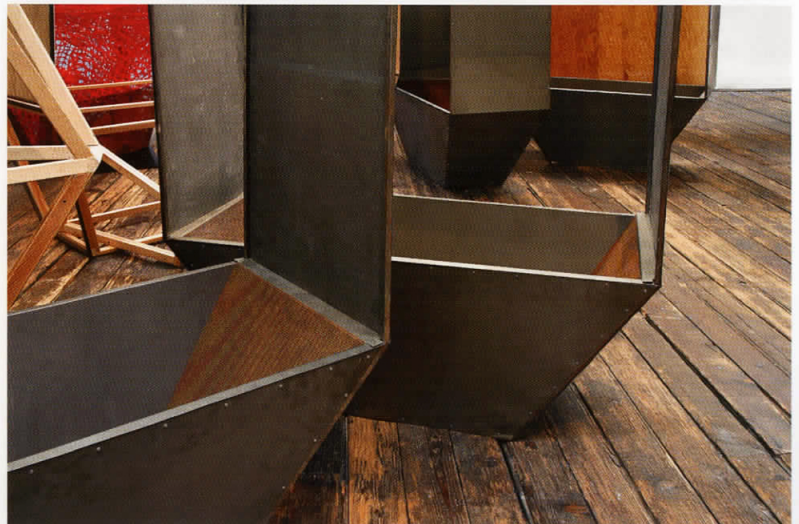
## PREFACE

*Beth Sellars, Curator*

Born in 1935 in Indianapolis, Joan Tanner has lived and worked in Santa Barbara, California since the mid-1960s. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in painting and sculpture from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1957 and began her career as a painter. She has consistently exhibited her work since 1968, creating exhibitions at Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara Museum of Contemporary Art, the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky, and the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College in Los Angeles. Tanner's work is included in the public collections of The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities; Harvard University; Stanford University; The Speed Art Museum; and Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

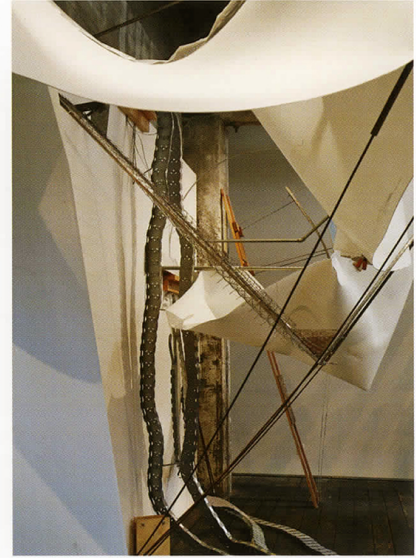
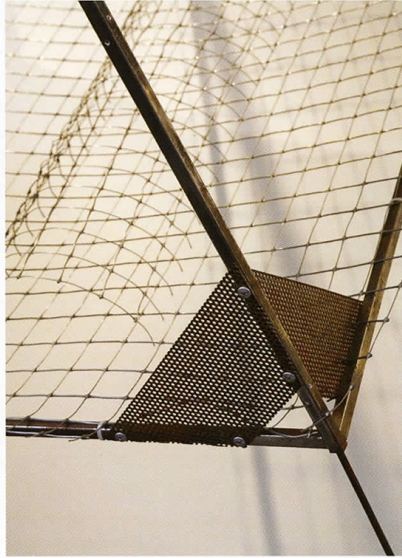
Tanner's early production of paintings began to incorporate three-dimensional objects in the late 1980s when she randomly introduced unusual materials such as branches, plywood, glass shards, and nails. After the mid-1990s, her tentative investigations morphed into increasingly large scale sculptural forms, leading to the individual structures that fill Suyama Space to capacity.

We acknowledge Joan Tanner's efforts expended on this installation, and are grateful to her capable assistants, Alan Struebing and Gera Ayala. Our special appreciation goes to Maiza Hixson for her insightful essay and professional collaboration. And thanks to Meg Linton who was Exhibitions Curator of the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College when she suggested several years ago that we take a look at Tanner's work. We constantly appreciate the continued support from 4Culture/King County Lodging Tax Fund, and our deeply significant Suyama Space Friends









## TRANSIENT PRESENCE: THE ART OF JOAN TANNER

Maiza Hixson

Encountering *False Spectator* feels like visiting a lost or futuristic city built from fragments of a post-consumer age. Yet Joan Tanner's structures stand as distinct, capricious entities mounted in a mesmerizing visual array that invites multiple readings and interpretations.

While we can decipher familiar architectural and sculptural shapes such as columns and troughs, we also confront wildly idiosyncratic constructions that deviate from traditional form. Invented structures made of durable, ubiquitous products and scraps replace conventional definitions of sculpture. Makeshift materials such as wood veneer and orange barrier netting commonly associated with construction sites adorn her structures and give the impression of provisional monuments.

Tanner describes her forms as troughs, bent panels, sawbucks, wedges, snakes, and buttresses. In a deeper sense, such shapes function as a device for decoding the mystery of her logic revealed and concealed. A recurring shape in her work, the truncated rectangle, appears in this installation as multiple troughs. The artist teases our presumption about the origins of this repeating form, which is a reference to the catchments in an antiquated waterwheel. The clustered troughs appear designated for use but also register as slightly dysfunctional in their congested placement. They are obdurate and get in the way of one another like cars stuck in a traffic jam.

By bracketing each trough with flimsy extensions as side panels that shoot upwards to penetrate the building's elevation, these untethered extensions contradict the stolid appearance of the trough augured to the floor. Tanner's conscious decision to present one trough without any cladding whatsoever calls attention to the larger subject of the installation: the reality of disparate and incomplete conditions and how to navigate and keep track of information when it constantly appears and disappears. We are caught off guard by our assumptions from Tanner's fugitive forms and quickly learn not to take anything for granted.

Styrofoam, for instance, is lightweight but appears heavy in the three towering panels adjacent to the troughs. These show similar curved elements, their rounded bottoms kiss the floor while their angled tops made of segmented boards point upwards to the ceiling. Placed tightly side-by-side

beneath skylights, the bent angles catch the overhead natural light, reflecting a shade of intense blue onto the wall behind.

The repetitive pattern of skylights is further echoed in the multiple sawbuck constructions that Tanner employs in this installation. The horizontal sawbuck resembles a tunneled archway of curved, metallic columns. The arched legs are splayed wide making a defiant stance in contrast to the narrow curve above. Elevated on metal rings, the "feet" of the conduits create the impression that the sawbuck is dainty, despite its imposing scale. Here and elsewhere in the installation, Tanner's clever variation of minor formal elements contributes to the playfulness in her work. Aesthetic incongruities compel us to remain alert for absurdity.

Tanner's forms defy logic. In her vertical sawbuck, carved chunky blocks of Styrofoam plug the end of conduit rods. Here the artist's daft gesture calls our attention to an incongruous element, which provides a clue to her conceptual methodology. Her work privileges space fillers and metaphorical voids in a demonstration of eccentric choices meant to confound, provoke, and entertain.

Signifying a temporary site where art and meaning are simultaneously under construction, an oversized wedge shaped armature appears swaddled in bright orange barrier netting. At one corner a pendulous bundle of the netting hangs from the side of the structure like a frivolous sash, but one notes the wadding and protrusions confound the use of the material. The netting is porous and allows one to see through the surface to the interior skeleton. In contrast to the boxy look and opaque surfaces of the adjacent trough forms, the orange wedge's see-through or flexible façade is also part of the foundation of its strength—a concept that registers as authenticity in Tanner's installation.

Rust colored, perforated metal serves as the base for the orange wedge and similar tones of orange and mahogany reappear in the sawbuck forms, clearly recalling Tanner's history as a painter. Tanner asserts when she discontinued painting, she "learned to unpaint" by gradually emptying the canvas with less paint, less color, fewer elements. However, the color of intense highway orange stimulated the challenge to "deal with it" in her paintings, just as she has reintroduced it in the three-dimensional work in *False Spectator*.



The tonal loudness of the orange in the wedge contrasts with the more subdued volume of white underlayment that protrudes from the south wall, which Tanner engages as an expansive base for sculpture in the gallery. Referring to it as “voluptuous with no rhyme or reason,” the wall supports precariously attached fragments where tenuousness and improvisation prevail. Shiny articulated metal snakes slither down the surface and onto the floor in a seductive coil. Made from interlocking metal fixtures designed for building curved walls, Tanner deftly manipulates these and other building supplies to achieve a rough yet refined aesthetic in this area.

The fluidity and dynamism of the south wall is slightly contradicted by the rigid set of Tanner’s mounted buttresses on and adjacent to the south wall. From these structures, Tanner attaches long threaded rods that aggressively jut out in a mildly threatening manner. In *False Spectator*, these subtle and at times insignificant details consistently announce themselves to enhance the perspective of those paying close attention. Tanner’s art is a mental exercise in trying to assemble disparate parts. Her aesthetic elevation of specific detail evokes philosophical questions. That Suyama Space was originally a car repair shop transformed into an art space intensifies the ironically mechanical nature of her installation.

Tanner creates an expressive visual vernacular from manufactured materials. Her process involves collating, discarding, changing, redefining, building and taking apart information and thereby Suyama’s floor becomes a stage for staking out contradicted boundaries and conjuring disruptive possibilities.

In *False Spectator* industrial sandpaper, rusted perforated metal and natural wood might appear common and unassuming. However with dry wit the artist de-familiarizes these elements, turning them into aesthetic tools or guides that refuse easy definition. Disparate shapes, dynamic forms and small parts ultimately cohere into one cogent installation, which reveals a corollary to how the individual mind, a city, a society might evolve or disappear. Seen in the larger context of a rapidly changing culture where the conditions of life are constantly being constructed, replaced or inescapably rendered obsolete, Joan Tanner’s art is a conduit to consider expanded possibilities.

*Maiza Hixson is the Curator of Collections for the Santa Barbara County Arts Commission.*



## ARTIST STATEMENT

Joan Tanner

For me the allure of Suyama Space lay in the framework it provided my imagination. It beckoned with the possibility of creating visual punctuations, and physical interruptions allowing me to occupy and displace space, and to articulate a theater of forms that allude to, but never quite confirm their architectonic origins.

My sincerest thanks go to George Suyama for creating this unique environment for artists to pursue their work, and inviting me to be a part of the program. My thanks go also to curator Beth Sellars for her support as my installation took shape. I am boundlessly grateful to my fabricators Bob DeBris, Mike Marsh and Alan Struebing, who also installed *False Spectator*, to my studio manager Gera Ayala who coordinated the project, and to Maiza Hixson for her insights. Lastly my thanks go to both Meg Linton and Julien Robson for their persistent support of my work.

[www.joantanner.com](http://www.joantanner.com)

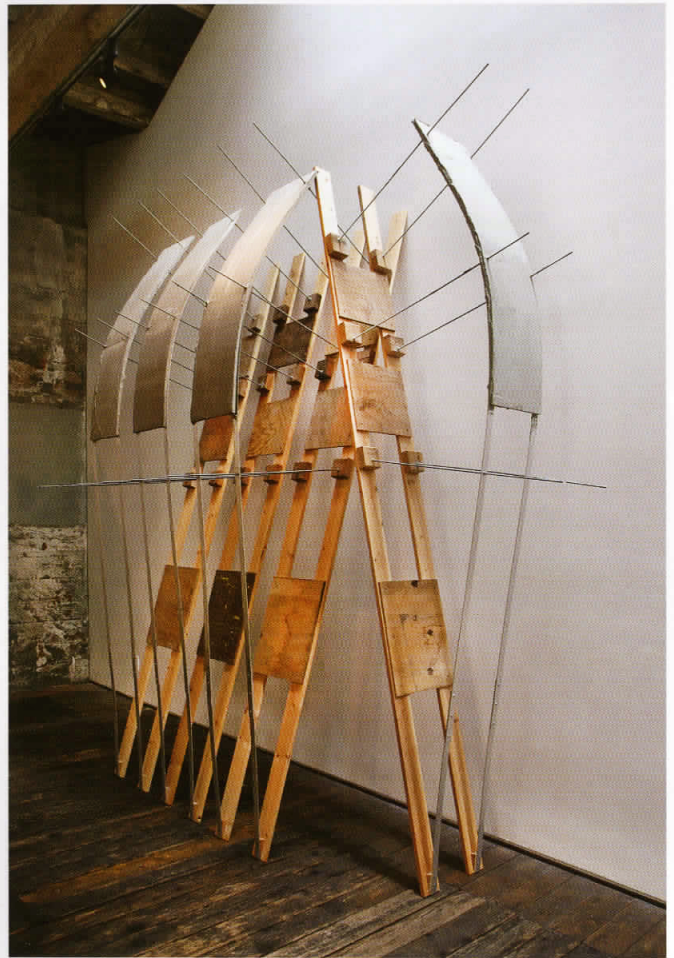


PHOTO BY BETH SELLARS



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PHOTO BY KATE MURPHY



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