

JOAN TANNER
ON TENDERHOOKS

OTIS Otis College of Art and Design
BEN MALTZ GALLERY



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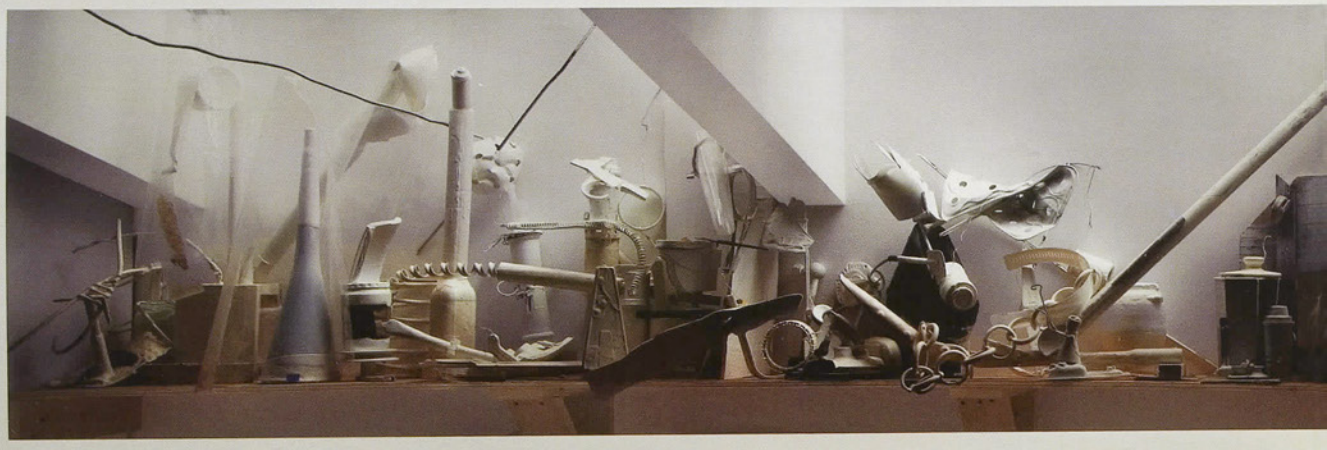


Elevated Shelf/On Tenderhooks, 2006
Ultrachrome print
12 x 120 inches



BEN MALTZ GALLERY
JULY 22 – SEPTEMBER 23, 2006



Studio Detail: *On Tenderhooks,* 2004–2006
Digital photograph



CONTENTS

Cutting the Surface
by Meg Linton 3

On Tenderhooks
Installation at Ben Maltz Gallery 5

Head to Head
Interview between Joan Tanner and Julien Robson 17

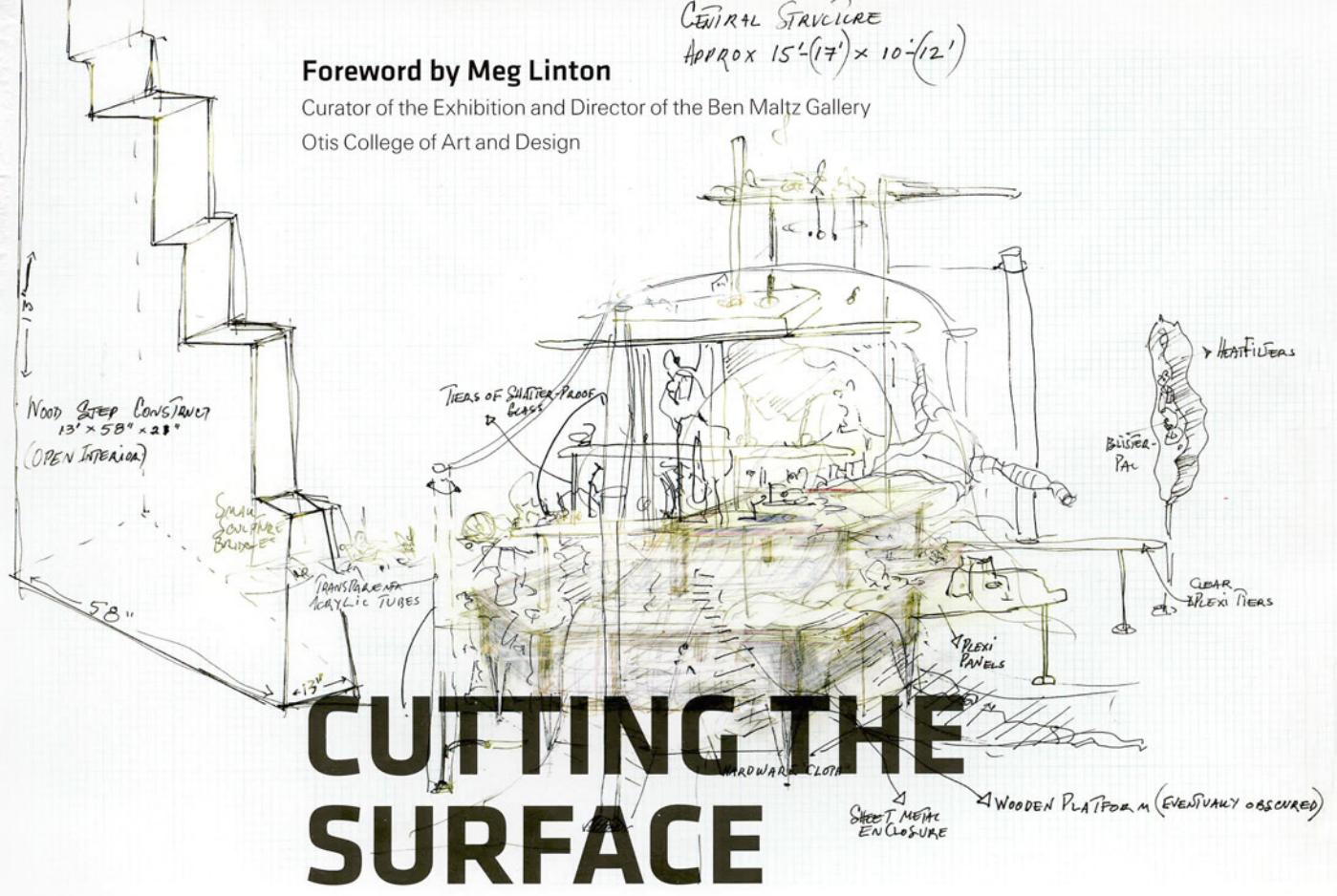
Joan Tanner Biography 38

Hand-Eye-Mind Coordination
by Michael Darling 41

List of Installations 51

Acknowledgments 53





CUTTING THE SURFACE

Foreword by Meg Linton

Curator of the Exhibition and Director of the Ben Maltz Gallery
Otis College of Art and Design

On Tenderhooks is a large-scale installation created by Southern California artist Joan Tanner, whose manipulation of materials and ordering of objects recalls the work of Kurt Schwitters, Constantin Brancusi, Joseph Cornell, Lee Bontecou, and Richard Tuttle. Using raw materials such as Blister-Pac, corrugated plastic paneling, galvanized metal, air-duct filters, plywood, industrialized coating, light, and video, Tanner assembles a precarious environment to tackle the visual paradox of architectonic order and disintegration—an ordering designed to achieve perfection manifested through inherent (and inevitable) imperfection. Materials are stretched, pulled, pushed, dangled, and exposed to create an overall tableau teetering between action and stasis.

In her studio/laboratory—free of hegemonic restraint and hard-lined hypotheses—Tanner investigates and observes spatial contradictions, archetypal geometric forms, raw materials, biology, and the world around her. Instead of formulating an idea, making sketches, and building an object, Tanner heuristically attacks her materials—a conglomeration of objects, fabrics, woods, metals, and plastics—gathered from hardware stores, thrift shops or salvage yards. She juxtaposes, melds, and distorts the items into various arrangements or still life displays. This activity is similar to an architect first making roughhewn study models, opposed to drawings, so thought and action become spatial rather than linear. This tactile pursuit moves Tanner through the carnal to discover and reveal visual metaphors for sensations like tension, frustration, and futility.

On Tenderhooks is the result of Tanner's methodology in action over a two-year period. It is an experience that defies articulation because it was created without words in order to make aspects of the human

Previous page
Preliminary Drawing: *On Tenderhooks,* 2004–2006
Ball point pen, gouache, and pencil on paper
17 x 22 inches

condition visible and tangible. Yet, it should be approached like reading a poem—looking for associations and possibilities—not like a newspaper article looking for facts and answers.

To be "on the tenterhooks" is to be in a position of strain, difficulty or uneasiness. It is a state of anxious suspense and it references the butcher's hooks used to dangle meat or the tanner's hooks used to stretch hides. The hooks hold the skin or fabric tight while it changes from one state to another—wet to dry, loose to taunt, dark to light. To be on Tanner's "tenderhooks" emphasizes her interest in moments of transition and contradiction—moments when things appear to be not what they seem.

A central and reoccurring action in Tanner's process is the construction of an epidermal layer of materials followed by its immediate dissection: "Building up a form, then slicing it open." Coming from three generations of medical doctors, Tanner claims she cannot escape the logic of "cut the skin and see the facts." She covers, coats, and dips materials like wood with metal, plastic packaging with liquid rubber, glass with chicken wire and foam to construct an elaborate epidermis that she cuts into, penetrates or peels away. The strata of her structures are extremely rich, and exposed areas often reveal fleshy insides made out of batting or soft-focused video. The materials become metaphors for the body: hot glue becomes mucous; metal, wood, and batting become exterior layers of the skin; video becomes intestinal and circulatory.

The architectural underpinnings for these clusters of biological intensity are stairways, bridges, and towers. In Tanner's hands these structures are disjointed, distended, and precarious. They are "step constructs" (as Tanner calls them), stairway-like forms looming thirteen feet high, leaning precariously against the wall. A black tower rises out of a bed of chaos and a ramshackle bridge hovers in a state of near collapse. Viability and ruin coexist in the logic of Tanner's installation: human achievement is represented by architecture, mortality by its decline. *On Tenderhooks* is a poetic metaphor for seeking perfection and the inability to attain it.

Joan Tanner
On Tenderhooks, 2006
An installation created for the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, July 22-September 23, 2006, funded in part by the Pasadena Art Alliance. The project began in 2004 and the following individuals assisted in fabrication and documentation: Bob DeBris, Gera Ayala, Fran Puccinelli, Julia Ford, Ginny Brush, Mari Bartoli, Carlos Alvarez, and Wayne McCall



ON TENDERHOOKS





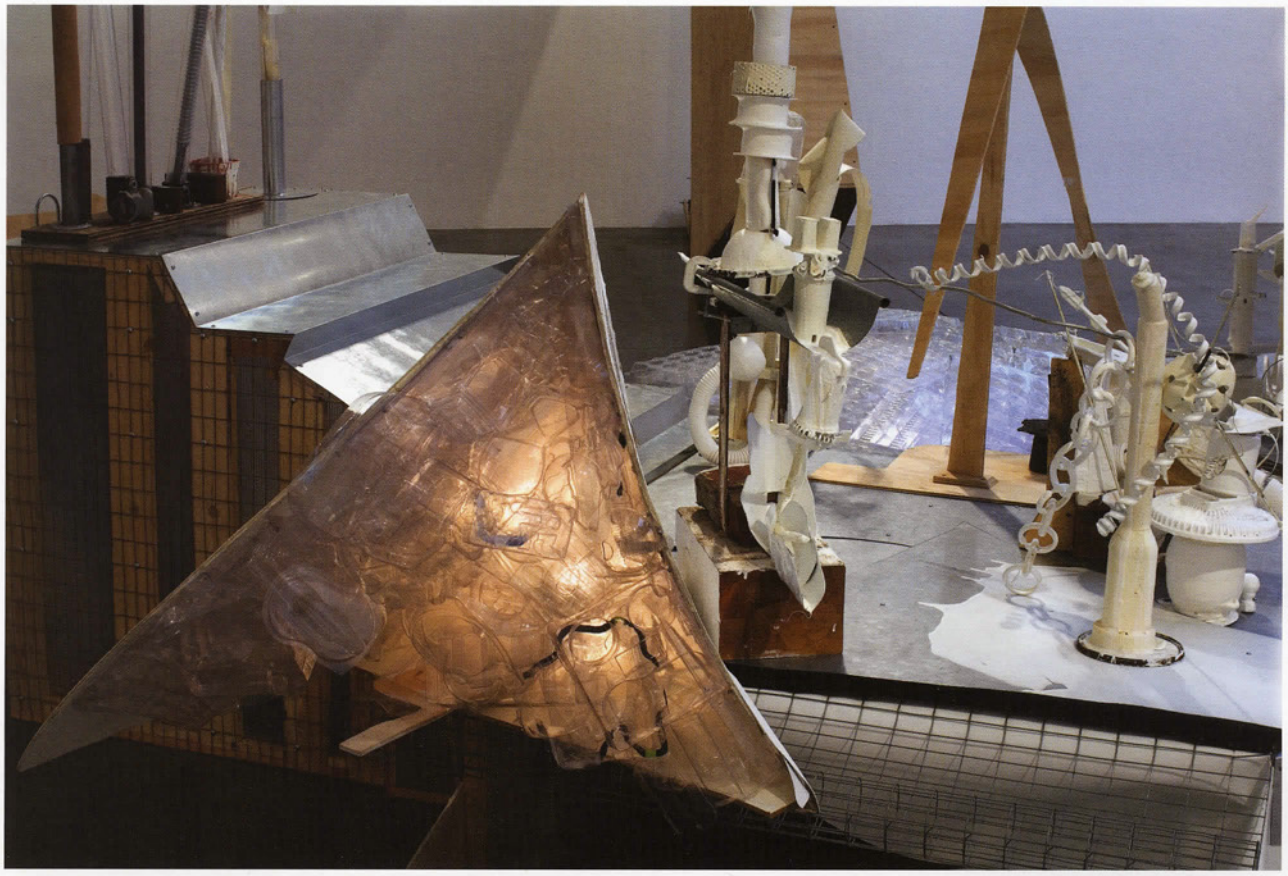




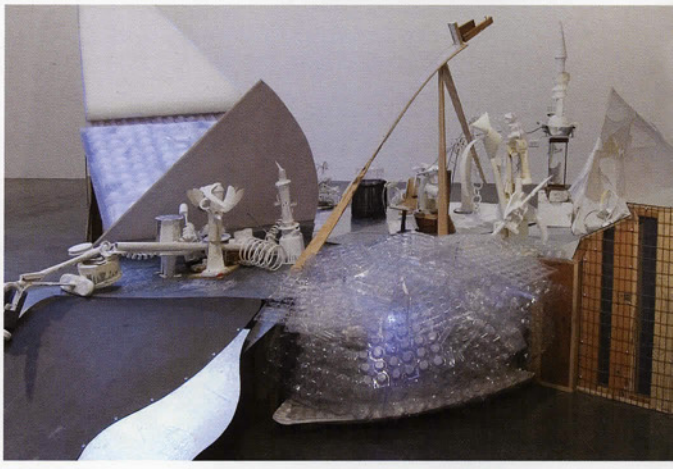














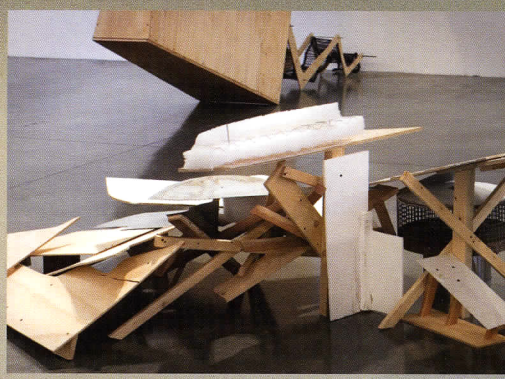








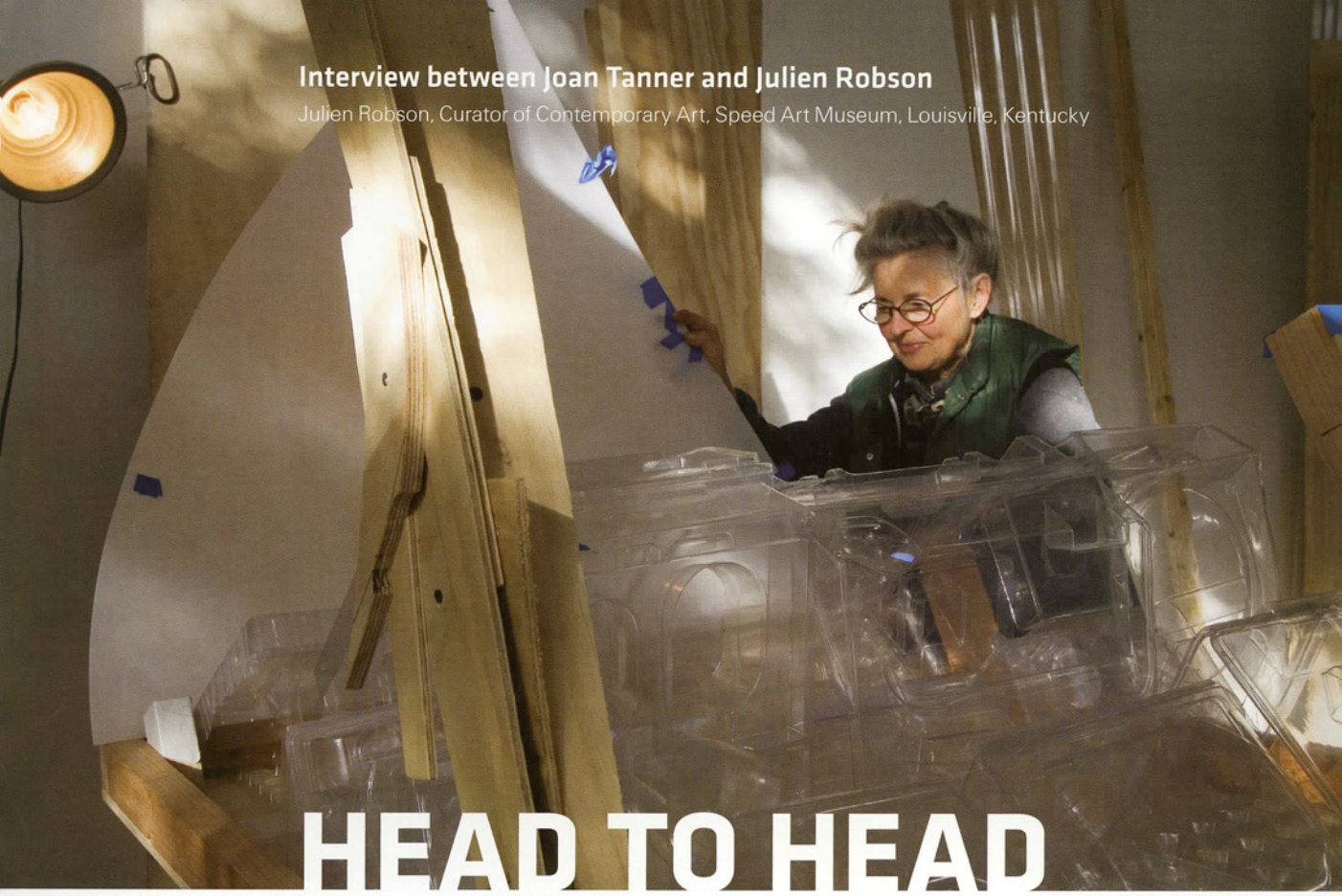












Interview between Joan Tanner and Julien Robson

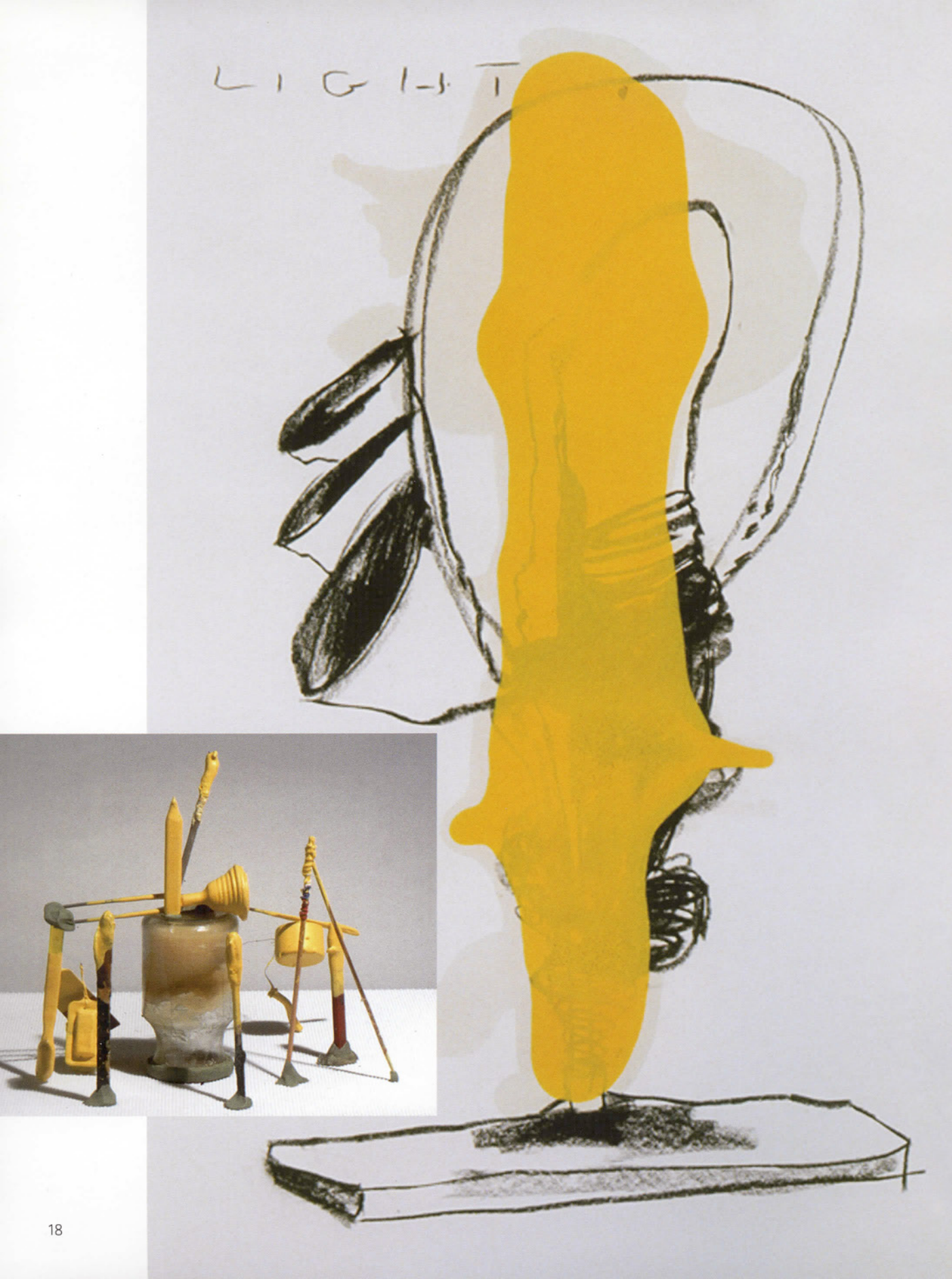
Julien Robson, Curator of Contemporary Art, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky

HEAD TO HEAD

It is well over 12 years since I was first introduced to Joan Tanner. Not knowing what to expect on that first visit, I was delighted to encounter an artist whose rich visual vocabulary and rigorous engagement were matched by a directness that was both generous and encouraging to the studio guest. At that meeting we mainly discussed her paintings, but it became clear on subsequent occasions in her studio that Joan's practice is fed by her interest in a diverse range of materials, and that her striking objects and installations emerge from her fascination with the visual and intellectual potential of new forms.

Despite its seeming variety, I have always felt that Joan's work is focused very clearly by the idea of history, which manifests itself in both the materials she uses and the way she manipulates them. In the early 1990s she used organic objects—such as apples pierced with nails and pins—that would chart a history of their own decay over a period of months or years. She then began to incorporate a plethora of found objects in her sculptures and to homogenize them with color, creating tableaux from the abject remains of consumerism. As she continued this investigation, her work began to open up new possibilities of scale that have subsequently rendered a number of compelling installations—including *Standing Yellow*, which was commissioned for the Speed Art Museum's collection in 2002.

Over the years, the discussion that began on my first visit to Joan's studio has continued to grow as her work has developed and changed. The suggestion that we do an interview for this catalogue offered an opportunity to commit part of this dialogue to print. We agreed that, given the geographic distance between us, we could realize it with the aid of e-mail. Our e-mails were many and lengthy, but the medium has allowed us to revisit and reconsider the text of our exchanges so that it can be published. The result is an edited version of the discussion we carried out during March and April 2006 while Joan was in the process of fabricating her installation for Otis' Ben Maltz Gallery.


LIGHT

Light, 2001
Charcoal, yellow Plasti-Dip
on Strathmore paper
30 x 25 inches

Yellow and Paste, 1996
Mixed media with Plasti-Dip
8 x 11 x 5 inches

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Julien Robson (JR): In recent years you have become increasingly interested in using a mixture of industrial and discarded material in your work. This has resulted in a series of installations that are sometimes site-specific and sometimes more formally sculptures. How did this move away from painting come about?

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Joan Tanner (JT): A shift from painting to making three-dimensional work, using diverse materials, was clearly evident by 1995 in the *Close Scrutiny* exhibit at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum (SBCAF). Since then I have not returned to full-scale painting. With that said, I recognize that exploring the properties of another viscous medium—one that solidifies to a fleshy surface—reflects a painter's concern.

Yellow Sticks is part of a group of small, coated sculptures I made from 1996 to 1998. I started by reconfiguring ordinary objects selected from any source material that randomly caught my attention. I applied a rubber coating material called Plasti-Dip, and by repeating the process of dipping, pouring, and covering, altered the identity and shape of the original object. I was attracted to this substance because of its specific limitations: generic, commercial colors; rapid drying; and the capacity to spread an opaque surface over disparate elements. My objective was to develop a homogenous surface by adding epidermal layers and, by using a palette of only one color, producing an artificial continuity. The bonding characteristic of Plasti-Dip also made it possible to adhere eccentrically shaped parts together. Thus, I was able to build elaborate structures with incongruous elements that were erratically forged into densely arranged constructions on a larger scale. To my mind this work is the precursor to my larger installation projects: *Attending Yellow* (2000) and *Standing Yellow* (2001).

>>>

JR: The Miramar project, *Attending Yellow,* is obviously a key moment in your work in that it seems to consolidate this direction and use of materials, as well as present a number of new challenges that take you forward.

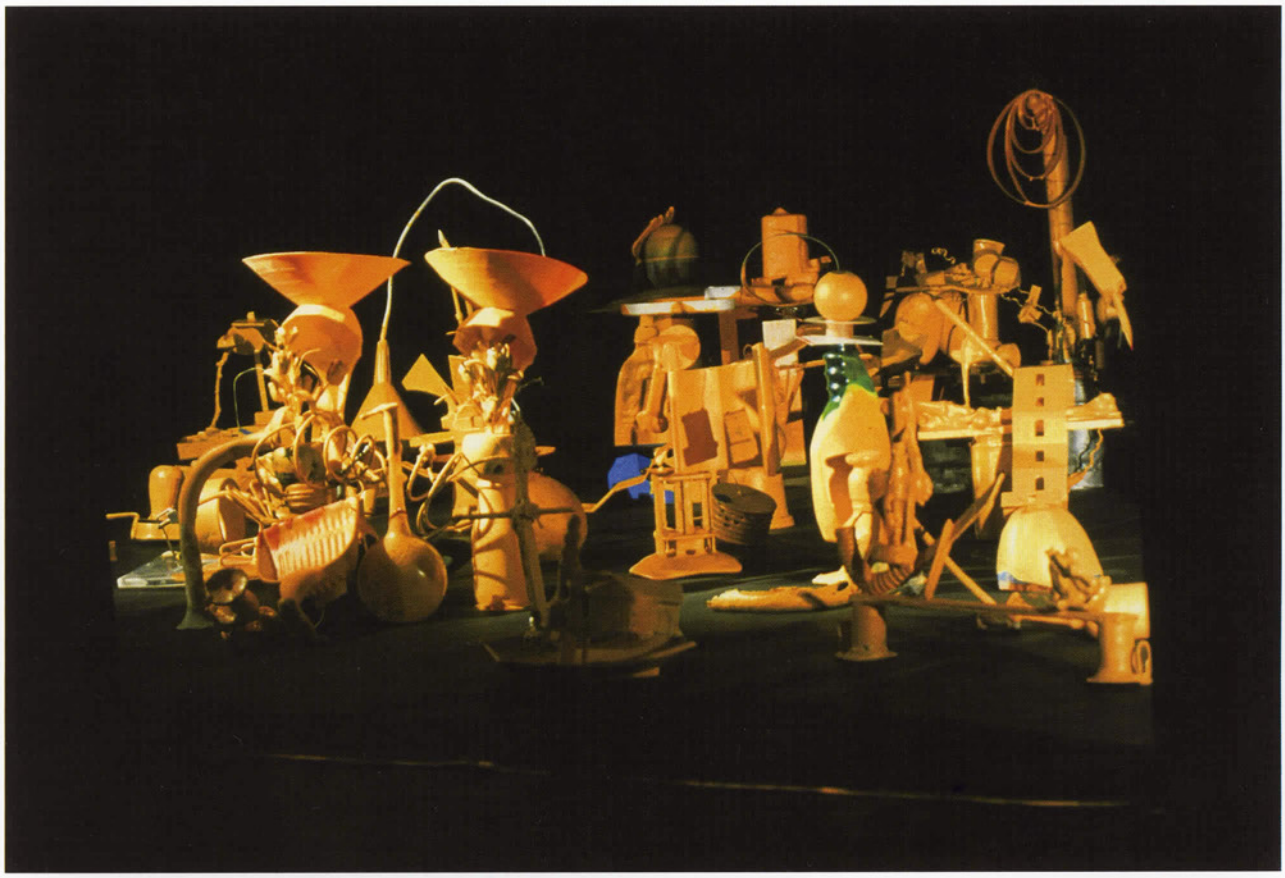
>>>>

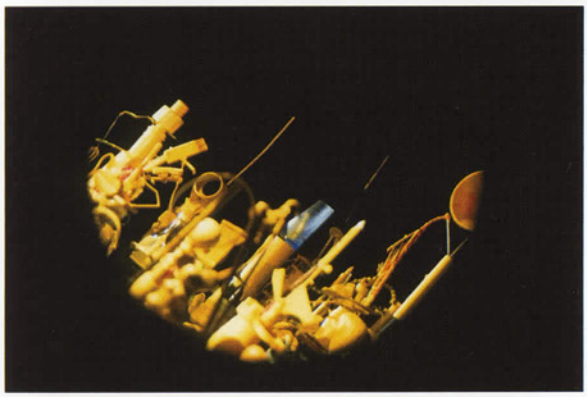
JT: You are on track to describe the Miramar installation as "a key moment." Working in a non-art, off-site space for a month at the Miramar Hotel in Santa Barbara was intriguing. The challenge to assemble my sculpture—redefined as portable objects for a temporary set-up—advanced the context of how the details in this work could operate, be seen and encountered. It was also clear that assembling my coated sculpture into an impenetrable



Attending Yellow, 2000
Site-specific installation at the
Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum's
Miramar Artist Project Space









Details, *Attending Yellow,* 2000
Site-specific installation at the
Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum's
Miramar Artist Project Space

mass of illuminated yellow against the darkened interior of the Miramar charted the next direction. I realized the potential of light as a significant spatial consideration, and renewed my interest in sustaining tangible architectonic tension.

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JR: As these spatial considerations come into to the foreground I also get the sense that the viewer is directed to a more active participation in the work.

>>>>

JT: Yes, I think that's right. The Miramar space had walls of exposed studs. One designated the entrance, while another enclosed a separate area. This latter worked something like a signifier of inaccessibility that reinforced the viewer's presence in the space. It was painted to imitate the "famous" blue of the Miramar rooftops (a familiar beacon to freeway travelers). The primary focus in this otherwise unimposing blue expanse was a clear-cut, horizontal, floor-level opening that revealed the work as a glowing cluster of yellow objects behind the wall. So the necessity of standing in one location, bending over, and peering into a specific cavity presented a challenge to anyone who resisted the notion of directed attention. In addition, the light level in the outer space was subdued in order to heighten the limitations caused by the barrier, and increase a sense of artificial distance in what was a relatively ordinary room.

Indirectly, a barrier suggests other identities for an art viewer to assume: interloper, spy, trespasser, passive or active participant. Then the viewer is included in an imagined dialogue with the artist. I was working with the idea of creating a designated port, something close to an aperture, a peek-hole into a building site. It was far more compelling to thrust the work to the far end of the space, as if the yellow pieces were peculiar remnants—like abandoned shop items that were inexplicably altered and nearly swept out the back door.

>>>

JR: Obviously—in the way you took over the space and altered it—there is a sense of intervention in the Miramar project. How does this compare with *Standing Yellow*, which might at first seem more like a conventional sculpture?

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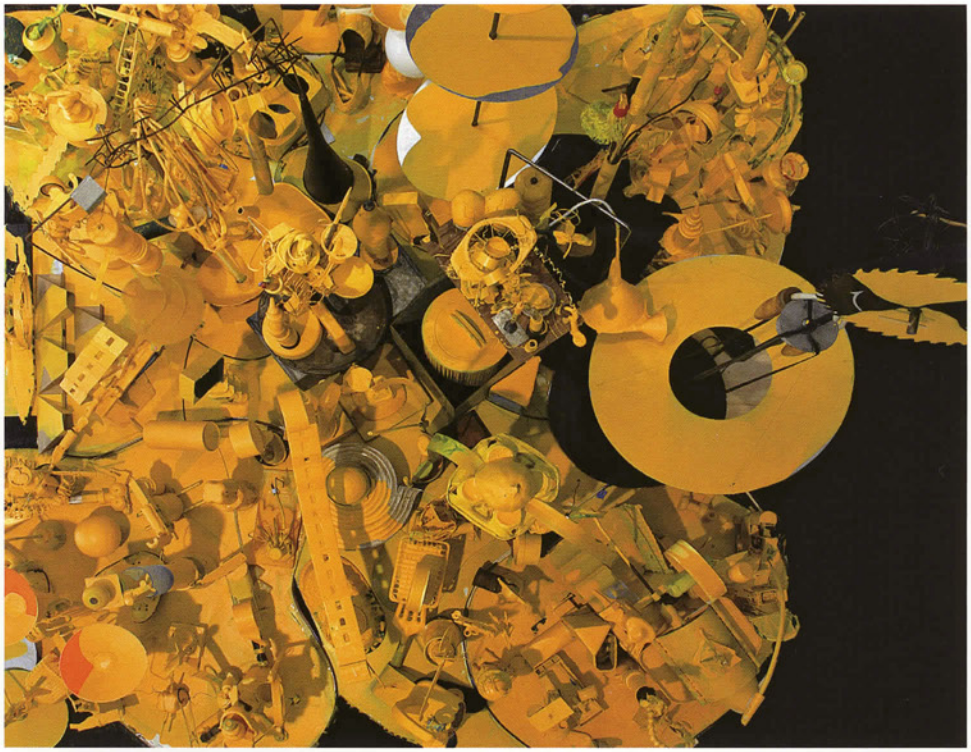
JT: In one sense I consider *Standing Yellow* in much the same way, although it differs because it was a work designated for a specific site in a large museum gallery. However,

Standing Yellow, 2001

Details, *Standing Yellow,* 2001
Installation at the Speed Art Museum





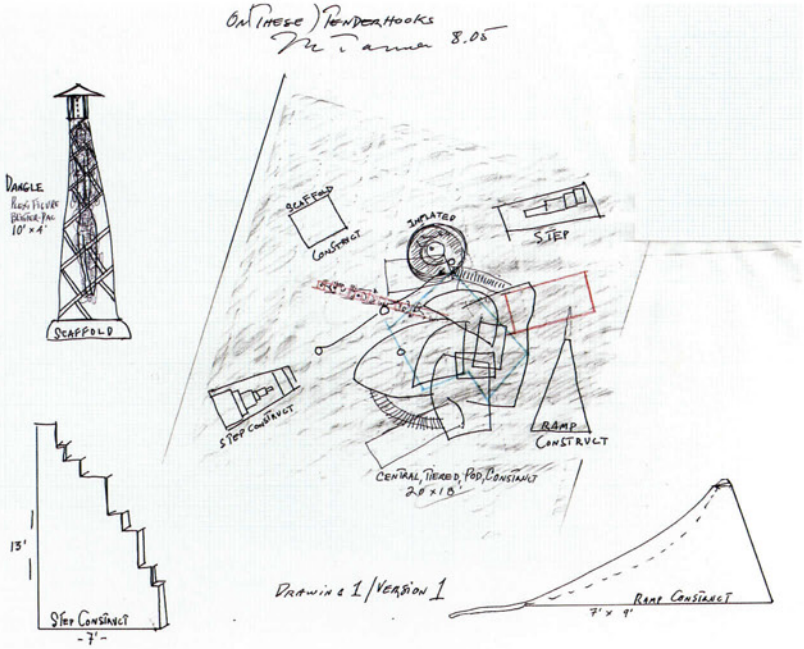
while the majority of the gallery remained unchanged, I still think of *Standing Yellow* as an intervention because of the way its character affected the rest of the space.

Remember, *Standing Yellow* was mounted over a permanent limestone plinth in the sculpture court of the Speed Art Museum. This site presented the challenge of building a complex structure over the top of a fountain that was not in use. In order to simultaneously engage and cover its four-foot rise, I draped vulcanized rubber panels over the edge onto the surrounding marble floor, thereby hiding it—making it uniform. Mounted on top of this plinth were densely clustered arrangements of objects covered in Plasti-Dip. The black rubber related well to the flesh-like surface of the coated sculpture and it transformed the entire work into an artificial presence through this simple juxtaposition of highway-yellow on top of a black mantle.

I think the singular, chromatic theatricality of *Standing Yellow* interacted with the whole gallery space. It had an architectonic presence that was at once familiar and strange, creating a new context for the other works in the gallery.

>>>

JR: Both these works were challenging in terms of scale. With your current installation you seem to be taking this challenge to a new level. As I look at the plans for the Otis installation, I cannot help but think how the environmental aspects of the Miramar have been synthesized with the architectonic ambitions of *Standing Yellow*.



Preliminary Drawing:
On Tenderhooks, 2004–2006
Ball point pen and pencil on paper
17 x 22 inches

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JT: There is a spatial vocabulary going on with Otis' Ben Maltz Gallery that I didn't encounter in the Miramar or the Speed Art Museum projects. The gallery is a long, white rectangle that creates a sense of enclosure, and this project is considerably more expansive—primarily because of the size of the space, and because I'm making large-scale, individual sculptures as well as a central site with dominating extensions. These segments move off the central site in horizontal thrusts, with a tension that pulls out into the gallery, toward the vertical pieces that stand separate and solitary. The density of coated elements will still appear at various junctures in the work but, in this project, I've added Blister-Pac (vacuum-molded packaging) clusters—sometimes exposed, sometimes tucked into interstices and underpinnings throughout the installation.

I'm curious to see how the larger sculpture operates, intermingled with the layered appearance of Blister-Pac insertions. When they are stacked up, jammed together, conjoined in some kind of random fashion, the negative Blister-Pac shapes become something else. They remind me of what one might see in a laboratory, resembling curious glass bottles, specimen slides, vitrines, etc. I like that they are not always clear and also that they have a greasy appearance. I like that they gather dust, and that they are empty, and that they are remnants of other things. I'm also bundling, stacking, and piling up plastic paneling in order to generate an epidermal-like layering as an accumulated configuration.

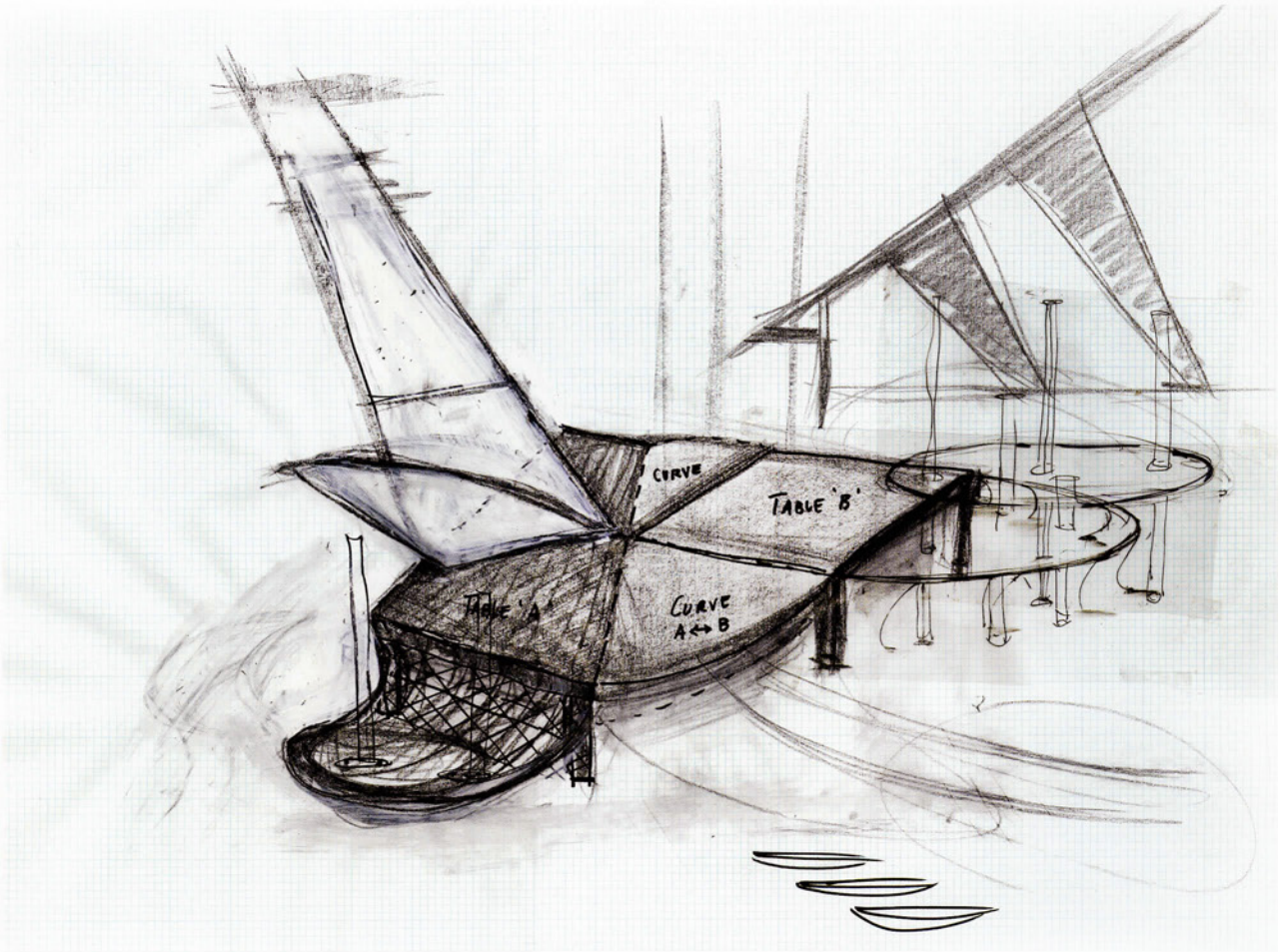
For my own reference I call the larger, solitary pieces "step-constructs" and "ramps." None of the steps or inclines can be climbed on, since the dimensions of step and rise are exaggerated by design —either too high, too small, too precarious. There is also a subtle undulation from top to bottom because the overall width varies since these dimensions aren't intended to be logical.



Studio Details
On Tenderhooks, 2004–2006
Digital photographs

The images on this page and the following were taken in Joan Tanner's studio during the construction of *On Tenderhooks*.





Preliminary Drawing:
On Tenderhooks, 2004–2006
Ball point pen, gouache, and pencil on paper
17 x 22 inches





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JR: There is an obvious reference to assemblage art in your work, which makes me think of Kurt Schwitters, and you readily acknowledge the influence of Mario Merz on your thinking. I have always thought, however, that there is a complex engagement with systems of control and unpredictability that possibly results from your interest in scientific as much as artistic practices.

>>

JT: It's interesting that you mention Schwitters. I haven't thought about Kurt Schwitters for a long time, although I've always admired his nonchalant use of materials. And most likely when I was painting, I indirectly engaged the intention of his work. Mario Merz made a deep impression on me when I first encountered his installations, but with Merz I would need to elaborate on discontinuity to describe his influence.

In regards to your phrase, "a complex engagement with systems of control"—your wording intrigues me. But it automatically triggers in my mind a visual situation based on a lack of systems and one that reflects my preference for an arbitrary method of producing art. But that, too, is a kind of system.

"Control" might cause me some worry since it suggests that before taking action I know how an idea will turn out. Although I realize it's perverse to suggest I'm uncertain about the sensibility operating throughout my work, I'm quite sure I need to praise the gods of uncertainty as a steady resource.

This leads to your mentioning unpredictability to define the process I utilize to pursue solutions. There is no doubt that I prefer generating spatial tension from a context of disruption, intentionally withholding logical progression. Unpredictability becomes effectively logical and essential as it seemingly works to contradict authenticity. In art, I consider unpredictability a way of resisting congruence as a palliative, and to substantiate the random as more kindred to our instinctive ways and means.











>>>

JR: I like the comment you made earlier about how elements you include in your work take on a greasy appearance, and you relish it if they decline, gather dust, or look used. This suggests a number of things to me, like ordinariness and decay, and a sense that the drama of your work emerges from a transformation of the abject. Would it be fair to describe the work this way?

>>>>

JT: Yes, definitely. Blister-Pac, styrene, corrugated polycarbonate panels, Plasti-Dip, and galvanized metal attract particles of all kinds. As do we. Skin-like surfaces stimulate me to consider the familiar maxim: "the way things are." Of course one might make a case for furry exteriors or wet, slick skin not readily demonstrating "the way things are." But a biologist, a geneticist could point to detritus, spoiled surroundings, decay and debilitation as having unquestionable effects on "the way things are."

When you bring up unpredictability you allude to alarming situations that we, as a society, don't anticipate and aren't prepared to acknowledge. This societal indifference has bearing on my work in that I require the drama of transformation, of substitution, of conversion, of re-configuration to inject an unnerving aspect of endings and consequences — that of the remaindered.

>>>

JR: We live in a culture where, a lot of the time, transformation seems to translate into the tropes of redemption. Your reference to "the way things are" and your interest in unpredictability suggests to me your approach is not so optimistic.

>>

JT: Redemption is way off my radar. Redemption rings with authorized hope, a promissory note that conveys liberation from blame for the "the way things are." In fact, my intention is to engage discontinuity as the persistent reality in what is commonly referred to as "global existence." Transformation







could possibly apply to my work via the substitution of one set of variables for another. And perhaps, in disarray, we as a society rescind involvement in order to privilege ignorance and celebrate pretense. I'm not sure. But I don't see transformation belly up for redemption's sake. Optimism has such fragile implications. Maybe it's still possible to be optimistic about immediate goals. I guess this answer reveals my own uncertainty.

>

JR: Could it be that this uncertainty comes into play in the way you position the viewer? For instance, you spoke earlier about how the Miramar project forced the viewer to interact with the work. In the Otis installation, the interaction seems to take on a new and more interesting guise. It is as if it's a stage set where the viewer becomes an unwitting actor in a play—but a play that has no script. I spoke of the drama in your work emerging from a transformation of the abject, but there seems also to be a dark humor at play here.

>>

JT: I've always been attracted to work that crosses boundaries, that blurs and merges the formal distinctions used to define different disciplines, linking visual art to other forms of expression. In theater, the offstage character persistently referred to but never present has bearing on the manner in which art is perceived. These invisible exchanges—with the absentee artist, author, etc.—focus attention and offer pathways to insert ourselves as viewers into the work. Thus, to be arcane, hiding meaning layered in obscure distractions, presents intentional roadblocks. But I'd also argue that confusion reflects daily life: myriad choices, absurd situations, strange encounters, misunderstood communications, poor directions, unintelligible words, missed appointments, delayed schedules, etc. Now that's confusion!

As to dark humor, it is a vehicle I appreciate and look on as a boon to ironic prodding. Indeed what attracts me, for instance, to Samuel Beckett is the unconventional aspect of theater coming from two ash cans, or from a mouth behind a curtain exhorting an audience. What an idea! In Beckett, it is not always clear who speaks to whom or if a sensible dialogue is evolving, much less whether we comprehend how it's going to end up. Within his inscrutable passages, Beckett reveals living by some sort of preposterous skill—perhaps through endless repetition, maybe with the help of irascible queries, a ponderous progression of the abject.

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JR: Would I be right in presuming then that your desire to confuse the viewers, by the introduction of uncertainty, is also a desire to liberate their perceptions?

>>>>

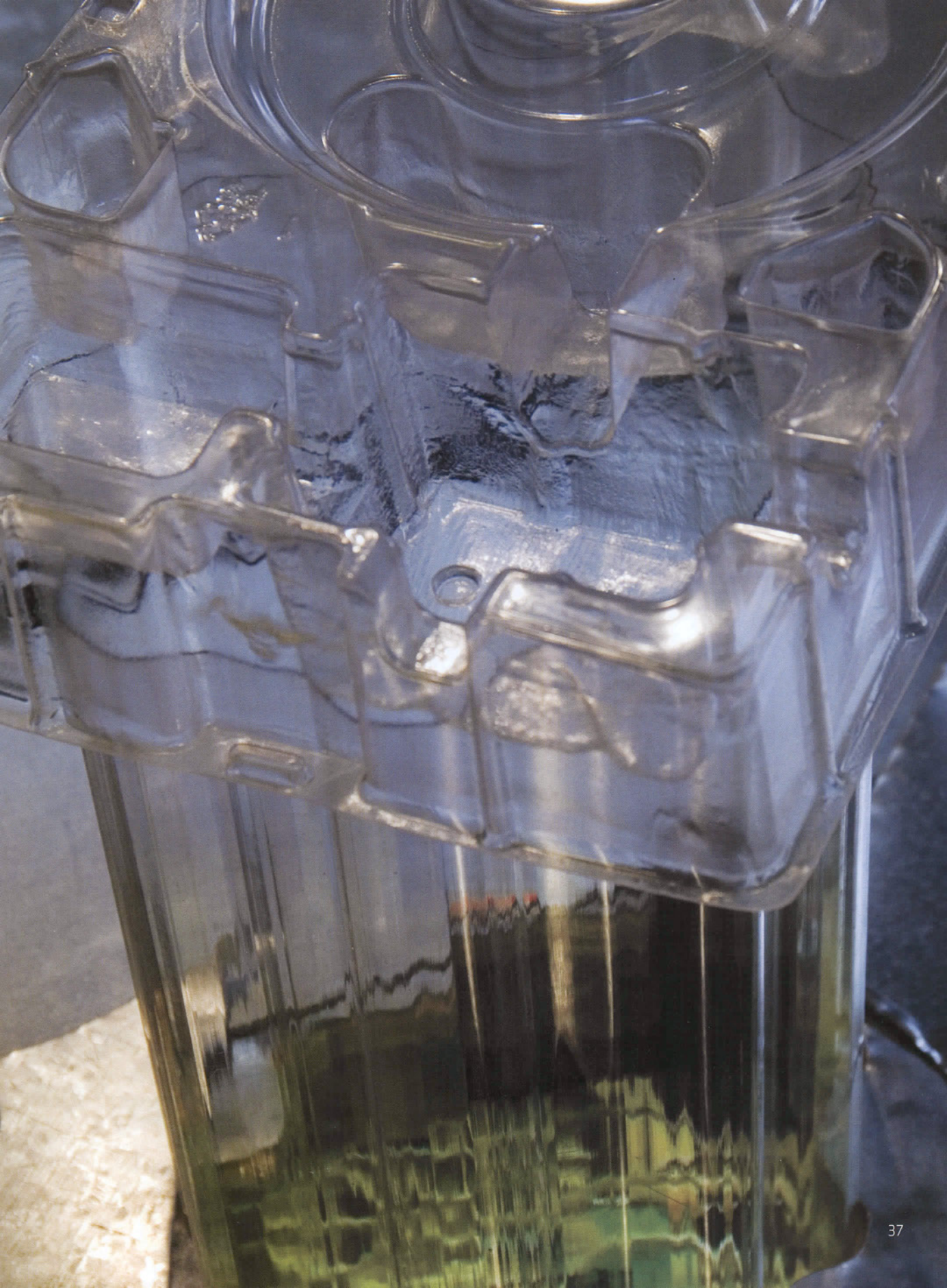
JT: Yes. We are hard-wired toward received perceptions, impressions, and readings of the world. I prefer a strategy of de-familiarization (or disruption) that creates the possibility of new meanings. No doubt the installation gravitates toward the familiar, but it remains inexplicable. It may be that uncertainty liberates perception from immediate judgment, from knee-jerk reactions.

>>>

JR: Would you argue then that there is a moral or political proposition in your work or does this seem too assertive of a posture?

>>

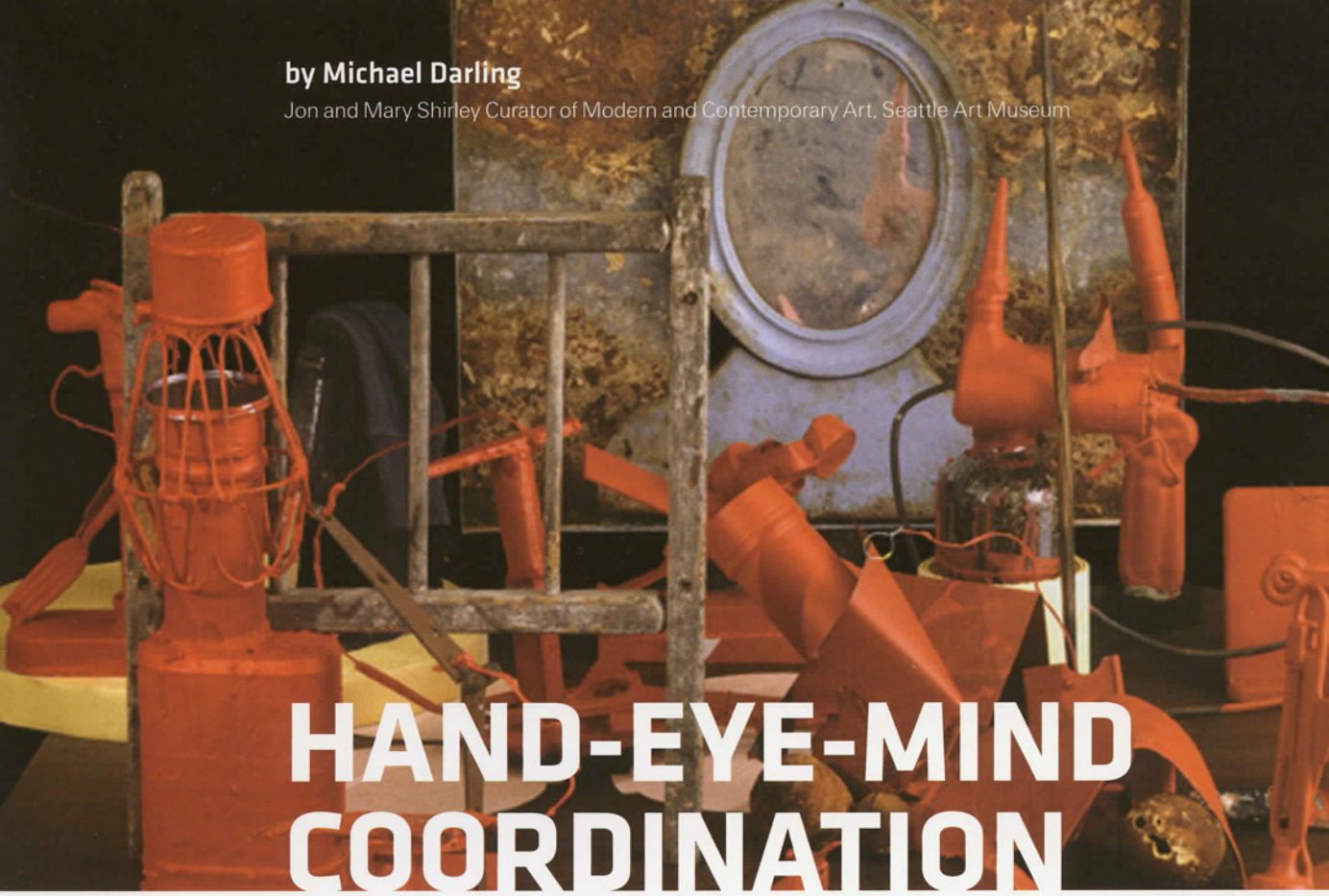
JT: I don't see that as being off-base, but posturing a moral/political stance is not my intention. That said, what I think about—how I conduct myself, what my work looks like—reveals my personal principles. But to trot out convictions, other than how ideas exist within the formal aspects of my own work, is disingenuous, unless my intentions were to send up hypocritical positions. That my work—and this particular installation—looks cranky, absurd, ill-fated, reflects on a fragile world. If a critical stance is revealed that addresses issues we are living with today, then I'm satisfied.





Born in 1935 in Indianapolis, Joan Tanner has lived in Southern California since the mid-1960s. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1957 and began her career as a painter. She has been consistently exhibiting her paintings, drawings, photographs, sculpture and site-specific installations since 1968. Tanner maintains a vigorous studio practice somewhat akin to a laboratory and is inspired by spatial contradictions, archetypal geometric forms and raw materials. Her work is held in a number of private and corporate collections and in the following public collections: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Special Collections; Harvard University, Houghton Library, Department of Printing and Graphics, Cambridge, Massachusetts; New York Public Library, Spencer Collection; Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; and Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California. Over the years, Tanner has been a visiting lecturer at the University of California Santa Barbara, Ohio University in Athens, Illinois State University at Normal, and most recently she was an artist-in-residence at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

For more information visit www.joantanner.com



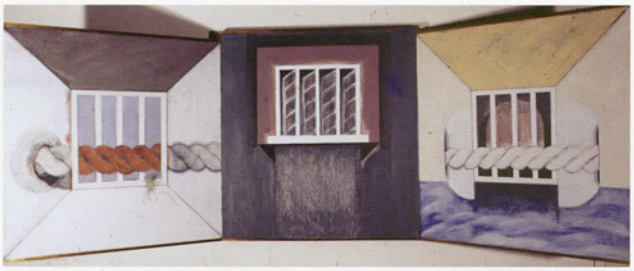
by Michael Darling
Jon and Mary Shirley Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seattle Art Museum

HAND-EYE-MIND COORDINATION

Viewers new to Joan Tanner's work might be tempted to draw any number of incorrect conclusions upon encountering her new installation, *On Tenderhooks* (2006). The roughshod construction, use of humble everyday detritus, and generally chaotic feel of the central sculptural cluster may lead visitors not versed in contemporary art to see it as a pile of junk, or inspire the age-old epithet: "My kid could have made that!"

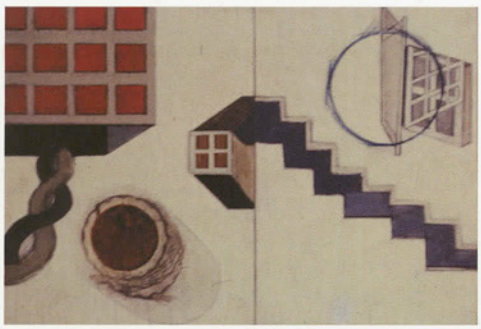
Viewers who are more regularly exposed to developments in new art would certainly have an easier time reconciling her fragmented composition with other art historical precedents, but might assume the verve and looseness must surely be the product of a newly minted MFA. Both groups would be surprised to know that this piece is the culmination of over 40 years of consistent artistic exploration by an artist who has been working and showing since the mid-1960s. One can only imagine that an audience who knew of Tanner's paintings from the 1960s and 1970s, but had lost touch with her work, might readily think that a different artist had made *On Tenderhooks*.

Closer examination and some nimble thinking reveal a surprising cohesion of ideas and forms, if not materials, throughout Tanner's output over this period. One of the constants is a searching interest in the connections and disconnections between perception and reality, and between the hand and the eye. These are not uncommon concerns for a visual artist, but are especially poignant for one who grew up in a household with a father who was a prominent ophthalmologist and whose younger brother also became a leading figure in that field. Thus a certain intellectual and scientific rigor permeates Tanner's work from the very beginning, albeit channeled through a different field of inquiry than that of her father and brother.



Window Triptych, 1965
Oil on linen
17 x 50 inches

Previous page
Red Tableau, 1999
Duratrans print
30 x 40 inches



Window Attitudes (or Early Window Study), 1965
Oil, pencil, glass, and carving on wood panel
14 x 21 inches
Collection: Don and Mickey Johnson, New York

In early paintings from the 1960s, one finds different orders of reason, knowledge and perception cohabitating in charged compositions. Signs and symbols of mathematical logic such as cubes, cylinders, and ziggurats conjure Euclidean geometry and evidence of brains in action, trying to make sense of the world. Window forms allude to vision and how visual data is framed and processed through contexts of scale, society, and culture. Coiled or braided motifs also proliferate in the early pictures, suggesting handwork as well as biological structures such as optic nerves or intestines.

Window Triptych (1965), for instance, features three panels "tied" together with a braid that pictorially penetrates the walls of the detached architectural spaces flanking the center, requiring a suspension of disbelief to make sense of the arrangement. More obvious hints of "Tenderhooks" already appear in such works as *Window Attitudes* (1965), from the same year where stepped forms appear as prophetic precursors to the giant totems installed in Otis' Ben Maltz Gallery.



First Window Landscape, 1965
Oil on linen
31 x 51 inches

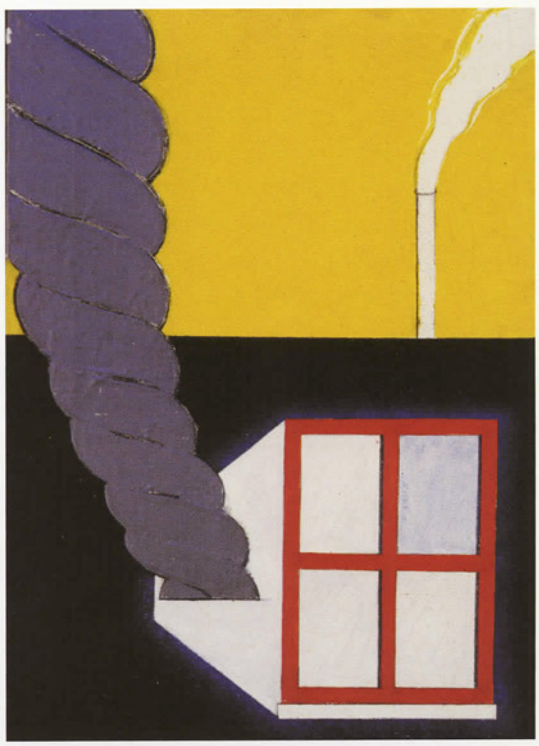
or *First Window Landscape* (1965), which pictures a whirling jumble of strange and familiar volumetric forms in a quasi-architectural space of uncertain scale. The thrusting and jutting dynamism of this painting is eerily similar to the energy of "Tenderhooks," as if it is a more tame study for the tumultuous room-sized installation to come some 41 years later.

The potential for sculptural development looms in these early works in much the same way that it does in the paintings of Tanner's contemporary, Eva Hesse. Hesse eventually broke free from the x/y axis that ruled her own work during this same period as evidenced in a piece such as *Tomorrow's Apples (5 in White)* (1965), but, it is worth noting the common usage of coiled forms and windows in the two artists' work at the time. Unlike the late Hesse, who at this time was just on the cusp of making more of a name for herself in sculpture than in painting, Tanner continued with increasingly ambitious and expressive efforts on canvas throughout the later 1960s, 1970s and 1980s before making the leap to truly three-dimensional work in the mid-1980s. An ambitious painting such as *Grey Tube* (1967–68), again utilizing a powerfully exertive braided form that is as suggestively mechanical as biological in its Leger-like modeling, brought her ever closer to architectural renderings as vehicles that explore the mysteries of vision and mental computation.

As her paintings progressed, she used architectural figures increasingly to define problems of perception, allowing motifs from buildings to define space, set



Grey Tube, 1967-68
Oil on linen
88 x 160 inches
(Sections: 72 x 72; 72 x 16; 24 x 79 inches)



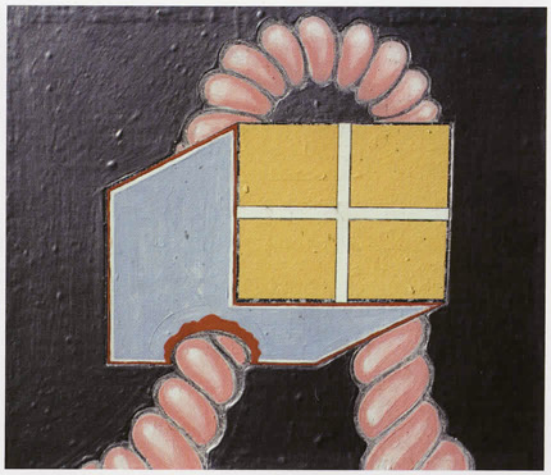
Coil and Stack
(or Silver Cord Entering Window Box), 1969
Oil on linen
18 x 13 inches
Collection: Phyllis Plous/Gift to
Ruth Shaffner Collection, University Art Museum,
University of California, Santa Barbara

scale, and then work against it with irrational counter-proposals. Incredible paintings such as *Coil & Stack* (1969) invoked an early master of this kind of composition—DeChirico—in its mysterious smokestack, while others from this period such as *Pink Cord Entry* (1969) and *A Strong Cord at Work* (1969) are perhaps closest in feeling to avant-garde design projects from contemporaneous firms like Archigram or Superstudio.

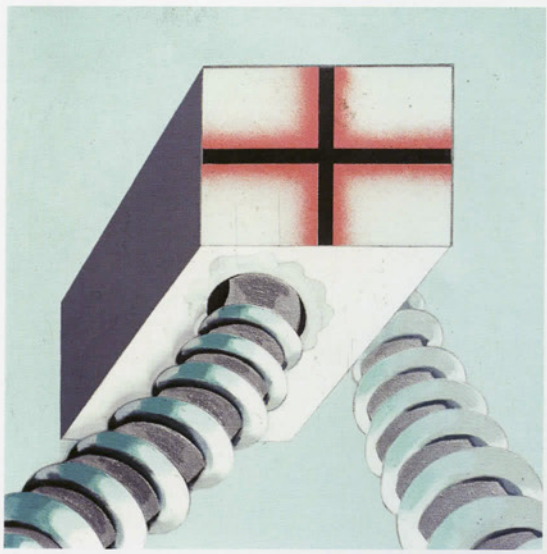
Moving into the 1970s and beyond, works such as *Red Center White Shard* (1977), *Three/Some* (1982) or *Architectural Notations* (1983) forced the viewer to reconcile distinct elements distributed across the canvas in such a way to invite comparison and contrast. In the latter, for instance, three different types of form and knowledge vie for legitimacy: abstract geometry as embodied by a pyramid, practical know-how as seen in a Roman colonnade, and intuition or the subconscious as conjured in a lyrical non-representational shape.

This sort of visual value judgment is crucial to understanding *On Tenderhooks*, because in the new work Tanner promiscuously counterposes refined but neutral craftsmanship, evidence of artistic intervention, and seemingly random decay to prompt different ways of looking and seeing. If one studies it closely enough, *On Tenderhooks* becomes less and less chaotic and more and more composed, cataloguing a range of gestures, actions, compositions, and possibilities.

DeChirico's metaphysical landscapes come to mind again when viewing *On Tenderhooks* in that the large, stepped forms, which approach architecture in scale,



Pink Cord Entry, 1969
Oil on linen
15 x 17 inches



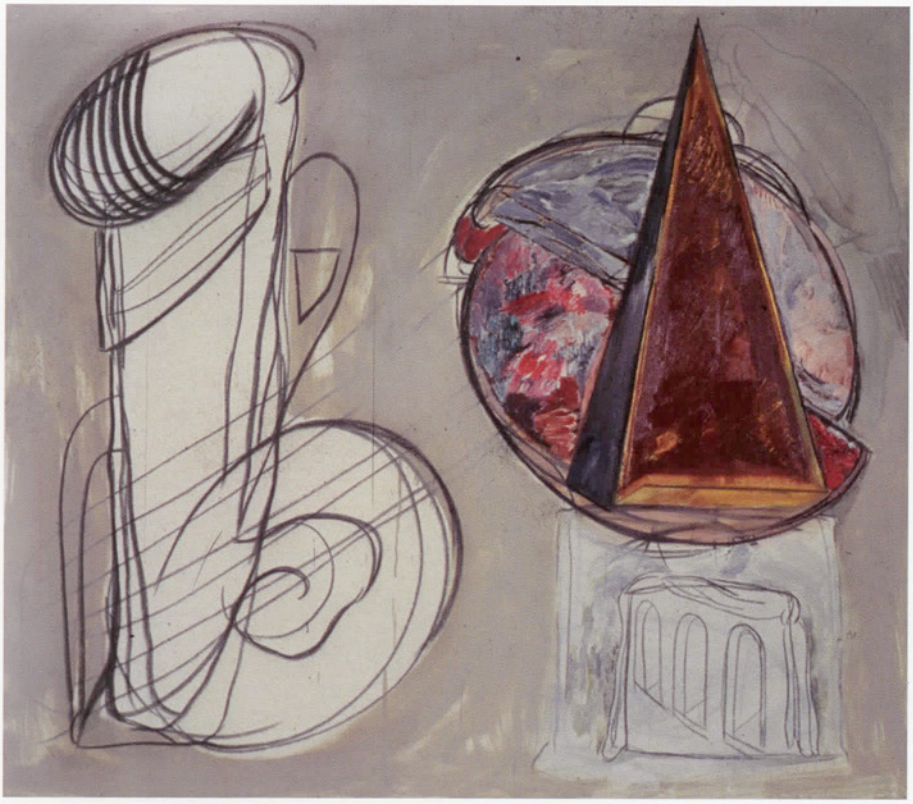
A Strong Cord at Work, 1969
Oil on canvas
18 x 18 x 5 inches



Red Center White Shard, 1977
Oil on canvas
60 x 72 inches

help to set off the much less rational action taking place in the center of the gallery. Like one of his famed piazzas translated to three dimensions and environmental scale, *On Tenderhooks* sets the stage for an exploration of alternative modes of perception, with the wild central composition becoming Tanner's own Ariadne.

This kind of pictorial and mental space was first pushed to three dimensions in pieces from the mid-1980s such as *Beckett's Trance* (1985) that took the form of tabletop or pedestal-based accumulations of towers and stepped forms but was perhaps most pointedly announced in *Art Sector* (1990). In this work, a canvas was laid flat and encrusted around the edges with extinguished paint tubes while a minaret of coiled canvas



Architectural Notations, 1983
Oil on canvas
53 x 46 inches
Collection: Wayne McCall and Penny Mast McCall, Santa Barbara, CA



Three/Some, 1982 (destroyed)
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches

shot up from the middle of the square. Not only did this work signal Tanner's abandonment of traditional painting by taking the canvas off the wall and ceremonially laying to rest her tubes of paint, but it also ushered in a new era of material and categorical freedom outside of painting that has sustained her to the present day.

One fascinating aspect of Tanner's work from the 1990s that had direct relevance to the current installation is the emergence of photography in her practice. Using found and fabricated materials in addition to her own body, she staged captivating images for the camera that returned to territory similar to that covered in her earlier paintings.

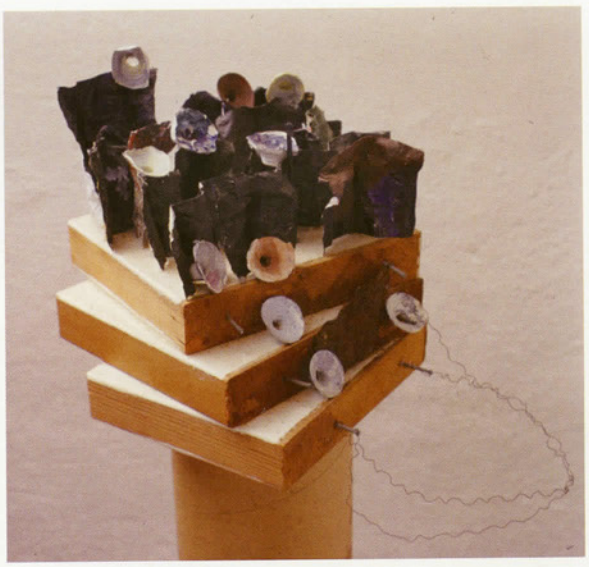
Sometimes contrasting forms are paired for comparative study, and objects with varying levels of opacity test and exercise the eye. Funny scenarios with hands protruding into a stage set from circular holes re-enact some of the discourse of early works such as

Window Triptych (1965), where the pure geometry of colored balls is matched with the imperfect and unique reality of the human form. Other shapes and compositions found in *On Tenderhooks* also appear in the photo pieces, such as stacks, towers, and funnels; grounding this new work on familiar footing and again proving that it comes from deep within her oeuvre.

These towers and funnels could also be characterized as rods and cones, two of the basic building blocks of the structure of the eye. *On Tenderhooks* is littered with them, and they come in both clear and opaque forms, again inviting comparison and distinction, and privileging active looking. The clear forms are usually made from translucent plastic, another material that emerged in Tanner's work in the 1990s, and which, once one looks past its often prosaic roots in commercial packaging, invites biological meta phors of membranes, vessels, and reservoirs.

Her use of Blister-Pac, for instance, often serves as see-through containers for loose and vulnerable materials in much the same way that organs or even eyes are tenuously held together. Sometimes, both because of their lack of cultural value and their near invisibility, the shadows they cast on the walls are more noticeable than the containers themselves. That teetering state on the edge of vision and perception is Tanner's preferred place in which to operate.

The photos of sculptural groupings also revive the frame and the window from her earliest work, putting very fixed boundaries around a situation and forcing a view that the unbounded eye would have a hard time finding on its own. A range of tonality, various kinds of pictorial space, and shifts of scale are found in these photo-



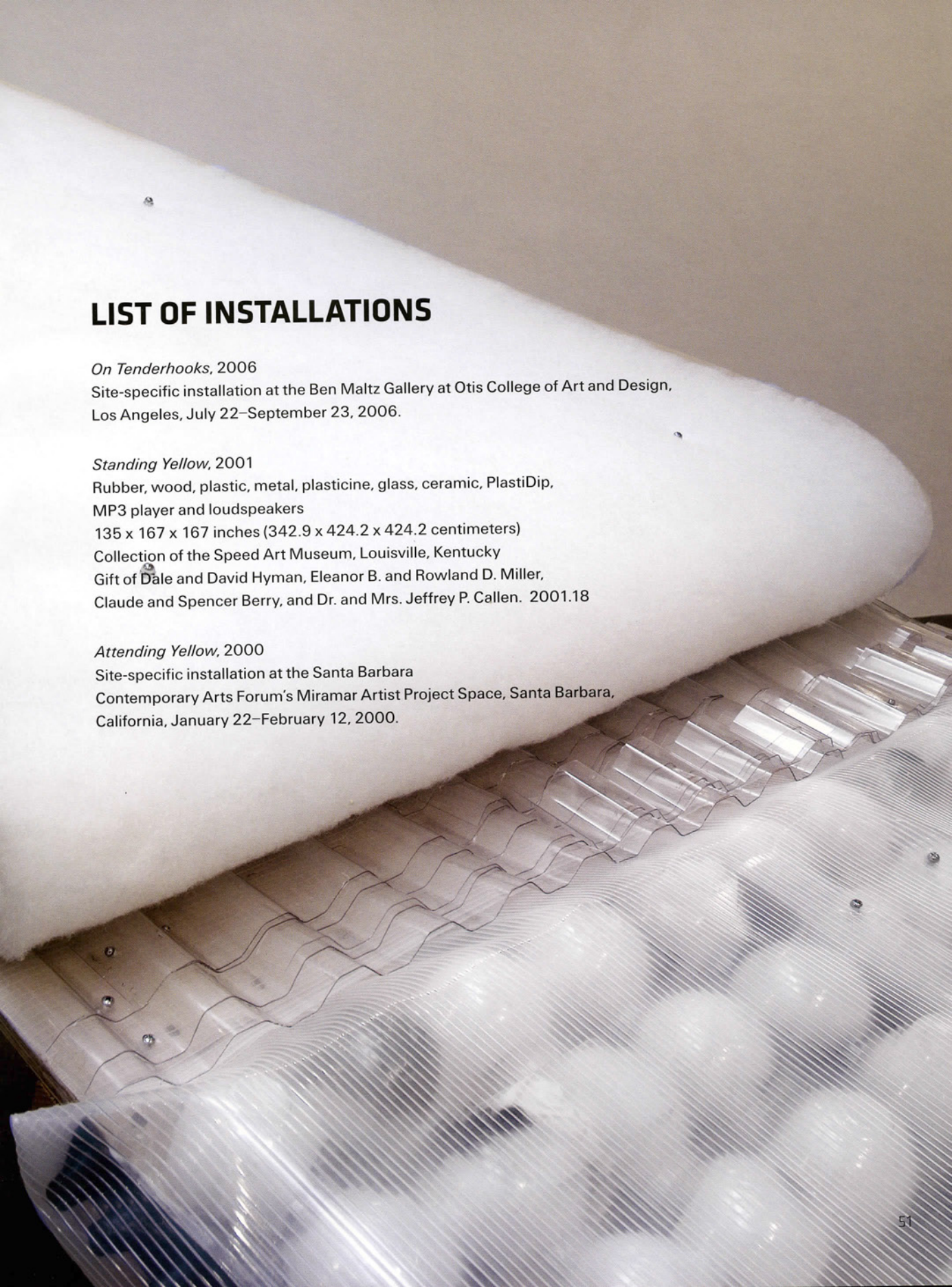
Beckett's Trance, 1985
Wood, wire, glue, splayed and dried oil paint tubes
16 x 12 x 11 inches



Art Sector, 1990
Paint on plywood panel, charcoal drawing on canvas, dried paint scrapings, splayed oil paint tubes, canvas coils with oil pastel, and cardboard tube base
60 x 60 x 45 inches

graphs just as they were found in her paintings, while it is much more difficult to discern the very same qualities when in the presence of the sculptural subject. Tanner has also trained the camera on selected sections within *On Tenderhooks* and produced mesmerizing views that are tempting to call "painterly" in their soft forms, eerie light, and general abstraction. The disjunctions and connections between the two formats, even though their sources are exactly the same, provoke the questions that have sustained the artist for so many years.

As someone who has been privileged to spend time in Tanner's studio over the years, looking at older works as well as the always-developing newer pieces, *On Tenderhooks* comes as no surprise. It is the logical outcome for an artist who is constantly searching, always intellectually inquisitive, and never interested in sitting on her artistic laurels. Tracing her work from the 1960s through the 1980s, one could very easily imagine her continuing on within the traditional boundaries of oil on canvas, but that would be to neglect the restless experimentation that has always characterized her practice. This ceaseless inquiry has pushed her work into other media and other methods during the past 20 years. While this trajectory may not have made for the most easily understood or appreciated career development, it has certainly made for an oeuvre that is more challenging and ultimately more satisfying in the long run. And as far as I can see, she is not about to give up that quest anytime soon.



LIST OF INSTALLATIONS

On Tenderhooks, 2006
Site-specific installation at the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, July 22–September 23, 2006.

Standing Yellow, 2001
Rubber, wood, plastic, metal, plasticine, glass, ceramic, PlastiDip, MP3 player and loudspeakers
135 x 167 x 167 inches (342.9 x 424.2 x 424.2 centimeters)
Collection of the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky
Gift of Dale and David Hyman, Eleanor B. and Rowland D. Miller, Claude and Spencer Berry, and Dr. and Mrs. Jeffrey P. Callen. 2001.18

Attending Yellow, 2000
Site-specific installation at the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum's Miramar Artist Project Space, Santa Barbara, California, January 22–February 12, 2000.

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THANK YOU

This exhibition and publication would not have been possible without the generous support from the following foundations and individuals:

Pasadena Art Alliance
Ruth and John Ackerman
Juan Carlos Alvarez
Gera Ayala
Bob DeBris
Barry and Jo Berkus
Susan Bower
Ginny Brush and Mary Bartoli
Michael Darling
Julia Ford
Ann and Robert Diener
Susan Jørgensen and Alice Gillaroo
Mary and Robert Looker
Lillian and Jon Lovelace
Penny and Wayne McCall
Marc Meredith
Ann Morris
Gail Pierce O'Brien
Elizabeth and Leon Olson
Helen Pashgian
Merrily Peebles and Paul Roberts
Frances and Keith Puccinelli
Joanne and Brian Rapp
Margi Reeve
Julien Robson
Richard and Cissy Ross
Anne Swett
Andrew and Laura Tanner Swinand
Speed Art Museum



OTIS Otis College of Art and Design
BEN MALTZ GALLERY

This book has been published in conjunction with the exhibition *Joan Tanner: On Tenderhooks*, curated by Meg Linton and presented at the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design July 22–September 23, 2006. Additional funding was generously provided by the Pasadena Art Alliance and the following individuals: Ruth and John Ackerman, Jo and Barry Berkus, Susan Bower, Ginny Brush and Mary Bartoli, Ann and Robert Diener, Susan Jørgensen and Alice Gillaroo, Mary and Robert Looker, Lillian and Jon Lovelace, Ann Morris, Gail Pierce O'Brien, Elizabeth and Leon Olson, Helen Pashgian, Merrily Peebles and Paul Roberts, Frances and Keith Puccinelli, Joanne and Brian Rapp, Richard and Cissy Ross, and Andrew and Laura Tanner Swinand.

ISBN 0-930209-12-5

Photographer: Wayne McCall
Catalogue Designer: Anne Swett
Printer: Ventura Printing, Printed in an edition of 2000

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