

Attachment-4/9/99

Exhibitions & Acquisitions Committee Meeting—April 13, 1999

Judith Shea

American, born 1948

*Mid-Life Venus (Inside Venus)*, 1991

Cast bronze and fabric, unique

84" high X 19 ¼" wide X 19" deep

Source: John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco

Museum price: \$65,000

Contemporary American sculptor Judith Shea came of age artistically in the late 1970s, helping to define a new aesthetic direction called New Image. Along with other New Imagists, she played a significant role in reviving figuration and bringing content back into art. Living and working in New York, Shea created a sensation with her bronze and iron casts of articles of clothing that maintained the elegant simplicity of 1960s and 1970s Minimalism while reintroducing the human figure. A student of fashion before devoting herself to sculpture, she enjoyed early recognition for her commanding, sometimes haunting, figures whose gestures and expressions suggest open-ended narratives.

In 1983, when Shea traveled to Greece, she was drawn to the archaic and classical sculpture she saw there. "In classical sculpture...I found a whole vocabulary of formal compositions of figures, most strikingly in pedimental sculptures. I couldn't get over the integration of forms, both figural and architectural, with story and emotion..." While the issues of figuration and abstraction remained paramount to Shea, she began to focus on the connections, as well as the tensions, between the contemporary and the antique. Based on one of the central icons in Western art, *Mid-Life Venus*, 1991, is among the most important works by the artist to emerge from this pivotal exploration. It is a dramatic exercise in contrast, with the classically-inspired, life-size figure holding a silky white dress that drapes onto the floor and terminates as an unfurled bolt of fabric. This striking visual juxtaposition is critical to the work's symbolism; if Shea's meaning is intentionally ambiguous, part of it derives from her concern for classical ideals and concepts of beauty as they apply contemporarily.

Shea's *Mid-Life Venus* meets a stated board, directorial and curatorial objective to acquire the best examples of significant contemporary art that will substantially enhance the Museum's 20<sup>th</sup>-century collection. Important, visually exciting, and intellectually challenging, this key work by Shea greatly enriches our collection of contemporary American sculpture, while providing an important link to the institution's classical antiquities.

*Selected One-Person Museum Exhibitions and Public Commissions:*

1995 *The Other Monument*, Public Art Fund Inc., Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York

1994 Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

1994 Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire

1992 Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York

1990 National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

1989 Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

1988 San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art

1986 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia

# Judith Shea

*Lynda Forsha*

La Jolla Museum of  
Contemporary Art

Useful background  
to Shea's motivations/  
inspirations.

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# JUDITH SHEA

*Lynda Forsha*

The work of Judith Shea occupies a unique niche in the realm of significant sculpture. With the resurgence of figurative art in the mid-seventies, Shea's work alone is defined by an investigation of clothing—clothing both as sculptural object and as surrogate for human form.

As is apparent from her work, Shea's fascination with articles of dress is finely honed, and the resulting works of art are elegant and archetypal in form and in purpose. This is clothing that sheathes the body and derives sculpturally from the figure in a manner that is timeless and free of the cosmetic extravagance of fashion or ornamentation.

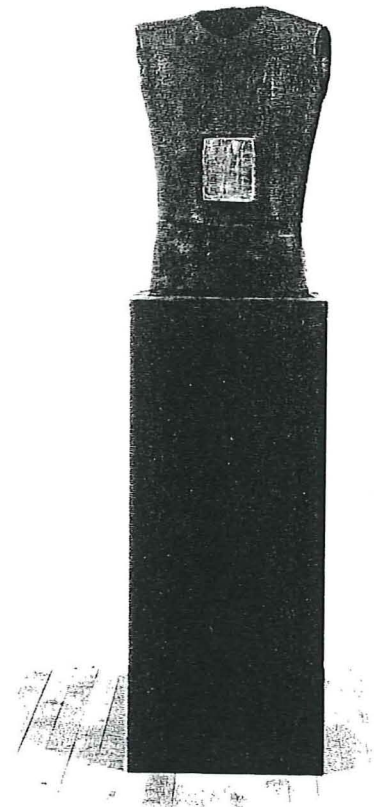
Shea's formal strategy is a synthesis of the minimalist conception of "essential form" combined with the fluid and organic nature of cloth. The subtle, compound masses that clothing delineates when draped or wrapped about the human body are sculpturally reviewed through the legacy of reductivist abstraction. Her work has evolved during the past decade from wall hangings—nearly flat, graphic silhouettes concerned almost entirely with their rectilinear construction—to the most recent free-standing pieces which combine formal and iconographic strategies that seek to reconcile reductivist and classical notions of form and beauty.

Obsessed with dressmaking and design from an early age, Shea attended Parsons School of Design with the idea of becoming a fashion designer. However, by the late sixties, fashion had abandoned strict structural concerns in favor of more cosmetic issues. To her additional dismay, she discovered through subsequent job experience that designers rarely enjoyed the kind of hands-on process of constructing a garment.<sup>1</sup>

Seeing the promise of the fashion industry fade, she returned to Parsons to study art and received her B.F.A. in 1975. Through a summer residency at Artpark in 1974, Shea became clearly aware of her kinship with other artists who were similarly interested in investigating structural issues, and began to clarify her own stake in the aesthetic and conceptual milieu of that time.

Shea's first widely exhibited works date from the mid-seventies following the Artpark summer. These "clothing constructions" consist of fabric sections sewn together to create the appearance of various articles of clothing. The individual works are installed flat against the wall, and hung primarily from a single horizontal dowel. This two-dimensional silhouette evokes the paper templates of pattern pieces prior to construction. (A shirt, for instance, might be divided into front-and-back, left-and-right panels, along with adjoining collars or sleeves. An abstracted inventory of a garment, itself an abstracted variant of the body part it serves to cover.)

Shea began the development of each "construction" with the fabric, considering its physical and associative qualities, and allowing



*New Man, 1986*  
bronze  
26" x 16" x 12"

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shape and character to lead her to an image of the type of garment that would best elaborate the particular quality of the material.

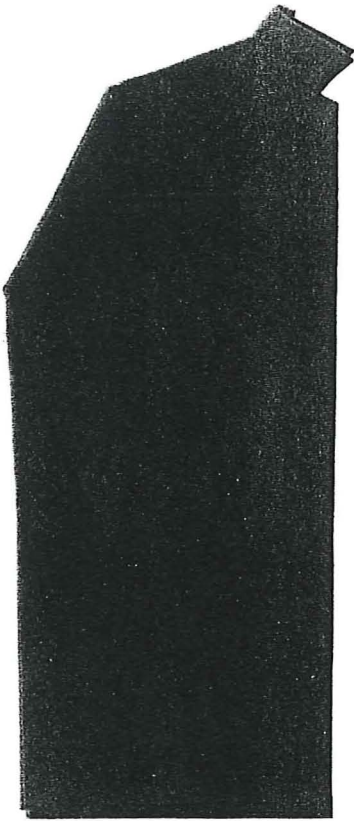
As very shallow wall works (bas-reliefs) these pieces equivocate between painting and sculpture. At once “shaped-canvas” and objects of literal, quasi-functional import, they play off both the aesthetics of two-dimensional abstraction and the sculptural potential of “occupied” garments.

Additionally, these cloth sculptures serve to bridge the gap between art and craft/design. While fabric, specifically canvas, is the normal ground for mainstream painting, cloth as pure material ironically has endured the tainted status of a “craft” medium. Yet Shea’s quality of intention catapults this work well beyond the “handsome object” mentality of much crafts-related work.

Though works from this period all share a clear constructivist orientation, it is not entirely at the expense of referential imagery. With great economy of means, Shea has managed to evoke a surprising variety of historic and cultural moments from pop clothing in *Bop, I Like Ike*, and *The Dobe*, to haute couture in *Inaugural Ball*, all 1980.

Alternately sardonic and sympathetic, these references generate a level of content wholly beyond the dispassionate purity of doctrinaire minimalism. If the minimalist’s vision of the sublime was an ascetic one, Shea’s early work develops a more synthetic and ultimately figurative vision, which is no less grounded in the Aristotelian notion of “universal form” than that of the minimalists.

3 Square Shirts, 1977, which was made at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, exhibits the juxtaposition of geometrically printed fabric with that of clothing construction. White yardage is printed in solid primary colors that occupy the square dimensions of the interior of the silk-screen frame. These colored squares abut, forming crisp edges between one color region and another, while occasionally and quite deliberately, the white, unprinted fabric appears as a narrow strip between or around the color masses. The fabric is cut into four pieces for each “construction.” The pieces for the torso, collar, and armpit gusset are square, hence the title of the work. The piece for the sleeve is rectangular. Combined, the four pieces form a vertical “peasant” shirt which appears to have been folded back upon itself longitudinally. In presenting five color pattern combinations from a series and system that potentially extends to dozens of permutations, Shea suggests the range of possibilities for combining color structure and shirt construction. The systematic combination of elementary geometric form and primary color extends a rigorous modernist tradition that includes such artists as Piet Mondrian to Ellsworth Kelly and Sol Lewitt. Yet these brilliant fabric pieces even more vividly evoke the



*I Like Ike*, 1980  
canvas  
44" x 19" x 2"  
Collection of Miani Johnson,  
New York City

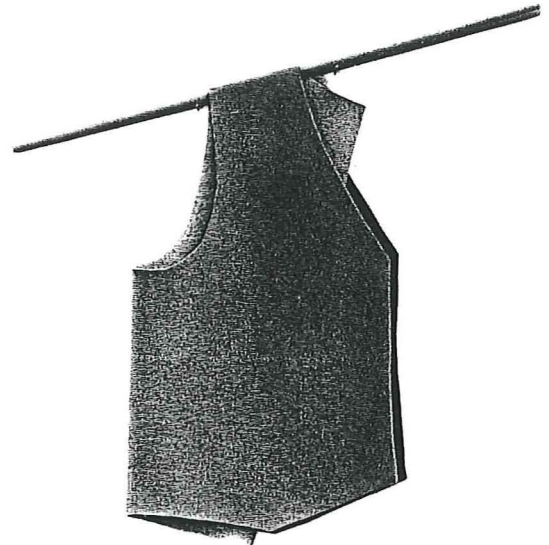
chromatic geometry of flags, specifically the colorful vocabulary of nautical signal pennants.

During the late seventies, Shea embarked on a series of wholly three-dimensional pieces made with wire mesh and sheet metal. While these works foreshadow the fully volumetric cast pieces of the eighties, Shea concluded that in constructing with sheet metal she was unable to mimic the suppleness of cloth and, ultimately, the dynamic subtlety of human gesture.

In *Checked Pants*, 1977-78, cloth-like undulations are achieved through the manipulation of gridded wire mesh, a pliable yet rigid material. The grid becomes a topological map of the uneven surface contour, while the transparent properties of the mesh material permit a simultaneous and superimposed pant reading front and back - inside and outside. The whimsical title loads the gridded mesh with yet another message — the reminder of the actual woven pattern of the imagined fabric. A wonderful irony emerges between the rigorous reference to the Agnes Martin/Sol Lewitt minimal grid and the vernacular association of plaid fabric never missing from the links.

By 1980, Shea began using heavier materials, industrial felt, cast iron, etc., and her wall constructions became less flacid, more volumetric. Some pieces employ garment construction techniques such as gathered folds, darts, and pleats to cause the front face of the “garment” to emerge from the wall. Dark, often monochromatic color strategies tend to reinforce a more starkly sculptural reading of these pieces. Through the specific identity of each piece, the issue of gender becomes clearer, with curves and protrusions characterizing female apparel, and rectilinear contours defining more masculine tailoring. The dowels, once an invisible support element, are now used as a deliberate formal element to create a linear counterpoint to the mass of the clothing shape, and to echo the contour of the top edge of the “garment” by extending its curve or angle. Like *Checked Pants*, these works are often titled to emphasize cultural associations that belie their rather severe formal presence.

*B-Vest*, 1981, exemplifies the somber and more sculptural nature of this period. It was designed in partnership and in counterpoint to *Ahab*, 1981. Both works are half-pieces of clothing made from dark felt with the natural color of the felt on one side and colored felt (silk-screened) on the inside. While *Ahab*'s references are masculine—a trouser leg, phallic-shaped, alone and defiant both in title and posture—*B-Vest* registers a calmer and more covert attitude. Formally it is composed of a series of arched contours that in silhouette and relief delineate the female torso. The volume of its front panel is formed by the dart that also reads as the lone and poignant figure on an otherwise solid and continuous surface. The ochre “facade” largely



*O Kazimir*, 1981  
felt, paint, chalk, wooden dowel  
22" x 24" x 1/2"

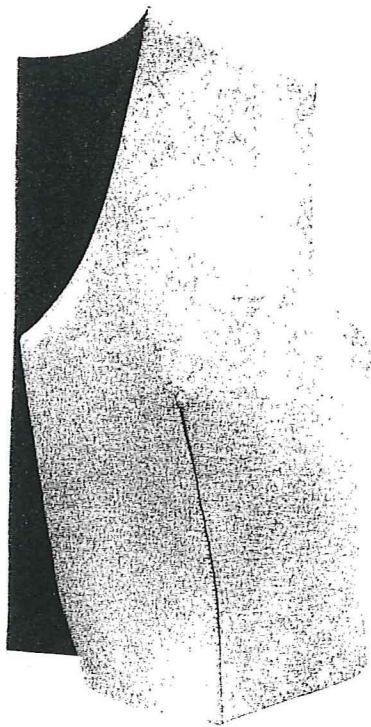
conceals and protects the dark, concave interior form of the piece which underscores *B-Vest's* brooding, impassive countenance. The name *B-Vest*, in typical Shea fashion, counters the mood of the piece by referencing the yellow and black coloration of a bumble bee.

While these constructions enjoy stronger sculptural characteristics than the earlier hanging work, the softness of the fabric placed limitations on Shea's ability to investigate increasingly volumetric forms, clothing filled-out and enlivened by the human occupant.

In 1981, while teaching a class in Medieval European Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Shea gained a working knowledge of early battle armor. Most armor on public exhibition is ceremonial, originally worn by royalty and high-ranking officers, and consequently adorned with ornamental embellishments. But the armor that Shea discovered was modest, straightforward, and above all, made for protection and mobility. Through these objects Shea began to see the possibility that cast metal would have as a rigid material with which to more fully investigate shape and gesture in three-dimensional space.

In 1982, Shea produced *Crusader*, one of her first cast pieces. As with those that followed, she began the work by constructing the form of the piece out of the same heavy industrial felts that had already been used. But now a mold was built around the felt form and molten iron was poured into it, burning away the felt and cooling in its place. Just as Shea's articles of clothing were beginning to stand for human form, so would the cast metal become a surrogate material for the original felt and wax model.

Process



*B-Vest*, 1981  
felt with textile paint  
20" x 15" x 3"

In *Crusader* one sees cast metal replicating the hammered metal and chain mail used in medieval armor. Here, Shea has ingeniously employed the longitudinal half-fragments of clothing to depict a slain soldier sunk into the mire of the battlefield. Though it is not significantly more complex in form than some of her earlier works, *Crusader* clearly references the figure and the human event *within* the "wrapper" of the clothing and, in so doing, the work announces not only a more volumetric means but, most importantly, a clearly assertive depiction of content in Shea's work.

Through the use of patina, which can be produced with the application of chemicals, Shea is able to give ancient and archaeological qualities to her cast work, qualities that reaffirm the rather timeless and archetypal reading of the forms themselves, placing their depiction into a removed historical context. This ability allowed Shea to pursue her long-standing interest in history in general. It also provided a powerful tool in her continued movement away from nonreferential construction towards a more personal, synthetic vision that could now

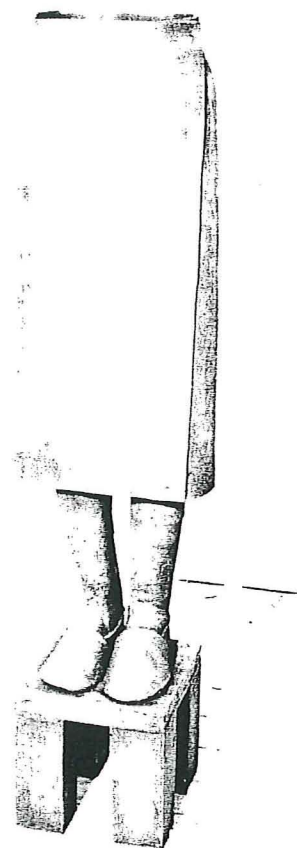
draw upon the history of figurative sculpture for content and inspiration.

As with the earlier work, these works through 1985 possess human-scale and are exhibited at a height that corresponds to the literal position they would occupy on a standing or sitting body. In some pieces this necessitated a base that would elevate the “body part” to the correct height. Seizing the opportunity to further enrich the formal complexity of the work, Shea designed the bases (and shelves) in counterpoint to the formal and expressive strategy of the figurative mass, serving much the same purpose as the dowels of the hanging constructions.

While most of Shea’s work during this period was cast, materials such as felt and wood were also used for their tactile and chromatic properties. The hollowed-out forms that constitute these works are, at once, substantial and delicate in demeanor, metaphors for both human sturdiness and frailty. Each is a representation of human gesture that is formed by the clothing of an everyman or everywoman and distilled to the clothing/body part that contains its essential spirit.

When such fragments are read as body parts rather than as clothing, the dismembered forms carry the surreal overtones of pieces of memory in search of context. They also allude to classical figurative sculpture in which often only the torso remains intact. It is this reference that Shea cultivates explicitly in subsequent work. Having dealt with a considerable variety of formal strategies through these works, Shea next set out to extend her vocabulary by producing works that were less monolithic and more environmentally charged. She accomplished this through the addition of a second figure. With an interaction between two human forms Shea was able to set up formal and physical dichotomies within a single piece, though she subsequently became concerned that such a format converted the figures into dramatic characters, a perceptual shift she was not interested in pursuing.

In 1983, Shea traveled to Greece. She found herself, for the first time, deeply drawn to archaic and classical Greek statuary, and saw a connection between the starkness of her own work and the distilled form of the Greek robes that clad many of those figures. She found an extensive vocabulary of human posture, particularly in pedimental reliefs that force allegorical groups of figures into a severe geometric shape. In this and other aspects of Greek architecture, Shea saw figurative and geometric elements combined, distilled, and formally reconciled. Such visceral discovery heightened her own resolve to connect classical and modern, figurative and geometric idioms within her own work.<sup>2</sup>



*Good Girl*, 1985  
bronze  
53" x 14" x 11"  
Collection of Linda and  
Ronald F. Daitz,  
New York City

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The work of the mid-eighties, all fully volumetric, tends to play pure geometric elements against figurative form. In some pieces—*Black Dress*, 1983, or *Good Girl*, 1985—the base both mimics and counters the form of the supported figure above. In others, such as *New Man* and *The Balance*, both 1986, the geometric volume interacts with the figure in a more specially metaphorical if open-ended manner.

As her work has evolved, gradually moving from purely syntactic to more semantic concerns, Shea has reconsidered the formal and historical significance of various periods constituting the vast tradition of figurative sculpture. While her recent pieces evoke a diversity of classical Greek, Oriental and medieval sources, all fit neatly within the spare formal elegance of the “classical” tradition.

To push her exploration one step further, Shea has more recently engaged in extracting new meaning from both the rather extravagant style of 19th-century European sculpture as well as ancient Egyptian statuary.

*The Balance* in particular elicits a wealth of interpretive possibilities of the relationship of the diminutive cube to the ancient robed, sage-like figure. Could this be the Greek mathematician Euclid, father of geometry, contemplating his offspring? Or perhaps it is a variation of the virgin and child tableaux with geometry achieving divine status? Shea more likely thought in terms of representing two traditions, that of classicism/figuration in relation to cubist driven modernism, and suggests here that the latter is necessarily the rather young offspring of the former — different, perhaps in formal strategy, but genetically linked, nonetheless.

It is this very connection of abstract and representational traditions that has always been at the contemplative heart of Shea’s work. With clothing as her guide and catalyst, Shea has navigated in a dozen short years from the relative straightjacket of minimalism to a body of recent work that, in its richness and breadth of meaning, has established Shea as a true heir to sculpture’s most ancient and durable tradition.

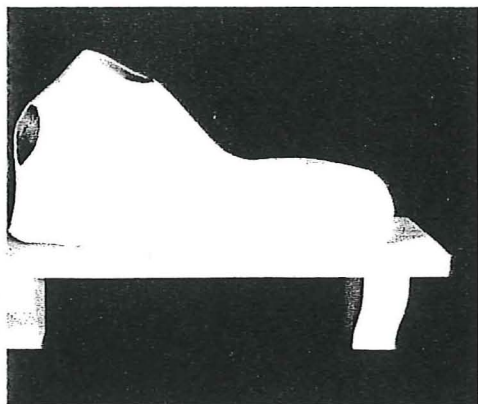
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#### NOTES

Information throughout this essay has been drawn from conversations with the artist in New York City on April 30, September 23 and September 25, 1987.

<sup>1</sup>Helen Raye, “Judith Shea.” In *Structure to Resemblance - Work by Eight American Sculptors*, (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1987), p.45.

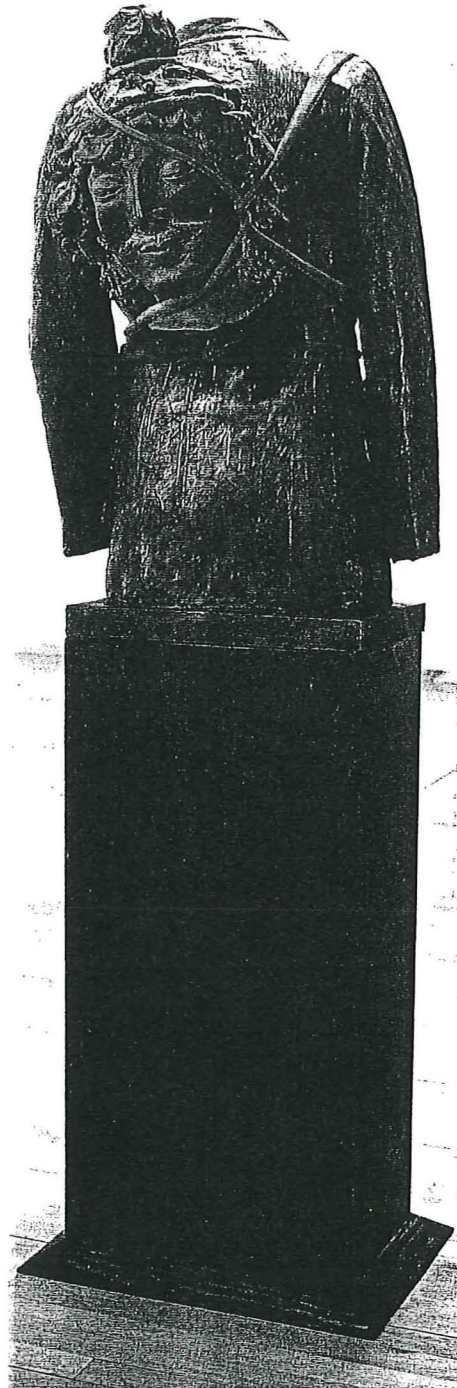
<sup>2</sup>Wade Saunders, “Talking Objects: Interviews with Ten Younger Sculptors,” *Art in America*, vol. 73, no. 11 (November 1985), p. 119.



*Shelf Piece*, 1983  
wool, felt, wax  
13" x 26" x 11"  
Collection of General Mills  
Corporation,  
Minneapolis, Minnesota



# Judith Shea



Some background  
+ quotes from  
the artist -

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HORIZONS

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art ■ February 24–April 23, 1989

Given her background as a clothing designer it is not surprising that the primary visual references for Judith Shea's sculpture should derive from the human figure and clothing. Her early works from the mid-1970s were made from fabric and quoted patterns used in the clothing design process. For Shea these geometric shapes functioned as abstract forms, "clothes as primary structures"<sup>1</sup> and linked her work to Minimalism, the prevailing aesthetic of that time.

Her work underwent a gradual transition in the succeeding years: from clothing functioning as abstract form to clothing functioning as human surrogate. Shea made three-dimensional reliefs of clothing forms such as dresses, shirts and bodices by stiffening the fabric with either Rhoplex or plaster, paste, paint and wax. This allowed the pieces to hold a curve or a wrinkle and become more gestural and expressive. In these works Shea successfully introduces a dialogue between abstraction and figuration.

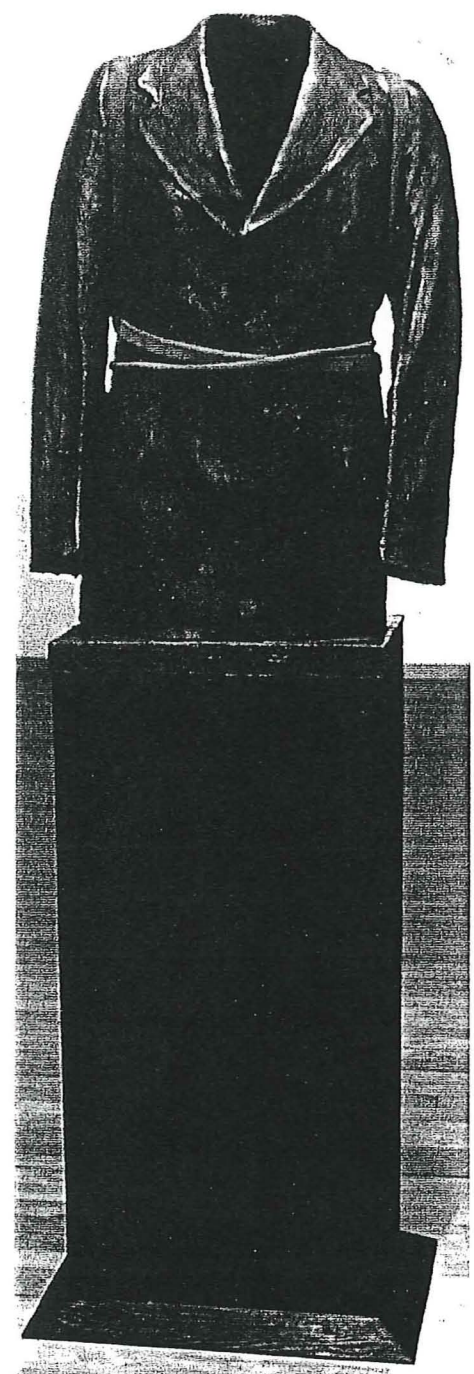
In 1981 Shea taught a class in Medieval European armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The experience was a pivotal one for her, opening her eyes to the possibilities of using cast metal for her own work.

She cast her first pieces of iron sculpture in 1982. (Later she would use bronze.) Fabric and clothing remained important to her thought process as well as to her working process since she modeled the original form from the heavy felt she already knew. Saturating the fabric with hot wax, she made the form by manipulating the hollow, pushing the shape out from the inside. The pieces were then cast using the lost wax technique, and during the process the original felt is lost. The memory of the felt and the clothing construction details remained, however; its texture was preserved by the metal, and even the seams were still discernible. Making her sculptures this way was important to Shea because she could construct the piece in an additive way, "building up from the inside out."<sup>2</sup>

Shea's bronze sculptures of the early 1980s depart from her strict minimalist vocabulary. Now the clothing forms take on a new sense of gesture and expression. The recent work, which is represented in this exhibition, shows Shea's continual evolution as an artist. While figuration and abstraction are still paramount issues for her, new influences have also introduced new issues. Shea traveled to Greece in 1983, and for the first time she felt drawn to the archaic and classical sculpture she saw there. She acknowledged affinities between the minimal nature of her own work and the reduced forms of the Greek sculpture. "In classical sculpture, particularly of the so-called Severe Style, I found a whole vocabulary of formal compositions of figures, most strikingly in pedimental sculptures. I couldn't get over the integration of forms, both figural and architectural, with story and

emotion. . . . And the cool severity of the forms, which dominated the spiritual aspects, seemed to make the work impacted and resonant."<sup>3</sup>

In two works from 1984 we see Shea integrating classical and modern as well as abstract and figurative ele-



Portrait of a Man

ments in her own work. In *Sphinx Relaxed* (1984), Shea has cast a bronze dress that serves as a substitute for a female in a semireclining position. She activates the uninhabited dress subtly; folds at the waist and below the knee, and the elevation of one shoulder lend the

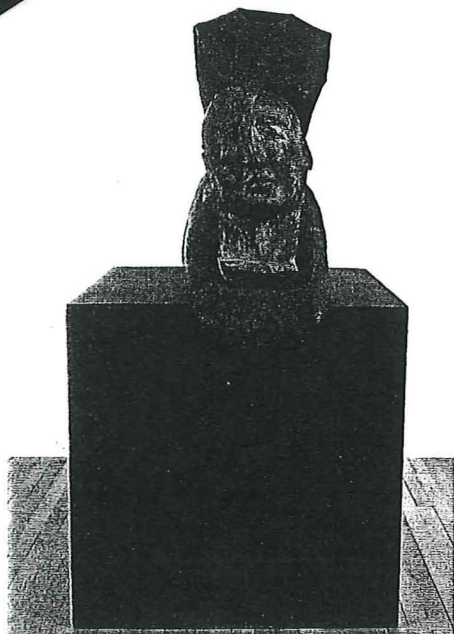
sculpture a more specific feeling. The title brings forth certain associations that are reinforced by the actual form: the pose of the dress recalls the formal and rigid posture of Egyptian figural sculptures. But Shea underscores the contemporary nature of the sculpture by seating the dress on a contemporary oak chair, thus inviting dialogue between the old and the new, the antique and the contemporary.

When Shea uses two figures in her sculpture, as in *For Mom* (1984), human relationships are at issue. A tiny, tawny colored baby dress nestles with a larger shape that evokes the lower female torso. The emotional level is high here, intensified by the differences in scale, color — the torso is rustically colored dark brown — and texture — the dress, although made of bronze, seems to be diaphanous, while the torso is weighty and coarse. Here Shea addresses the relationship between mother and child: the dependencies, shared emotions, need to protect and the need for protection.

Shea has been searching to extend her vocabulary for treating the figure and continues to be drawn to historical representations. While still involved with contemporary clothing as the impetus for certain forms, Shea now comfortably looks to earlier art as well. She continues to make her forms as she always has: working from the hollow. "I can not just model a figure in clay. There has to be a transformation process and that is why I hang on to the clothing. There is the presence of a transformation — something being not entirely one thing or another."

In her newest body of work we see her continuing to address her primary concerns: the tensions that emerge between abstraction and figuration and between the contemporary and the antique. In *Endless Model* (1988), for example, one of her most "totemic" pieces, Shea is dealing with the contrast of forms. The base, which is modeled after Brancusi's *Endless Column*, is architectural (or geometric) while the lower half of the female torso is organic. Both forms are incomplete, unresolved. In this work Shea is searching for the essence of the respective form and figure. As early as 1982 her cast sculptures were fragments rather than complete clothing forms. "The truncated clothing forms provided an essence — no extremities, no movement. It was a way to express the essence of the human presence."

In *Different Destiny* (1988), Shea looked to a sculpture of the Egyptian female pharaoh, Hetshepsut, at the Metropolitan Museum, for her model. "Old art is broken. I don't have to make choices where to break it." Originally cast in bronze, Shea made the piece again in wood to intimate, by means of a mottled surface, an ancient quality to the piece. The hieratic pose of the seated figure speaks to an earlier time as well. By contrast the modern felt coat folded and draped over the back of the seat alludes to the present, inviting interpretation. Funereal in



*Between Thought and Feeling*

its matte blackness, Shea may be suggesting that the coat is the contemporary viewer and that its very specific placement represents his or her involvement with art.

Shea further explores the figurative tradition of sculpture in *Between Thought and Feeling* (1988) by introducing a bronze sculpture of a male head. A bronze dress is seated on a large cast stone cube holding in its lap a larger-than-life male bust with Hellenistic features. The artist seeks a balance between the pure, logical geometry of the minimalist cube and the poignant and emotional face which was modeled after photographs of busts of Alexander the Great. Shea sees herself as the female here, functioning as both the "divider," or female, and as a force that melds the two entities together.

For Shea each element in her work "represents a particular time frame and corresponding aesthetic."<sup>4</sup> In *Portrait of a Man* (1988), for example, Shea is referring to the late twentieth century. She sees the jacket as a "prep school" jacket that represents a "western man in training, or growing up, but not quite there yet." There is a delicateness conveyed, a feminine aspect in the slight tapering at the waist that suggests that the young man is not totally trained. Her addition of a slight *contrapposto* also reinforces this gentleness. "I am stressing several things here: the youthfulness, not totally buying the whole thing yet, not being hardened, not being beyond questioning."<sup>5</sup> The head was modeled from three sculptures, one from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and two from the Metropolitan Museum, each a bodhisattva from Gandhara, now Pakistan. Shea strapped the cast stone head to the back of the youth to suggest the burden of a religious or spiritual principle. "This is a young man growing up to live pragmatically in the

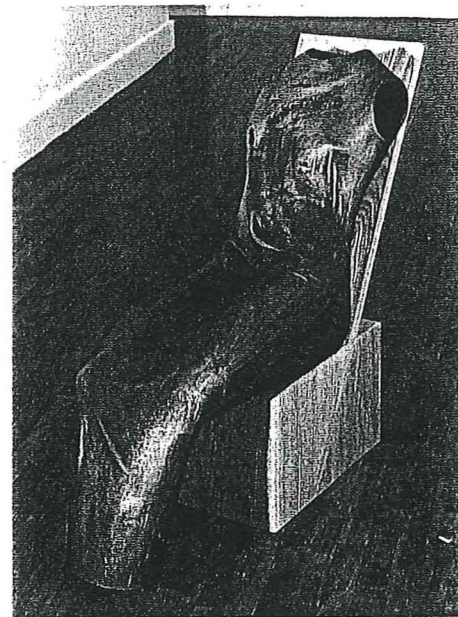


*For Mom*

world, but there are the spiritual questions, whether the form it takes is art or religion or philosophy. . . . That's why I show this Asian head, rather than a classical head, because a classical head could be a hero as opposed to a god. So this is clearly a Buddha diety. It's about a religious or spiritual ideal."

In the past Shea has not exhibited her drawings with her sculptures. The six drawings in this exhibition, which date from 1983 to 1989, were the testing grounds for her newest ideas. They are spare, elegant and sensuous, and seeing them with the sculptures enhances our understanding of the three dimensional work. The very nature of the casting process removes, to some degree, the touch of the artist's hand. In the drawings we are afforded an intimate view of Shea's hand at work, describing nuances that are later translated into statements in her large-scale sculptures. In the *New Studio* (1989), for example, Shea, as many artists before her have, presents a view of the works in her studio. She pauses to evaluate her most recent ideas and considers them in the context of her past work. Some of the details, rendered here so exquisitely, will undoubtedly appear in future sculptures. In *Untitled* (1989), she juxtaposes a minimally described jacket with a richly articulated classical nude, suggesting that there is an unusual consistency in her work that allows for evolution and reflection simultaneously. In the drawings, as in her sculpture, Judith Shea's commitment to the human figure and clothing remains constant and continues to enable her to explore the relationships between abstraction and figuration, and the old and the new, in her work.

DEBORAH EMONT SCOTT  
Sanders Sosland Curator  
of Twentieth-Century Art



*Sphinx Relaxed*

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Martin Friedman, et al., *Sculpture Inside Outside* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 203.
2. Unless otherwise noted all quotations are from conversations with the artist, October 1988 and February 1989.
3. Quoted in Wade Saunders, "Talking Objects: Interviews with Ten Younger Sculptors," *Art in America* 73 (November 1985): 135.
4. Dominique Nahas, et al., *Figures Form and Fiction* (Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1988), 42.
5. *Ibid.*, p 43.

# Art in America

November 1975 \$4.75

Special Section: Interviews with Young Sculptors / Hockney's Stage Designs  
Ratcliff on Caravaggio / Report from Moscow: Soviet Art Today

Interview w/ the  
artist - she discusses  
her early work +  
transition into later.  
Influence of history +  
antiquity as well as  
Pattern + Decoration  
movement.



## Judith Shea

Born 1948, Philadelphia. Education: Parsons School of Design, BFA in Fashion Design, 1969; Parsons School of Design, BFA 1975. Currently lives in New York. First group exhibition: Artpark, New York, 1974. First solo exhibition: "Studio Project," Clocktower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York, 1976. Recent exhibitions at Willard, New York, 1984, "Judith Shea and Robert Moskowitz," Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1985, "Body and Soul: Recent Figurative Sculpture," Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 1985; forthcoming exhibition at Willard, New York, 1986.

My first associations in the art world were mostly with Minimalist sculptors and their constant talk about rules—how to look at Don Judd's work, how to learn from Carl Andre. I remember ten years ago feeling absolutely straightjacketed—always trying to figure out whether my work was *right* according to that logic. In some of my earliest pieces I feel that the articulation of the ideas may be as interesting as their realization in the sculpture.

The idea of the concept being so beautifully thought out is really something that's connected to Minimalism for me. It's interesting, because that was a period when there was terrific writing about art, and then you'd see the work and think, "So *that's* what all this was about?" The ideas are so beautiful; they fit together so well. Intellectually it's really how you'd like the world to be; it's really neat. Yet the work is in many ways just really stingy.

One big difference between artists my age and the Minimalists is that we tend to like some sense of hand work, some evidence of the individual's skill or craftsmanship—not necessarily a highly skilled execution, but a sense of the touch of the human hand. Whereas Minimalism wants to look as if no hand ever touched it, and glorifies fabrication—the machine-cut edge, and so on. There are excep-

tions, of course. One example for me is Robert Grosvenor's creosoted wood pieces, which have a strong emotional presence and a sensual, worked surface, as well as the pure formal power of the object in space.

The '70s were such an interesting and eclectic time—but a difficult one for painters. How far could you go with Minimalism beyond Ryman or Marden? I think painters found a way out before sculptors did. All the recent focus on painting has created, in a positive way, a situation of adversity for sculptors our age, where there is something very real to work against; there is a need to work for more visibility, not just for yourself, but for a whole kind of work. Suddenly a couple of years have passed and you ask, "When was the last time I saw a great sculpture show?"

One thing the recent expressionistic painters have done for us in both their painting and their sculpture is to make all manner of subject matter acceptable. Some of their sculpture has been really instructive to me. I've seen instances where I've felt that what you could use well in paintings—emotional, sentimental, romantic or mythical material—didn't translate well, or as easily, into sculpture. It just looked like sculpture from the past, while the painting comes out of history but goes beyond it.

An important influence on me in this vein was a trip to Greece two years ago. In classical sculpture, particularly of the so-called Severe Style, I found a whole vocabulary of formal compositions of figures, most strikingly in pedimental sculptures. I couldn't get over the integration of forms, both figural and architectural, with story and emotion. I felt sure that centaurs, for example, were invented in mythology because of their perfect proportions for fitting into a triangle. And the cool severity of the forms, which dominated the spiritual aspects, seemed to make the work impacted and resonant.

I've long been conscious of a certain structural history of clothes. In older clothing, the formal concentration is on the material; how you throw it on yourself is clothing. Later the concentration moves to anatomy and the manipulation of anatomy—the building out of one area and the smothering in of another. The movement is from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional handling of the garment. My own work started with a not very anatomical version of clothing as a form in itself, but it has gotten increasingly anatomical.

One of the things that's really visible in my new work is a greatly increased emotionalism. There are a couple of pieces with more than one figure. You open up whole different associations by doing that; you emphasize interaction. Formally, you can get beyond the single figure, into the juxtaposition of metals, of colors, of figures, of forms. For example, in a recent piece called *He and She*, the female form is very contained, essentialized—unmis-



Judith Shea: Standing There, 1984, bronze, 36½ by 11½ by 9½ inches.

takably female, even stereotyped. It comes down to a kind of essence of the female, almost like those little fetish figures, where it's so unmistakably female that that's what it's about. The male form, which is in the shape of a big coat, is extremely open, and is as much about the cloth as about the figure. The female figure is very tightly contained with an empty space inside, and the male is very open, its empty space almost more prominent than the container. The space represents two kinds of characters, or two opposites of form and personality. In the clothing framework, there's the dress and the coat—the idea of the thing that covers the body and then the thing that covers both of those together. So the piece is not just about representing the gesture of the figures, though that's increasingly important for me; it's more the fact that with these figures I'm involved with the use of open and closed space.

It dawned on me recently that there was never a point where I considered giving up clothes as sculptural elements, and it's strange, because in the first years I was working this way there was absolutely no place for it; I constantly had the sense that it never was going to be taken seriously. The Pattern and Decoration movement was important for me that way, since at least it has a focus on cloth. I never felt that my work was basically connected to that esthetic—what I was doing was so formal and unornamented—but P & D definitely opened opportunities for my work to be seen. I think the movement was infatuated with design, ideologically speaking, and I was reacting against design—so we crossed, but going in very different directions.

# Judith Shea

Recent Work

November 11 - December 5, 1992

Brief discussion  
of Inside Venus  
reviewed by  
Village Voice 1991

JOHN BERGGRUEN GALLERY  
228 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, California 94108 Telephone: (415) 781-4629 Fax: (415)781-0126

## Judith Shea

"An interesting thing about skin is that it has two sides. The same goes for clothes (which might be considered elective skin, as skin is compulsory clothing). Inside, there is the important stuff that skin protects. Outside, there is the world. I think most people feel mainly that their skin is the outer limit of themselves. It follows that most people are lousy dressers, unalert to meanings of clothes beyond comfort and concealment. (I am this type to an extreme. I never know what I look like and so rely on friends to inform me, gently.) But I am convinced that some people feel, in effect, that their skin is the inner boundary of the world, whose pressure — above all a pressure of gazes — they sense acutely. They dress great. Mutual incomprehension and suspicion between the two types constitute one of the fundamental misunderstandings without which social life would be rational and boring.

"Is it possible to be both types? I fancy that Judith Shea is, reversible in her own skin, and that this is what makes her a terrific sculptor. A fashion student who turned artist in the mid-1970s, Shea over the years has created a body of work (or work of bodies) electric with an alternating current of self-consciousness and world-consciousness, a dialectic that she extends to problems of sculpture after Minimalism, sexuality under feminism, and everybody's being-in-the-world all the time.

"Shea emerged in an artistic tendency of the late '70s, known as New Image, that strove to insinuate figuration into painting and sculpture that had been caught in a cul-de-sac of abstraction by '60s formalism and by Minimalism. (Leading artists of the tendency included Joel Shapiro and Susan Rothenberg.) Shea made a sensation with empty bronze or iron casts of articles of clothing — part of a blouse on the wall, a one-piece bathing suit front-down on the floor (*Crawl*), a pedestaled 'little black dress' — swelled by the bodies of invisible wearers. Earlier she had sewn or constructed subtle caricatures of generic garments, a lexicon of fashion in odd materials. I well recall the kick of free-standing 'checked pants' made of square-meshed wire fencing. (Shea is never not witty.) But the cast clothes were her major coup. They were, and still are, drop-dead haunting and, aesthetically, genius-touched. They brought a wealth of content and sheer pizzazz into sculpture that was faithful to the self-evident literalness preached by Minimalism.

"*Opus Notum Galateae Unum* ('The Only Known Work of Galatea'), in the present show, is a gustily romantic bronze sculpture of classical drapery swathing a striding male figure from neck to ankles. The shape of one arm is visible beneath the fabric, held against the figure's chest. There are gaping holes where the other arm and the head would protrude. Metal posts in place of feet anchor the figure to a marble pedestal inscribed with the work's Latin title, which wryly surmises that Pygmalion's famous creature had her own fling at magic-making sexual obsession. The presence/absence of an idealized man is indeed magical, as a symbol of longing. Does the man long for the creator who longs for him? Able to manifest himself only through what contains him, he cannot say.

just on this work

"*Inside Venus*, a voluptuous cousin of the Venus de Milo, has a patina that is richly green and streaked. (Shea is a virtuoso of patination). This Venus holds in her hand a little white linen jumper whose skirt unfurls from a rolled bolt of the fabric on the floor. Again we are invited to provide a story that will meld the disparate elements. The problem is interesting, in addition to distressing, because symptomatic of a present artistic climate that demands much of artists in terms of socially engaged meaning while giving them only the vaguest orientation in terms of style. As it happens, exactly that kind of dilemma — between responsiveness to the world and loyalty to self, between outside and inside — has been the dynamic of Shea's best work."

Peter Schjeldahl

Excerpted from a review

The Village Voice, 1991

The three most recently completed works included in this exhibition are *Artist, Storage, (f.)*, and *Storage, (m.)*. The *Storage* pieces, disparate companions (*m.* – males and *f.* – females), present an almost archeological display of forms which have been key vocabulary in my work since the early 1980's, but leaning wall to floor, jumbled, toppled, disassembled, in reserve. (*m.*) in steel refers to the common sight of post-industrial remains, (*f.*) in bronze, to an even longer history of human endeavor and residue.

*Artist* is a fully modeled female figure, cast in steel, on a typical statuary pedestal. I mean this to be not so much a self-portrait as a depiction of the qualities inherent in being both woman and artist in the contemporary world. The details of the body are iconographic: an open hand is receptive while a clenched one shows determination; bare feet are both vulnerable and earthy; the tight fitting dress reveals sensuality, femininity, perhaps romanticism in contrast to the head, carved away from the mask-like face, which is denuded of hair, streamlined for efficiency and clarity; she stands just barely still on her categorical pedestal.

Judith Shea

New York, New York, 1992



1985 List Visual Arts Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge

1984 Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

*Exhibition history of "Mid-Life Venus (Inside Venus)," 1991:*

1998 "Hanging By A Thread," Hudson River Museum

1996 *Art/Fashion*, Biennale di Firenze, Forte Belvedere, Florence, Italy;  
traveled to Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

1994 Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, NH

1992 *Judith Shea: Recent Work*, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco

1991 *Judith Shea: Monument Statuary*, Max Protech Gallery, New York

*Museum Collections including Shea's work:*

Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

Brooklyn Museum, New York

The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, Texas

# Artist picked to do sculpture for new federal courthouse

By STEVEN LITF  
PLAIN DEALER ART CRITIC

Judith Shea, a New York sculptor known for fusing classic figurative imagery and contemporary ideas, has been chosen to create a monumental outdoor sculpture for the new federal courthouse skyscraper under construction in downtown Cleveland.

"I'm thrilled to be chosen," Shea said Friday, shortly after her commission was announced by the General Services Administration office in Chicago.

Shea's sculpture will stand between 30 and 45 feet high on the northeast corner of the courthouse, scheduled for completion in the summer of 2001. It is the largest work of her career to date. The building will rise along Ontario St., just south of Superior Ave. Ground was broken for the 24-story, \$178 million building in May 1997, a GSA spokesman said.

Shea, who was awarded the \$640,000 commission on the basis of her past work, hasn't started designing the sculpture yet, and was reluctant to discuss what form it might take.

"I'm trying to protect a certain amount of freedom for myself in coming up with a design," she said.

Shea was chosen from a field of 150 applicants by a committee of 13 local arts, planning and court officials. The panel included U.S. District Court Chief Judge Paul R. Matia; Edward Reich, of the Cleveland City Planning Commission; Barbara Robinson, chairwoman of the Ohio Arts Council, and Kathleen H. Coakley, director of the private, nonprofit Committee for Public Art. Also serving on the panel was Michael McKinnell, a partner in the Boston architecture firm designing the court tower.

Shea, 50, was born in Philadelphia and studied at the Parsons



NANA WATANABE

Judith Shea was chosen from a field of 150 sculptors to create an outdoor sculpture for Cleveland's new federal courthouse building.

School of Design in New York. Her work is in many public collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York; The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.; and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo.

Shea said she will soon visit Cleveland to view the site of the court tower. She said she hoped to achieve "a kind of consensus" over the design, but added, "I will stand my ground creatively."

The sculpture will be funded under the GSA's Art-in-Architecture Program, established in 1963. The program sets aside 0.5 percent of a building's construction cost for commissioned works of art.

## ART



Shepherd's Muse, by Judith Shea, a work owned by a private collection in California, typifies the artist's interest in monumental sculptures inspired by classical tradition. Shea was chosen by the federal General Services Administration to create a monumental outdoor sculpture on the new federal courthouse tower in downtown Cleveland.

FIGURATIVE IMPULSES

FIVE CONTEMPORARY SCULPTORS

# JUDITH SHEA

Judith Shea began in the mid-1970s to develop what has become her now characteristic use of cast clothing forms, both as the means to explore formal sculptural concerns and as expressive symbols for the human figure. When Shea, who trained as a fashion designer, turned to making sculpture, she continued to use fabric as her medium in a series of stylized, basically two-dimensional works derived from pattern pieces. Her next bas-reliefs, based on clothing molds, led into her ongoing series, begun in the early 1980s, of cast works—in iron, bronze and, recently, stone.

*On the Curve* (1983), one of Shea's earliest cast pieces, retains some of the spare, abstract character of the earlier canvas reliefs. Yet, despite its abbreviated form—the back right half of a shirt—the sculpture extends a long sleeve into space and anticipates Shea's move to fully three-dimensional forms that invoke an unquestionable human presence. Still employing some basic principles of dressmaking, Shea cuts industrial weight felt into approximated patterns; using darts to flush out their volume, she glues them at the seams and saturates them with wax to make them rigid. Through direct casting, the original is sacrificed, but its form and material texture is transferred to the unique, cast image. The resulting hollow forms read clearly as articles of clothing, yet their suggestion of the figure within is undeniable. As Shea has stated, the basis of this work is in "establishing the presence of figure in the actual absence of it."<sup>1</sup>

Casting suited Shea's interests well and led her to explore more complex relationships of form and meaning by juxtaposing images of differing personalities, shapes and even materials. *For Mom* (1984) brings together a darkened bronze sheath form, curled on the floor, and a small, silvery infant's dress near its lap. The work's semantic reading rests in the art historical motif of Madonna and Child. Beyond its narrative interpretation, however, *For Mom* posits a formal relationship of shapes (cylinder and triangle) and considers the no-

tions of duality and opposition.<sup>2</sup> In this case, the contrasting patinas and attitudes of the two elements serve to heighten both their actual and implied differences.

From the series of paired, semi-abstracted figures, Shea's work took the next logical step. Inspired by the architectural sculpture she saw while visiting Greece in 1983, Shea started to juxtapose her figurative clothing elements with fully abstract forms of cubes, cones and pyramids. At this point, her efforts crystallized to pose—and reconcile—the historical tradition of figuration with the abstract sculptural issues of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

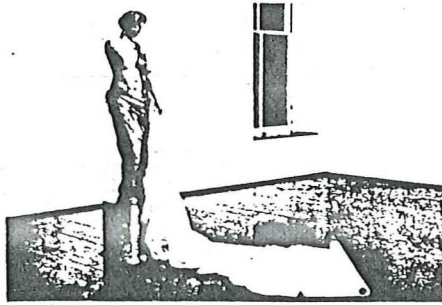
*Untitled* (1987) presents a slight variation on this idea. A pair of cast-iron men's work gloves curl up their palms to hold an organic, even sexual, form made of hardened pink clay. Beyond the apparent contrasts of texture, color and gender identification posed by the forms, the work expresses other dualities. The rusted gloves connote everyday experience while the ovoid form suggests something more precious—intimating, perhaps, both the historical connection of the art object to the natural world and its modernist elevation to another realm.

*Between Thought and Feeling* (1988) adroitly orchestrates Shea's various interests and situates her work squarely at the border, merging form and content, concept and expression. The central cast bronze dress, simultaneously referential and abstract, symbolizes Shea's position. In its lap rests a bronze head; modeled after a bust of Alexander the Great, it alludes to the historical and representational art of portraiture. The cast stone cube upon which the figure sits is an emblem of Minimalism, that end point of sculptural abstraction. Far from exhausting the expressive potential of clothing as subject and form, Shea continues to plumb its possibilities. In her hands it is at once contemporary and historical; intimate and universal; body and spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the exhibition catalogue, *Robert Moskowitz: Recent Paintings and Pastels/ Judith Shea: Recent Sculpture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, List Visual Arts Center, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Also, the artist in conversation with the author, June 27 and July 21, 1988. All other quotes and references are from these discussions unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Lynda Forsha, *Judith Shea* (La Jolla, California: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988).



Judith Shea: *Inside Venus*, 1991, cast bronze, fabric, 84 by 18 by 130 inches; at Max Protetch.

### Judith Shea at Max Protetch

In two of the four sculptures in her latest show, "Monument Statuary," Judith Shea continues to deploy full-scale bronzed garments as figurative substitutes. In the other two, however, she addresses the body itself, the flesh—traditional subject of the Western statue.

Ironically, one of the pieces in her older mode refers directly to the work of Rodin, the man who brought his figures down off the pedestal and whose figurative fragments are arguably the first sculptures in the modern sense (that is, they are not statues). Titled *Post Balzac*, Shea's signature image of an empty raincoat stands dourly on a slightly funereal base inscribed "XXe," the shoulders of the garment hunched, its arms hanging limply at its sides. The coat stands slightly open, so that a long slit runs from the collar to the floor, and this pointed emphasis on the sculpture's status as shell not mass seems an intentional (if grudgingly admiring) mockery of the surging phallic thrust that characterizes Rodin's own *Balzac*. An even more revealing comparison would be with Rodin's plaster study for Balzac's dressing gown—which, by virtue of its rude facture, swelling volumes and empty crossed sleeves, makes Shea's modern hollow man seem puny indeed.

The central pieces in the show, however, are less ironic and more ambitious. *Inside Venus* is a mock antique bronze nude, half-draped in the manner of the Venus de Milo and elevated on a bronze base. Missing her right arm and much of her neck, she holds in her left hand the collar of a white sleeveless shift, made of real cloth, which falls to the floor, billowing yard after yard only to end in the rolled bolt of material from which it sprang. Her face is cracked and slightly caved in. While the statue is maternal, broken, static and residual (as might befit a surrogate antiquity), the dress is youthful, endless, contingent and present. The contrast is powerful and disquieting.

*Apollo* is a fragmentary male nude, also in a mock antique style, whose neatly folded black coat is pinned quietly on the wall behind it. Apollo, too, is missing his left arm, as well as his head and lower legs. Here the contrast between the conventionally cut, deliberately restrained coat and the vitality of the figure is foiled somewhat by Shea's weak modeling. While her silhouettes are strong, her internal planes and contours are not. Her volumes seem alternately blown up or deflated, never full or taut. Any palpable sense of internal structure is here nearly nonexistent. Nevertheless, Shea's corrupt classicism, functioning in a manner similar to Brecht's alienation effect, helps to break our physical identification with her sculptural bodies and keep our attention on her ideas. In the end, the untrammelled ephebic sensuality of antique statues, associated as it is with a Phidian sculptural virtuosity, is the very quality which Shea seems to both envy and abhor. This ambivalence itself has an undeniable power.

—Robert Taplin

- D. Source: John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco  
 Funding: Eli and Lea Luria and other donors  
 1999.32 Credit Line: Museum purchase with funds provided by Eli and Lea Luria, (the determination of additional donors still in process - will be forthcoming)

Judith Shea

American, born 1948

**Mid-Life Venus (Inside Venus), 1991**

Cast bronze and fabric; TR 1839

84" x 19 ¼" x 19"

Museum price: \$65,000.00

Contemporary American sculptor Judith Shea came of age artistically in the late 1970s, helping to define a new aesthetic direction called New Image. Along with other New Imagists, she played a significant role in reviving figuration and bringing content back into art. Living and working in New York, Shea created a sensation with her bronze and iron casts of articles of clothing that maintained the elegant simplicity of 1960s and 1970s Minimalism while reintroducing the human figure. A student of fashion before devoting herself to sculpture, she enjoyed early recognition for her commanding, sometimes haunting, figures whose gestures and expressions suggest open-ended narratives.

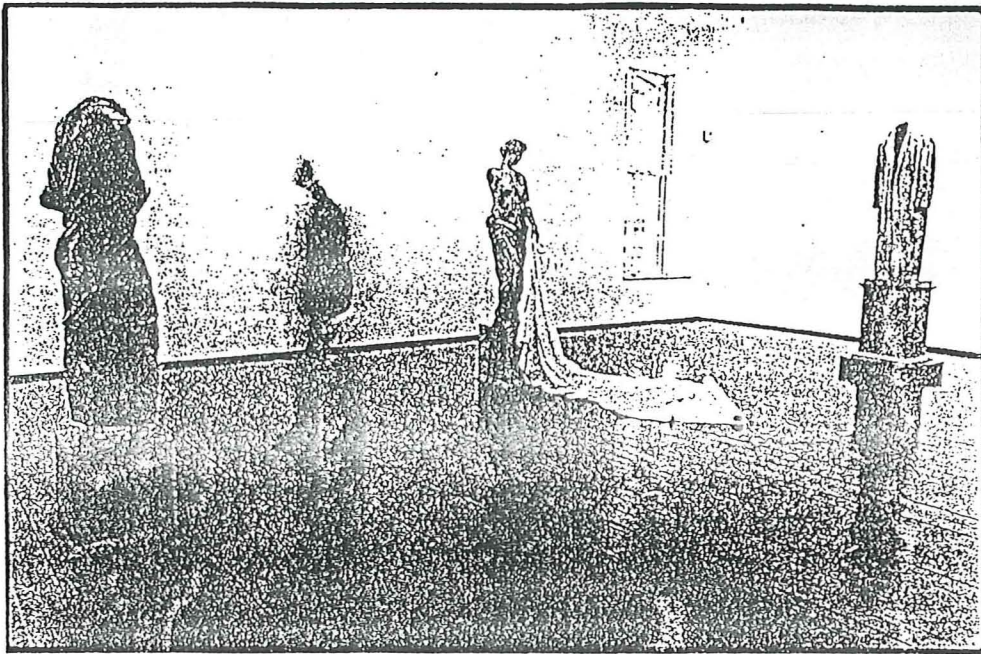
In 1983, when Shea traveled to Greece, she was drawn to the archaic and classical sculpture she saw there. "In classical sculpture...I found a whole vocabulary of formal compositions of figures, most strikingly in pedimental sculptures. I couldn't get over the integration of forms, both figural and architectural, with story and emotion...." While the issues of figuration and abstraction remained paramount to Shea, she began to focus on the **connections**, as well as the **tensions**, between the **contemporary and the antique**. Based on one of the central icons in Western art, *Mid-Life Venus*, 1991, is among the most important works by the artist to emerge from this pivotal exploration. It is a dramatic exercise in contrast, with the classically inspired, life-size figure holding a silky white dress that drapes onto the floor and terminates as an unfurled bolt of fabric. This striking visual juxtaposition is critical to the work's symbolism; if Shea's meaning is **intentionally ambiguous**, part of it derives from her concern for **classical ideals and concepts of beauty as they apply contemporarily**.

Shea's *Mid-Life Venus* meets a stated board, directorial and curatorial objective to acquire the best examples of significant contemporary art that will substantially enhance the Museum's 20<sup>th</sup>-century collection. Important, visually exciting, and intellectually challenging, this key work by Shea greatly enriches our collection of contemporary American sculpture, while providing an important link to the institution's classical antiquities.

*Selected One-Person Museum Exhibitions and Public Commissions:*

1995 *The Other Monument*, Public Art Fund Inc., Doris C. Freedman Plaza, N.Y.

1994 Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln



Judith Shea: left to right, *Opus Notum Galateae Unum* (1991), *Inside Venus* (1991), *Post Balzac* (1990)

# Metaphysics of Skin

By Peter Seljeldahl

Judith Shea:  
"Monument Statuary"  
Max Protetch Gallery  
560 Broadway  
Through April 27

An interesting thing about skin is that it has two sides. The same goes for clothes (which might be considered elective skin, as skin is compulsory clothing). Inside, there is the important stuff that skin protects. Outside, there is the world. (My insides are "world," too, I suppose; only I don't believe it.) I think most people feel mainly that their skin is the outer limit of themselves. It follows that most people are lousy dressers, unalert to meanings of clothes beyond comfort and concealment. (I am this type to an extreme. I never know what I look like and so rely on friends to inform me, gently.) But I am convinced that some people feel, in effect, that their skin is the inner boundary of the world, whose pressure—above all a pressure of gazes—they sense acutely. They dress great. Mutual incomprehension and suspicion between the two types constitute one of the fundamental misunderstandings without which social life would be rational and boring.

Is it possible to be both types? I fancy that Judith Shea is, reversible in her own skin, and that this is what makes her a terrific sculptor. A fashion student who turned artist in the mid-1970s, Shea over the years has created a body of work (or work of bodies) electric with an alternating current of self-consciousness and world-consciousness, a dialectic that she extends to problems of sculpture after Minimalism, sexuality under feminism, and everybody's being-

in-the-world all the time. She has a frequent flaw of forcing more-discursive meaning into sculpture than that mute medium can manage gracefully. Her current show of four bronze figures or figure-fragments creeps a bit with ponderous philosophizing. But Shea's sensitivity to the metaphysics of skin, a sculptural equivalent of perfect pitch, never fails her, unless perhaps by making her think she can get away with anything. She does cleanly fulfill the promise of this show's title, "Monument Statuary." Without being much larger than life-size, her statues are as satisfyingly monumental as the classical precedents they headily comment on. I would want one for my formal garden, if I had a formal garden.

Shea emerged in an artistic tendency of the late '70s, known as New Image, that strove to insinuate figuration into painting and sculpture that had been caught in a cul-de-sac of abstraction by '60s formalism and by Minimalism. (Leading artists of the tendency included Joel Shapiro and Susan Rothenberg.) Shea made a sensation with empty bronze or iron casts of articles of clothing—part of a blouse on the wall, a one-piece bathing suit front-down on the floor (*Crawl*), a pedestaled "little black dress"—swelled by the bodies of invisible wearers. Earlier she had sewn or constructed subtle caricatures of generic garments, a lexicon of fashion in old materials. I will recall the kick of free-standing "checked pants" made of square-meshed wire fencing. (Shea is never not witty.) But the cast clothes were her major coup. They were, and still are, drop-dead haunting and, aesthetically, genius-touched. They brought a wealth of content

and sheer pizzazz into sculpture that was faithful to the self-evident literalness preached by Minimalism.

If nothing by Shea since then has had equal impact, it is because big changes in the art world drained urgency from her preoccupations. In retrospect, New Image was the last truly New York-generated modern-art evolution, eclipsed in the early '80s by the rangier agendas of German and Italian painters, English assemblage sculptors, French-theorized photographic artists, and international-circuit installation show-offs. Shea's once definitively New York-ish characteristics of modernist idealism and stylistic erudition (for instance, in a startling bronze of a pair of shorts alluding at once to Brancusi and break-dancing) passed into a blind spot of contemporary taste. There she has struggled to regroup her enterprise with reference to an ancient classical past and to present-day social and psychological vicissitudes.

*Opus Notum Galateae Unum* ("The Only Known Work of Galatea"), in the present show, is a gustily romantic bronze sculpture of classical drapery swathing a striding male figure from neck to ankles. The shape of one arm is visible beneath the fabric, held against the figure's chest. There are gaping holes where the other arm and the head would protrude. Metal posts in place of feet anchor the figure to a marble pedestal inscribed with the work's Latin title, which wryly surmises that Pygmalion's famous creature had her own fling at magic-making sexual obsession. The presence/absence of an idealized man is indeed magical, as a symbol of longing. Does the man long for the creator who longs for him?

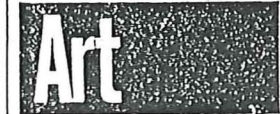
Able to manifest himself only through what contains him, he cannot say.

Like Shea's earlier work, the Galatea plays on the fact that, while fitting and projecting the human form, clothing breaks it up into parts. (Skin has no edges. Clothes do.) Here, clothes make the man, but only as much of him as they can reach. The same trope appears in *Post Balzac*, another pedestaled empty garment featuring a sex reversal. Here the robe of Rodin's mighty author gaps on the void of a body whose narrow shoulders, apparent in the drape of the sculpture's wonderful cascade of heavy bronze, indicate that it is (was? would be?) female. (This is the imaginary being I want installed in my imaginary garden.) While verging on smart-alecky, the sex-reversal motif is not a problem when I am looking at the work, to which it gives a decisive skew: the artist finding an efficient way to take personal possession of intimidatingly grand models.

Relatively troublesome, though still enjoyable, are the show's two other pieces, tableaux of statuary and fabric. *Apollo* is a splendid naked male torso (Shea can really sculpt, delivering exotically archaic pleasures of academic modeling) with, hung on the wall behind it, a schematic overcoat in stiff black linen. (This coat form, folded double lengthwise, recurs in her work; she has said it derives from seeing men on commuter trains fold their coats that way, in a gesture of peculiarly masculine fastidiousness.) You know what? I am disinclined to analyze Shea's *Apollo*, balking at a semantic gap between the work's halves that could be filled in, I suspect, only by an explaining-the-joke kind of

exegesis. To put it another way, the classical torso and the abstract coat categorically repel each other, and to force them together strikes me as an uneconomical use of mental energy.

Similarly labored is *Inside Venus*, a voluptuous cousin of the Venus de Milo—lacking only one of her arms, though also the back of her head and most of the elbow of the other arm. Her patina is richly green and streaked. (Shea is



a virtuoso of patination. The moody mottled surface of *Post Balzac* is part of what recommends it for garden use; it practically begs for rain and pigeons.) This Venus holds in her hand a little white linen jumper whose skin unfurls from a rolled bolt of the fabric on the floor. Again we are invited to provide a story that will mediate the disparate elements, and again the invitation makes me tired in advance. Shea's ambition to communicate overtrains her means, with over-the-top results. The problem is interesting, in addition to distressing, because symptomatic of a present artistic climate that demands much of artists in terms of socially engaged meaning while giving them only the vaguest orientation in terms of style. As it happens, exactly that kind of dilemma—between responsiveness to the world and loyalty to self, between outside and inside—has been the dynamic of Shea's best work. Her case merits patience.