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Judith Shea's signature image is the hollow dress, cast in bronze in the shape of a female figure. In formal terms, the hollow sheath explores the relationship between interior volume and exterior space. In metaphorical terms, it becomes a vessel into which the viewer may project personal feelings and ideas. Rich in allusive potential, Shea's dresses encourage reflection on gender, the body, representation and manifold other subjects.

Shea's interest in clothing as an artform stems from her training in fashion design. Born in Philadelphia, she earned an A.A. degree in fashion design from the Parsons School of Design in New York in 1969. While working professionally as a clothing designer Shea went on to receive her B.F.A. degree from the Parsons School of Design/New School for Social Research in 1975. Her early artworks were simple, flat pieces of cloth, adapted from patterns used in clothing design. Their basic shapes - squares, rectangles, triangles - conformed to the prevailing aesthetic of Minimalism, which stressed clear structure and geometric form. However, their implicit relationship to clothing and, by extension, the body, countered Minimalism's rigorous denial of content. References to clothing became more explicit at the end of the decade, as Shea crafted sewn fabric silhouettes in the shape of dresses, sleeves, bodices and trousers. Hung from the wall on rods or pins, they substituted for the human figure.

In the early 1980s Shea began to stiffen her cloth forms with plaster, paste, paint, wax or Rhoplex, which allowed her to create three-dimensional reliefs. After studying medieval armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art she decided to experiment with cast metal. She cast her first pieces in iron in 1982 and later made extensive use of bronze. The sculptures were initially modeled in felt, which was then saturated with wax, and used to make a ceramic mold into which the bronze was poured. Shea's first cast sculptures were fragments rather than complete articles of clothing. The artist observed that the "truncated clothing forms provided an essence - no extremities, no movement. It was a way to express the essence of human presence."¹

A trip to Greece in 1983 aroused Shea's interest in archaic and classical sculpture. Her work became more fully figurative, and evocative of ancient Greek as well as Egyptian sculpture. She also began to work with pairs of clothing forms - male and female, child and adult - creating new layers of narrative and psychological complexity. A series of works from the mid-1980s juxtaposed figurative presences with smaller geometric elements such as rectangular solids and pyramids. Shea saw the geometric elements "as symbols of history, of art, of a specific period or a specific place."² The simplified dress forms recalled ancient statuary, but their sleek stylization also suggested contemporary fashions. Strongly dualistic, these sculptures invited speculation about contemporary art's relationship to the historical past. They also communicated Shea's desire to make figurative art while at the same time acknowledging her continuing respect for Minimal abstraction.

Through these pieces, Shea sought to rebut the argument of Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1907; first published in English in 1953), that abstract and naturalistic treatments of form are mutually exclusive.³ Worringer argued that abstract and naturalistic styles serve different psychological needs. Naturalism, epitomized in the art of Hellenistic Greece and Renaissance Italy, springs from a confident acceptance of the world as it is, and arouses in the viewer an empathetic response. Abstraction, seen in Egyptian, Byzantine, Gothic and primitive art, as well as twentieth-century art, expresses human insecurity and the desire for more permanent, absolute and transcendental forms.

Abstraction and empathy are central themes of Judith Shea's *Between Thought and Feeling*, in the JCCC collection. The tripartite sculpture consists of a bronze dress, seated on a large cast stone cube, and holding in its lap a larger-than-life-size bronze head, positioned much like the Christ child in the lap of the Madonna. The head, freely modeled after Hellenistic portraits of Alexander the Great, bears a poignant expression meant to draw forth an empathetic response from the viewer. The cube, by contrast, achieves the transcendent perfection of pure geometry, appealing to the intellect rather than to the emotions. Situated between the two is the hollow dress, which Shea sees as a surrogate for herself.

The dress both divides and mediates between the extremes of style embodied in the cube and the head. It is smoother and simpler in form than the roughly modeled head, but rougher and more complex than the monolithic cube beneath it.

The dress literally occupies a middle position between classical figuration and Minimalist abstraction - the stylistic languages of antiquity and modernity. *Between Thought and Feeling* manifests a postmodern attitude toward art history as a reservoir of images from which the artist may choose at will, rejecting outdated notions of the superiority of either pure abstraction or perfect naturalism, not to mention their mutual exclusivity. In the postmodern view, no style is necessarily better or more advanced than any other. Abstraction and representation are both meaningful, thought and feeling are both important, and Judith Shea sees no need to choose between them.

FOR FURTHER READING:

From Structure to Resemblance: Work by Eight American Sculptors, exhibition catalogue (Buffalo: Albright-Knox ART Gallery, 1987).

Sculpture Inside Outside, exhibition catalogue (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center in association with Rizzoli, 1988).

Judith Shea, exhibition catalogue (La Jolla, Calif: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988).

Marincola, Paula, "Judith Shea's Contemporary Kore," *Artforum* 28 (summer 1990): 134-139.

NOTES:

1. Shea quoted in Deborah Emot Scott, *Judith Shea*, exhibition brochure (Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1989), n.p.

2. Shea quoted in *Sculpture Inside Outside*, exhibition catalogue (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center in association with Rizzoli, 1988), p. 213.

3. *From Structure to Resemblance: Work by Eight American Sculptors*, exhibition catalogue (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 1987), p. 47.