



Joan  
Tanner  
in direct dialogue



## **Between Abstraction and Figuration: Joan Tanner's Sensate Fabulations**

—Colin Gardner

Joan Tanner's work has always hovered uncomfortably in the liminal space between nonrepresentation and figuration, setting up tensions between form and chaos, perception and pure sensation. As a result her work is less preoccupied with conceptual issues of meaning and interpretation that question how to position it historically—i.e. in relation to established traditions of painting, photography and sculpture—and more concerned with affective questions such as "how does it work" and "what does it do?"

In this respect our main objective as spectators is to find a way into each work, navigate a path through it, and then negotiate a way out before moving on to encounter the next image or object. Our perceptual roadmap is invariably aided by formal devices such as the common ground forged by lines, trajectories, colors, densities, symmetries, volumes, open and

closed spaces. This process is of course nothing new. It is a staple of both Minimalism and post-Minimalism, particularly the gestalt established between the object/image, its contextual space and the ephemeral, subjective time during which the spectator contemplates a work of art. However in Tanner's case, there is a certain



*Indirect Dialogue* 1985 • painting • 48 x 48 inches



saturation of content—both within and between each work—that defies a traditional reading and demands a more radical aesthetics.

For example, in *Discs Facing Off* (1985), Tanner presents us with two abstract forms composed of interlocking arcs and discs that resemble a pair of severed horses' heads facing each other in a



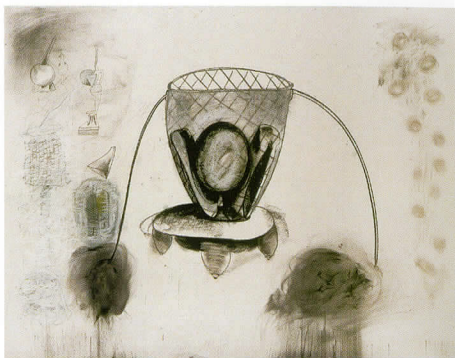
*Discs Facing Off* 1985 • painting • 58 x 53 inches

tense stand-off. Yet this anthropomorphism lacks conviction when we realize that the work could just as easily be read non-representationally forcing us to draw chromatic relations between one shape's white "face" and the other's predominantly white "neck." Thus our eye is shifted outward, away from the central confrontation of the two forms towards the edge of the canvas. Conversely, we could reverse the work's obvious figure-ground relationship and concentrate instead on the more thickly impastoed, brushy earth tones of the background that activate the figure's "neck" on the left, thereby forcing attention to the opposite side of the canvas. In this way, what started out as a study in formal symmetry has suddenly become perceptually unhinged through predominantly affective, emotional means.

However as is often the case with Tanner, the work ultimately recovers its equilibrium by virtue of the overall arc of the figures' outline, which both acts as a frame within the frame and also reiterates the central gutter between the "heads." More

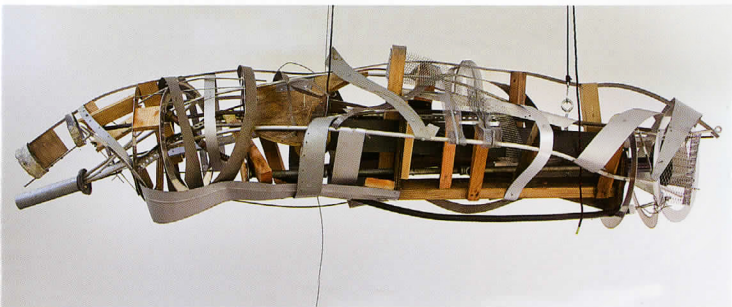


importantly, this connecting arc crops up as a common motif in other works, creating transversal links between otherwise distinct objects. Thus it recurs in *Fetch* (2001), a large charcoal drawing, where the curvature of the line appears to pass through a basket-like form, serving to accentuate its centrality (along with its strangely geometric contents), but also linking two fuzzy areas of smeared charcoal at the bottom of the composition, so that the central motif struggles to



*Fetch* 2001 • drawing • 38 x 50 inches

maintain its ground in relationship to the drawing's perimeter. The opposite is true in *Regarding Icarus* (2012), a large open sculptural form which hovers in perfect equilibrium between the ceiling and floor. In this case, the arc acts much like a horizon line in uneasy suspension, as if the form



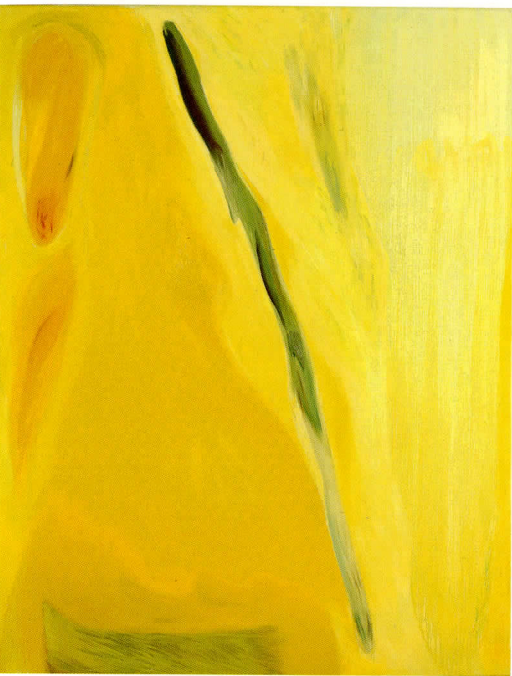
*Regarding Icarus* 2012 • sculpture • 22 x 84 x 18 inches



could defy gravity for as long as the spectator could will it to stay aloft.

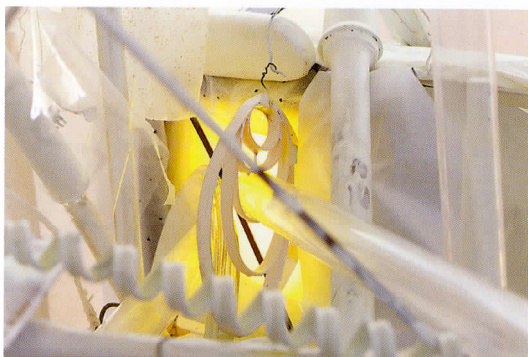
What links these otherwise very disparate works? Less a commonality of form than a becoming of affect as a perceived sensation. The key term here is sensation, for it is through sensation's confrontation with chaos—i.e. the plane of composition that creates an affective order from a multitude of possibilities—that we disclose the primal power of rhythm as itself the logic of sensation. This power is neither subjectively cerebral nor rational, but a collective, sensate act of fabulation that taps directly into the spectator's nervous system, penetrating our intuitive self deep into the brute reality of our flesh and bone. As in the case of another highly visceral artist, Francis Bacon, Tanner conjures this instinctual force through her compositional focus on the Figure. This isn't the same as the figurative (akin to the representational in art) but is actually a form of extraction and isolation of sensations from their immediate surroundings. In this way, sensations may be reconstructed in unexpected, nonrelational ways, thereby allowing them to be instinctively perceptible to the spectator beyond any discernible logic. Tanner's work is composed directly of such fabulations, harnessing spatio-temporal slippages that link otherwise isolated sensations, affects and percepts through a series of migrations between and across each work using a provocative combination of simultaneity and saturation.





*Yellow Swimming Too Fast* 1986 • painting • 94 x 74 inches

Tanner achieves this effect through a number of methodologies. The most affective is her recurring use of common colors. Thus the brushy color field of *Yellow Swimming Too Fast* (1986), with its baroque diagonal line anchoring a sea of "amniotic fluid," recurs as the central vertical motif of *Light* (2001), the ethereal auratic centerpiece of *Below* (2004) and in the biomorphic highlights of

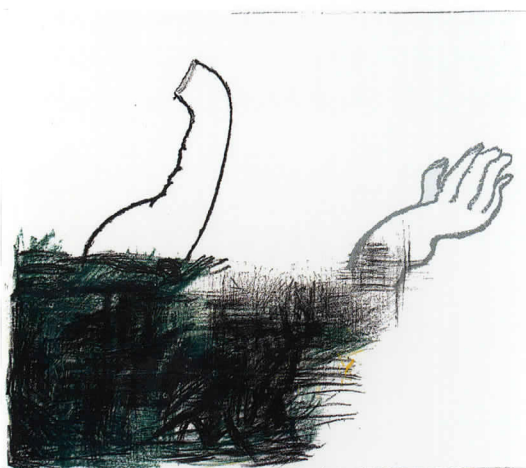


*Below* 2004 • photograph • 33 x 48 inches

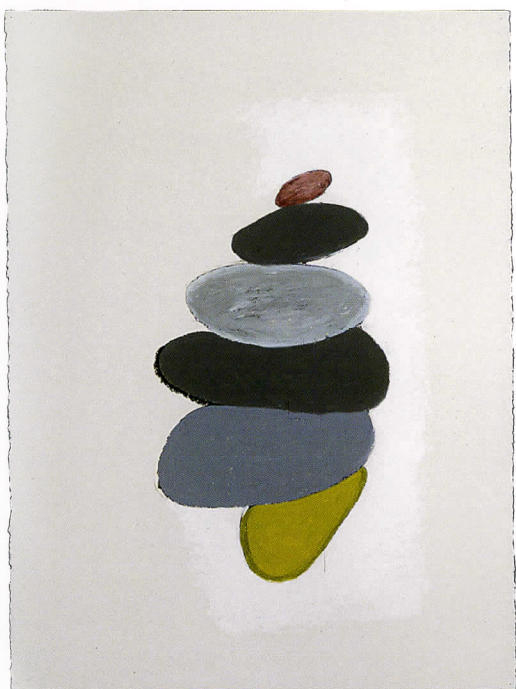


*Foiled Stack* (1999). Similarly, the red daub that constitutes the right-hand “horse’s muzzle” in *Discs Facing Off* recurs as a tiny, fleck-like organism in the otherwise architectural dreamscape of *Sentfor* (2004). Tanner also accomplishes similar lines-of-flight through cross-hatching in recent 2012 drawings—particularly in *Restive* and *Not A Cross*—where she moves with equal facility between contextualizing the bigger picture—is that a hand, a torso, a cross?—and the micro-world of pure process—no, it’s a series of agitated lines!

The key point is that there is no conceptual or narrative logic to these connections. They are pure fabulations, pure perceptual becomings that are both telescopic and microscopic, swelling both forms and “landscapes” into huge, grandiose topographies or shrinking them to miniscule disturbances that defy our ability



*Restive* 2012 • drawing • 38 x 50 inches



*Foiled Stack* 1999 • drawing • 30 x 22 inches

to contain or frame them perceptually. The magic of Tanner's method is that she is able to create works in a variety of media that dissolve traditional forms and instead impose a plane of composition whereby we can no longer discern differences but instead perceive their non-distinction that allows the elements to swell in our mind's eye, to become gigantic.

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February 2 - March 2, 2013

**Opening reception**

Wednesday, February 6th . 6 - 8pm  
with a talk at 7pm by Colin Gardner  
*Between Abstraction and Figuration*

**The Sculptures**

**An Afternoon at Joan Tanner's Studio**

Sunday, February 24th . 3 - 5pm  
[inquire with gallery for event address]



*Not A Cross* 2012 • drawing • 38 x 50 inches



*Concreto Tethered* 2011 • sculpture • 76 x 66 x 28 inches

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