

The background image shows an art installation in a gallery space. On the left, a tall, abstract wooden structure made of vertical and diagonal beams stands. In the center, a large, dense, cylindrical mesh sculpture hangs from the ceiling. To the right, a large wooden panel is partially covered by a blue and black abstract painting. A thin purple string is attached to the mesh and extends towards the painting.

JOAN TANNER

as is

installation 09

Essay by John David O'Brien

The Skeleton Key

By John David O'Brien



Box, 2009 (interior)
as is installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist
Commissioned by Fresno Art Museum

Center Panel, Top:
Box, 2009 (detail)
as is installation

Center Panel, Bottom:
3 Point Hanger, 2008 (detail)
as is installation

THE LANGUAGE TO DESCRIBE JOAN TANNER'S ART must track alongside the work itself in order to keep its faith with her practice and therein lays the first dilemma. In coining new terms to designate new actions or objects one uses neologisms (or protologisms), to track the physical workings of Joan Tanner's imagination, one may need to try something similar.

If the language I employ in this brief elucidation keeps the reader slightly off balance and a little unsure of exactly what is being said then it will accomplish precisely what Tanner seems to be inviting the viewer to do: entertain the ineffable.

The ensemble of works under consideration travels under the rubric of *as is*. I construe this object conglomeration as being titled both literally and—metaphorically. In the literal sense, it offers itself to the viewer as an unambiguous set of observable things to be taken, as they present themselves, no ifs ands or buts. *As is* defines an ethical stance as well; you figure it out, no guarantee is offered other than the first hand evidence that each viewer must observe, decipher and come to their own conclusion. In the metaphorical sense, *as is* alludes to the power of perception beyond the bounds of language. How can this seemingly random group of materials coalesce into a meaningful group of forms having tempo, rhythm, and composition and therefore configure intent? It does so, as it is, and in doing becomes a metaphor for the imagination—of that which comes out of nowhere and from nothing.

De-standard-if-ication is a term I would like to coin to allude to the way in which Tanner wrenches materials out of the ordinary and employs them poetically without pre-forming them back to a known historical variation. So, when she takes detritus (or even more germane to her sense of it) when she takes that which once having been used is discarded as spent, she does so in a Kurt Schwitters-like mode that doesn't resemble his outcomes. Her quasi-merz-like play with domestic remnants is analogous to an art history but unbent to its characteristic outcomes.

Enmesh-ti-phize is a term I made up to obliquely describe the modes in which Tanner wraps her entities in wrappings of different sorts thus lugging them into diverse realms of meaning. The bubble wrapped, blister packed aggregates of stuff hanging or crammed down between makeshift wooden plinths transit from the sculptural to the ecological to the eschatological without losing their thing-ness. The apparent bluntness of her materiality is honed to multiple edges.

Dishevel-en-ment is a term I have invented to

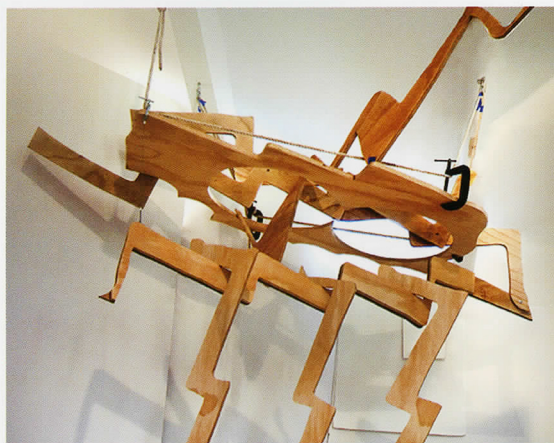
encircle the manner in which Tanner shifts her works from one meaning structure to another in interpretative midstream. As the forms begin to flow towards

one coagulation, she throws a new key into the mix that diverts to another flow without losing sight of the first. Her stair-like plinth/towers are both hollow and fragile and looming and massive as they lean into one another above the viewer. The rise exceeds the run vertiginously and the resulting ziggurat forms crisscross between the quotidian and the incredible.

A philosophical inquiry into physical matter founded in visuality can confound language, but in that baffling of language's ability to synthesize meaning lies the strength of the inquiry. The viewer is saddled with an intense kinesthetic and visual phenomena that is happening before their

eyes and which doesn't lend itself to a worded encapsulation. In some ways, the perpetual thrust of this esthetic impulse has been to offer the viewer something akin to a total presence.

Disinterested in the afterwards of a reflective re-collecting, the experience of the work is centered in



a persistent here and now. Frustrating to the viewer's desire for meaning and closure and extraordinarily powerful to the viewer's sense of perceptual presence and physical abandon into the workings of forms in space, Joan Tanner's installations accomplish her self assigned task of re-ordering the world space she is embroiled in.

In light of these inescapably thick word games, it may prove satisfying to speak of works that Tanner has created to buoy up the circuitousness of any discourse enveloping them. Meandering in and around the work itself is a joyful and intense experience that calls for a reckoning. The pleasure of puzzles (I certainly speak for myself) is not in having solved them but in solving them. The practice of trial and error is the ebb and flow of how desire moves back and forth between being confounded and understanding.

As is draws on different groups of art works which are concurrently under development by Joan Tanner in sets that are inter-related and yet autonomous. Without a doubt the actual configurations of these works and even the titles are all subject to reconsideration prior to their appearance in any particular exhibition (given Tanner's propensity to recombine until she must stop), so I will address the kernels of what is present in the cores. A series of spindle works slowly cavorts as one dance troop. Like large, tall spools winding up and winding down, these works slowly swirl side-by-side generating sound and light effects. Some of these spindles are disadorned or shorn down to just the materials used in construction. Others are gracefully draped as though they might be a tailor's mannikin or an indirect homage to figure maquettes from art historical lineage.

Elsewhere, a sledge-like array of forms is stretched out by guy lines, looking like a kind of skate vehicle or moveable chamber or ark. This *Belfry* has a slightly ominous air, like a medieval machine poised for some repetitive task or a platform from which to launch another more ponderous vehicle. Mast-like uprights hold in place a fence-screened element that may be stand-in in for the human rudder.



In another more somber aggregation of forms, *Towers* has the air of a formal hearing before the throne. Four large wood and sheet concrete panels

Towers, 2009 (studio view)
as is installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist
Commissioned by Fresno Art Museum



Spindles, 2009 (studio view)

as is installation

Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

Commissioned by Fresno Art Museum

Cover:

Box, 2009 (studio view)

as is installation

Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

Commissioned by Fresno Art Museum

stand upright around a virtual, rectangular space. In the center, a roll of fencing material twirls slowly back and forth, raising the artificial floor configuration ever so slightly as it moves up and down. Whatever this audience is about, a glistening surface heaves above the flooring and light flashes

irradiate the surrounding environment, reflecting out at the viewer. Built out as a dense, self-contained edifice, the polyhedral *Box*, structures an inside to out relationship governed by complexity. One semi-transparent side allows the viewer one kind of access to its object festooned interior. A painted wall elsewhere keeps the viewer circling for an opening. Fencing alternates with walls and some parts gape open for perusal. The experience has a somewhat magical feeling to it, as though a secret package were being unveiled in infinitesimally small increments right before you. The marvelous unveiling continues and should, especially as a viewer's experientially traverses through her work.

I would like to leave the viewer with the final image Joan Tanner talked about when I visited her studio. It is the first page of her *On Tenderhooks* catalog and the work is an ethereal wire drawing of a skeleton dancer twisting slowly in space. Slight, airy and whimsical, it might even get overlooked in the larger ensemble, but like a skeleton key that opens many doors; it is one among the many hidden-in-plain-sight keys to her profound humor and powerful, multivalent work.

John David O'Brien is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles and Umbria, Italy.



Spindles, 2009 (studio view)
or is installation
 Dimensions variable
 Courtesy the artist
 Commissioned by Fresno Art Museum

FAM FRESNO
 ART MUSEUM

2233 N. 1st Street Fresno, CA 93703
www.fresnoartmuseum.org

Photography: Wayne McCall
 Monograph design: Ginny Brush
 Printing: Typecraft, Pasadena
 © 2009

Installation
 November 20-2009-January 10, 2010
 in conjunction with the Distinguished
 Woman Artist Award for 2009.
 Information at joantanner.com