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LOS ANGELES

Joan Tanner

Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design

On Tenderhooks was a large-scale, gallery-filling installation created by Joan Tanner and curated by Meg Linton, director of the Ben Maltz Gallery. Titles often (and this is especially true for non-realistic artworks) give a first inkling of artists' intentions. Since it's been a really long time since either a tenter, or the hooks on one, have been around, it might help to know that the term comes from ancient processes of making woolen cloth. After the cloth (made of fleece, oil, and dirt) was woven, it was cleaned and then dried. The lengths of wet cloth were stretched on wooden frames and left out in the open. These frames were the tenters, and the tenter hooks were the metal hooks used to fix the cloth to the frame. So it is not hard to understand how being "on tenterhooks" (or tenterhooks) would come to mean being in a state of anxious suspense. It seems to me that Tanner has interpreted this anxiety and suspension as the active principle motivating her sculptural practice.

Over the years, her process has been to modify and deploy raw materials such as plywood panels, Blister-Pacs, corrugated plastic paneling, galvanized metal, air-duct filters, industrial detritus, light, and video to create wonderfully befuddling, complex, and sprawling works. Her installations have no corollaries in the world. They are not an interpretation of some natural phenomenon. They are not an abstraction taken from some human-made tool or other artifact. They are not stand-ins for the human body. Her assemblages add up to a precarious object environment in which the ineffable is given form through a paradoxical mix of order and disarray.



What is hardest to explain about Tanner's sculpture is how it manages to be extremely compelling, even without any correlating interpretative framework. For *On Tenderhooks*, I was almost tempted to give nicknames to the various forms and shapes. It seemed to be the only acceptable way to handle them critically and not sacrifice their inherent strangeness. The swelling, stair-like tower/plinths (hollow on the side leaning away from the viewer) were hard to fathom and yet a pleasure to view. The low-lying, central, platform-like pile/agglomeration, which had something akin to a small wing or a large ironing board cantilevering happily off into the ceiling, was busy being significantly meaningless. Here and there fragments of colored video images seeped up to the sculpture's surface like a funny little aside in a conversation. The clump/sack/pile of Blister-Pacs hanging somewhat obscenely out from a clear acrylic section of the entry wall was able to seem somewhat rude and somewhat related to the body without giving any specific index to justify that feeling.

Tanner's work has been likened to Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau*, Joseph

Cornell's boxes, and Lee Bontecou's early canvas and steel frame pieces. In Richard Tuttle, she finds a peer with regard to the ordering of modified shapes and the deft manipulation of discarded materials. In *On Tenderhooks*, Tanner capitalized on her characteristic use of detritus and tipped her hat to both Dada and Assemblage Art while launching into a broader discussion about consumer culture and the refuse it generates. It was well worth an extended look and the mental wrestling necessary to try and give it a name. We wait to see what else might happen, on tenterhooks.

—John O'Brien

Joan Tanner, *On Tenderhooks*, 2006. Mixed media, installation view.