

The house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind: the binding principle in this integration is the daydream. Past, present, and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another. . .

—Gaston Bachelard,
The Poetics of Space

The image “house” cannot, it seems, be encountered in any mind without associations in memory. Houses encase the experiences that are the content of our lives: warmth, rest, peace, fear, cold, loneliness, the within of a safe zone or the without of the unprotected. We are rooted or rootless. House can also be inferred to be our bodies, a temple, or the womb in which we all began.

In her current show of “Private Works,” Carolee Thea uses the house as a metaphor for many states of being. Each piece is a poetic exploration of the relationship between the three levels into which the terms of our existence so often seem to be described: the trinities of under, on, and over; past, present, and future; dream, reality, and hope. A house has a cellar, rooms, an attic.

These divisions are, of course, simplistic. What is fascinating for Thea is the relationship between the levels within each piece as well as the evolution of the work as a whole. Indeed, the development from the first to the last of the houses is an adventure into the hide-and-seek of visual equivalents, an evocative journey into variations in experience and change. We witness here the dialectic of structure, disintegration, and resolution.

Using a 12-by-13-inch nucleus of stretched canvas, the room/house most often has added to it a “structure” at the bottom and an arch above. The materials employed are innovative and many: paint, pastels (sprayed, marked, and scratched), broken pieces of wood, wiry mesh, and in one piece, the pastel chalks themselves. The works are sprayed, painted, collaged, glued, nailed, drawn on, and marked. All of them involve the wall on which they are hung. Refusing to conform to their squarish

premise, they slip their implied format with thrusts of molding, miniature ladders, drapes of mesh. The viewer is then forced to deal with shifts between piece and background as substance and shadow, making the wall and position in relation to it a part of our experience. A first distant impression evokes the New York City inscape: junk, decay, and graffiti. The color and surface in some of the work reminds one of Thea’s use of metal, wood, and rock in her large-scale sculptures. The surfaces of the earlier pieces hint at mill scale, of the earthy and metallic, a powdery gray dominating. Color, stronger in later pieces, suggests layers of storied pasts, as in old tenement walls. My favorite piece, *Housescape #8*, includes a graffiti-like bird drawn into a scuffed blue surface. Time passing wears through and changes surfaces into the penitenti of personal history. In each of the pieces we witness the search for the expressive image. The materials and forms remaining become references, artifacts of the process of artmaking, signposts left to remind us of the events of the adventure.

History, individual and otherwise, is implied in other ways. The earlier pieces include a mandorla, the al-

mond-shape symbol for the female genitalia which we see in early Christian illuminations, and later in the Renaissance where it is translated into the oval virgin womb where the Christ figure or his symbol is seen. For Thea, the shape is the iconographic equation of seed, world, egg, womb, woman, interior self-essence.

Each work exists in the present as a recording of time and has been built on the foundation of each previous work. In the first of these Housescapes the mandorla is dominant, central in a chalky gray grid suggesting windows. The shape then passes through stages where it moves from centrality through other attitudes within the spaces of the pieces, peeking out here and there, imprisoned behind a meshed rectangle (screened window/door?). Finally, the mandorla fragments and is absorbed into the activity of the whole structure. This symbol exists within the houses and takes on a personality within each setting. This becomes apparent when we view the work chronologically.

After the mandorla disappears, the structures become more architectural and more strongly lyrical, both in color and elaboration of the arched top. Formal attitudes of surface, wall, and projectile

rhythms clarify and take precedence.

The work tends to be read upward as well as sequentially within its private evolution and context. Where the cellars exist, they are the “statements” of the raw materials, the premises of concern, fragments, bits and pieces of color, or materials, waiting for elaboration in and around the lighter room and considered restatement in the arched pediment (attic).

Thea calls these pieces “constructs,” a word that alludes to painting, sculpture, architecture, collage, and drawing. They are ultimately about that transaction between inner and outer levels, change and process, the self and the making of art as synonymous and worthy of worship. The house as a vehicle allows for the transformation of the form into an art that invents itself. These pieces become private shrines, places of intricate and intimate dream biography. However, private and intimate do not connote obscure. The show becomes a place where the single Housescapes are small altars, stopping places on a pathway where, if we allow, we can recall our own cellars, rooms, and attics. (Frank Marino, May 3-24)

Annette Nachumi

CAROLEE THEA

Carolee Thea, *Housescape #5*, 1980.
Mixed media, 22 x 22 x 3". Courtesy Frank Marino Gallery.

