

CAROLEE THEA

9 FEBRUARY — 21 MARCH, 1986

WATSON GALLERY • WHEATON COLLEGE NORTON, MA



**The Dutchess, 1985** oil on wood & mixed media, 51" x 44" x 10"

## INTRODUCTION

The deliberate conflation of painting and sculpture constitutes one of the most vital traditions in Post-War American art. Ever since Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg exhibited such groundbreaking works as *Drawer* and *Monogram* in the late 1950's, succeeding generations of artists have continued to find ways to collapse the formal aspects of painting and sculpture. Carolee Thea's "Constructs" not only extend from this ongoing American tradition, but also from its European Modernist beginnings. One can, for example, deduce that Constructivist principles influenced the underlying geometry of such expressive compositions as *Rhino Mirror*. However, Thea doesn't simply appropriate a wide range of historical precedents. She has done something far more difficult: she has transformed both this history and her own into a flexible mode of personal expression.

Thea forces the immediate collapse of painting and sculpture through her use of the frame. Typically, it is one that was found in a junk shop and carries with it a rich constellation of meanings the artist must first isolate and then unlock. Rather than forming a decorative border around a painting, the frame is made to function as both a scaffold and a shallow container. The purpose it fulfills is formal and thematic: it is used to hold sculptural forms in place, as well as to suggest a narrative connection among the disparate elements. At the same time, by dislodging the frame from its historical usage, the artist is able to transform it into a kind of microscope through which she can examine the various social dynamics informing the way we look at painting.

*The Dutchess* can be read as an ironic commentary on our notions of portraiture. Against a gray oval ground the artist has attached an oddly shaped, bone-like branch that has been painted white. Around the branch and affixed to the frame are a helter-skelter of found objects—the detritus of the Dutchess' life. Whereas portrait paintings emphasize the fiction of a continual present, *The Dutchess* dramatizes the inevitable effects of time. On one level, the artist uses these formal devices and castoff objects to confront the fictions implicit in every portrait. On another level, she is questioning the possibility of portraiture in the late 20th Century—a time when every moment can be immediately preserved on a Betamax, Instamatic, or Xerox. Finally, *The Dutchess* inverts the way women have been perceived by men. An image of seduction has been replaced by objects from a sarcophagus. Instead of replicating reality, Thea investigates the various social codes that are at the root of each perception.

In *Horror Vacua*, the possibility of portraiture is examined from a very different angle. A wooden frame functions as the container for an oval shaped piece of plywood painted a pale, whitish green. Pencil lines divide the oval into four quarters, preparing it for a painting. A tin washboard has been placed behind both frame and oval, while tree branches and other wooden objects are affixed to the frame's front. In order to read this piece, the viewer must become an archaeologist sifting through the layers. Like *The Dutchess*, *Horror Vacua* is both a portrait and a biography. However, the story it tells is very different.

*Horror Vacua* is an emblematic inversion. The oval depicts no portrait. Except for the preparatory pencil lines and greenish ground, it is an empty surface waiting to be filled. It is a mirror that absorbs without reflecting. In using found materials, such as the tin washboard, to investigate traditional roles and conventional ways of seeing, the artist is suggesting that both have outlived their usefulness. *Horror Vacua*—the fear of empty space—is a warning. The artist knows that no portrait is possible as long as outmoded definitions exist. More importantly, she knows she must resist all temptations to fill the empty space—the clearing—with things from the past.

There is irony in the fact that Thea uses the debris of society to examine its continuing effect on our lives. Although these objects are castoffs, their definitions continue to restrain us. This is why portraiture forms an essential aspect of her work. Like the other pieces in the exhibition, *Horror Vacua* finds a way to examine the social codes implicit in earlier works of art. This is why the artist belongs to the tradition that breaks down the separation of painting and sculpture. The conflation is not just a formalistic experiment; in order to examine the past she must free herself from it.

In *Skyground (The Bride)*, Thea investigates the historical associations of the oval in yet another manner. Instead of presenting an “empty” center as in *Horror Vacua*, this work depicts one of the homeliest of creatures, the rhinoceros. Rather than mystifying her subject, as many portrait painters have done, the artist here offers us an unknowable animal. Whatever qualities we assign to it are a mirror of ourselves, not an accurate understanding of the animal. The rhinoceros remains apart from us. Placed within a frame and surrounded by detritus, the portrait becomes a pointed comment on what one expects to find when looking at portraits.

The artist knows that the history of portraiture records the various ways we have perceived ourselves and others. To begin to free both herself and us from these incarcerations, she must reveal the skeleton lying within this mode of pictorializing.

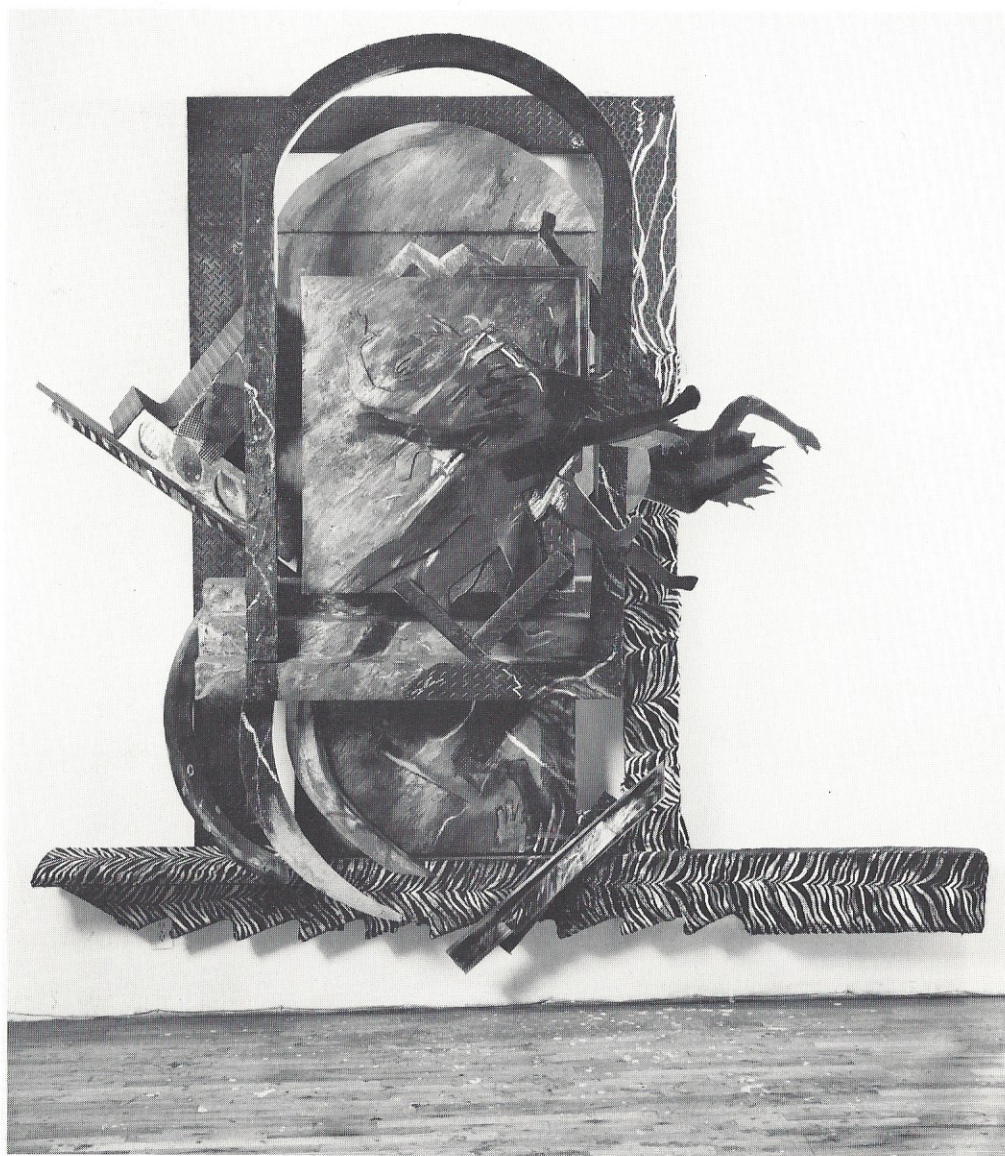
JOHN YAU



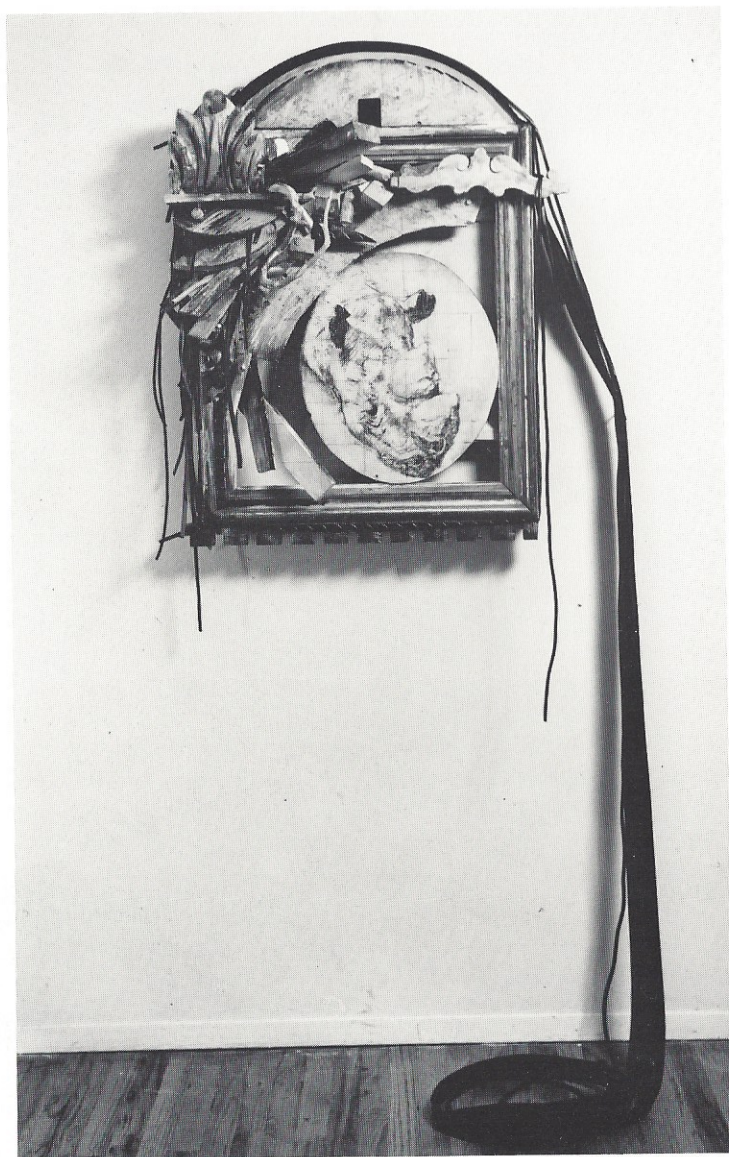
**Key Shark, 1985** oil on wood, 38" x 42" x 8"



**Horror Vacua, 1985** oil on wood, 54" x 31" x 8"

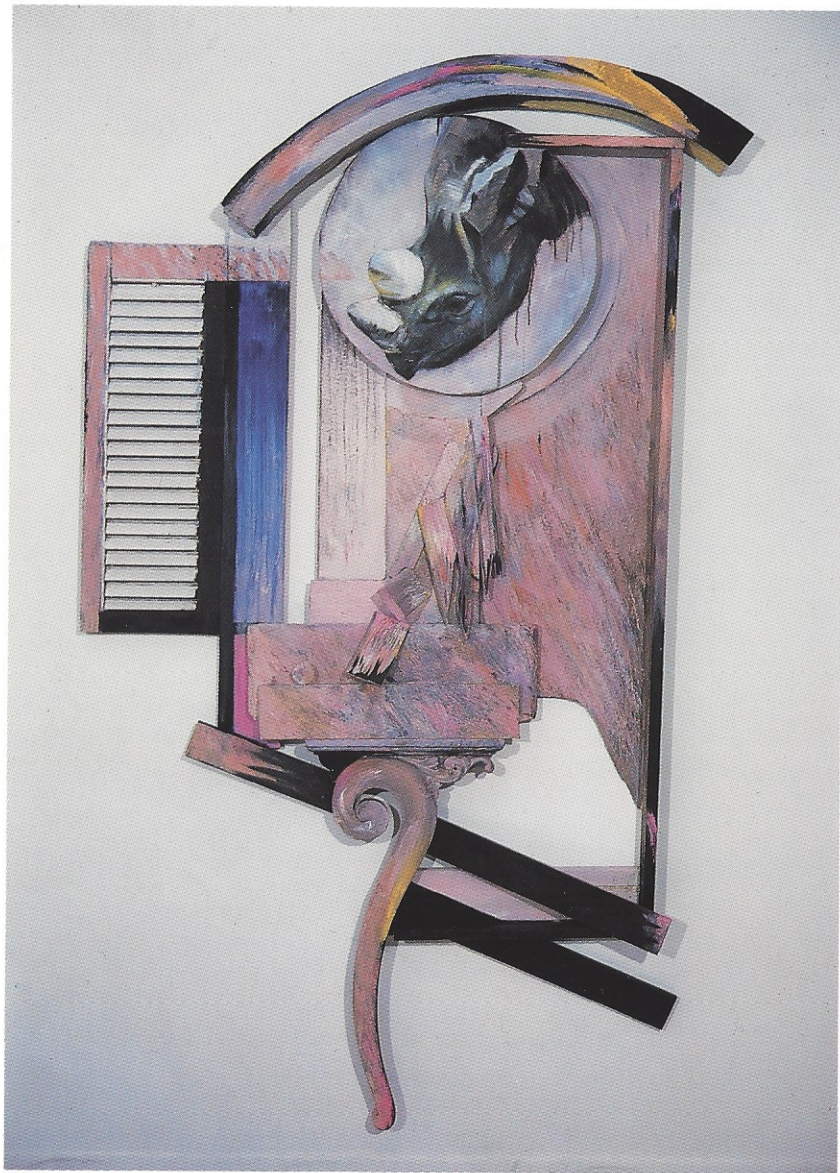


**Jamais Plus, 1984** oil on wood & mixed media, 120" x 120" x 30"



**Skyground (The Bride), 1985** oil on wood & rubber, 82" x 41" x 11"





**Rhino Mirror, 1985** oil on wood, 69" x 38" x 5"

## CAROLEE THEA

Born in Brooklyn, living in Manhattan.  
Hunter College, CUNY, M.A.  
Columbia University B.S.  
Skidmore College

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1984 Douglas College Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
- 1983 Adam L. Gimbel Gallery, N.Y.C.
- 1980,1 Frank Marino Gallery, N.Y.C.
- 1981 Morristown Museum, Morristown, NJ, (collaboration with P. Kaplan)
- 1977 A.I.R. Gallery, N.Y.C.
- 1974,5 14 Sculptors Gallery, N.Y.C.
- 1975 Kutztown State College, Kutztown, PA

### Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1985 Summit Art Center, Summit, NJ, *Interplay*, Wall Construction  
Lever House, N.Y.C. A.R.E.A. Siteworks, (photo documentation)
- 1984 Sculpture Center, N.Y.C. *Drawings*  
Bard College, Annendale on Hudson, NY Blum Art Center *LandMarks*, Site Work  
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, N.Y.C. *Heresies*, Wall Construction  
Sue Ellen Haber Gallery, N.Y.C., *Framed*, Wall Constructions  
Cranbrook Academy Museum, Bloomfield, MI, *View Point 1984, Out of Square.*  
Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT, "Intermedia", *Constructed Paintings*
- 1983 Alan Frumkin Gallery, N.Y.C., *Constructed Paintings*
- 1982 Skidmore College, Saratoga, NY, *Invitational*, Wall Constructions
- 1981 Syracuse University, Lowe Gallery, *All in Line*, Drawings
- 1980,1 Terry Dintenfass Gallery, N.Y.C., *All in Line.*  
Frank Marino Gallery, N.Y.C., *Two and Three Dimensions.*
- 1980 Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY, *Works on Paper*
- 1979 Ward's Island, N.Y.C., A.R.E.A. *Shoreline Sculpture*, Site Sculpture  
Bronx Museum, Bronx, NY, *Private Icon*, Wall Constructions
- 1978 O.I.A., N.Y.C., *Constructs*, Wall Construction
- 1974 Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY, Columbus Park Sculpture Competition  
College of New Rochelle, NY, Sculpture

### Selected Bibliography

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- Lewis, *Washington Post*, June, 1980
- Nashumi, *Arts Magazine*, May, 1980
- Schjeldahl, *New York Times*, March, 1980
- Alloway, *The Nation*, July, 1980
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- Frank, *New York Arts Journal*, December, 1976
- Heinemann, *Artforum*, April, 1975

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