

## ART

## Provocative Sculptures

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

**V**ISUALLY strong and loaded with potential for symbolic interpretation, Carolee Thea's robustly animated papier-mâché figurative sculpture at the Hofstra Museum makes a provocative installation.

Twisting and running, dozens of bodies seem charged not just with energy, but also with psychological force. Their rough, white-tone surfaces and modest scale of about 20 inches keep them distant from any aura of representation and allow them to serve broader, universal roles.

Ms. Thea can be aligned with artists who try to infuse their work with philosophical and introspective meanings. She sees these pieces as vehicles for reflecting the state of the world and places many in postures expressing fear and torment.

In the midst of international concerns about bombing, destruction and refugees, the once-uneasy relationship between modern art and renderings of angst seems to have disappeared.

In recent years, Ms. Thea has shown her earth works, papier-mâché figures, construct paintings and works on paper as installation pieces at a number of public and private galleries. Her last installation, at the Queens Museum, featured work created in conjunction with an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

For the present installation, which is titled "Images of Transformation," figures are presented in four separate but related groupings. Each grouping offers a different interpretation of the transformation theme.

Daphne, the mythological Greek nymph who was turned into a laurel tree as protection from the aggressive Apollo, is a perfect subject for symbolizing one kind of transformation.

In Ms. Thea's six-unit "Daphne" piece, the various sculptural renderings show the figure with feet and hair sending off multiple rootlike appendages, as if in the process of metamorphosis. Papier-mâché's natural fragility, roughness and lack of stability reinforce the impact.

In addition, the sense of bodies disintegrating lends credence to the artist's desire to have the tormented figures appear as metaphors for a larger, timeless message of oppression.

Messages sensed most readily as universal come from the exhibition's dominant work, "Nineteen Ninety," an eight-foot-square blue field suspended some 20 feet above eye level.

Against this richly resonant surface, which can be a metaphor for celestial sky, other worldly space or a mysterious void, about 40 figures in agitated postures rush and tumble along a sweeping perimeter path. They tip, fall and dash, propelled by or acting against an unseen force and visually defy gravity.

A number of postures derive from Michelangelo, and the whole evokes

aspects of that master's Sistine Chapel, particularly the chapel ceiling and the Last Judgment fresco. Transformation here is from the earthly to the spiritual, or from earth to heaven.

In both "Nineteen Ninety" and the Daphne series, the vigorously active bodies are attached at just one point to their blue-painted aluminum backdrop, but are seen as thrusting freely through imaginary unbounded space. They could be part of any narrative, conscious or unconscious.

The velvety, deep ultramarine blue panels in both pieces suggest infinity, and in the larger work the evocative blue is sensed as having independent substance and profound meaning.

Ms. Thea eliminates spatial boundaries in "The Journey," a long, two-segment wall piece, by overlapping and combining two- and three-dimensional forms. There are attached and relief figures, and also painted images.

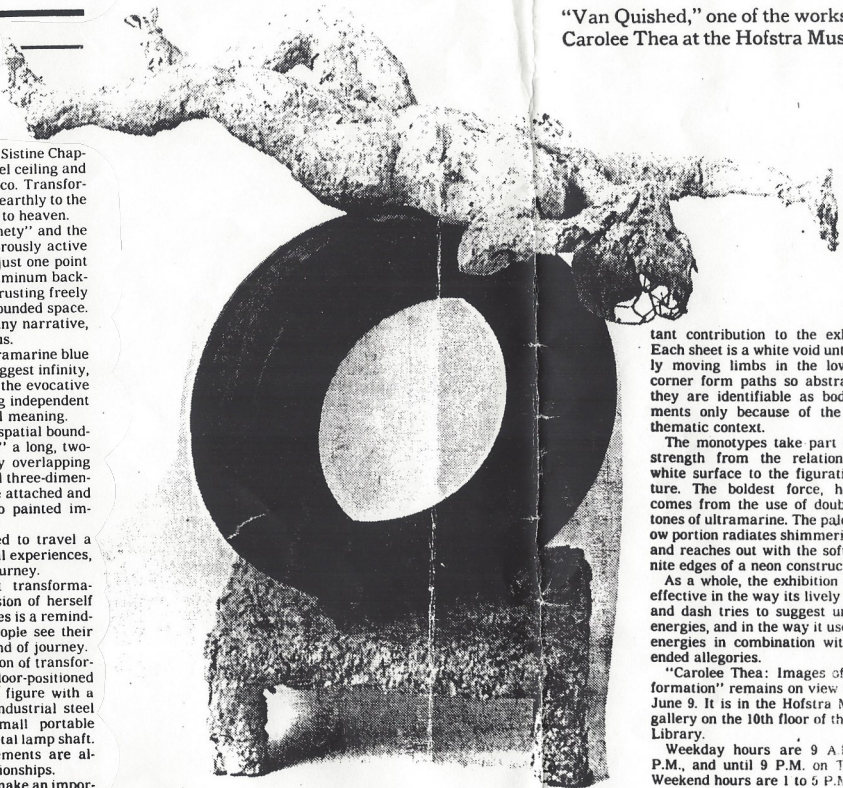
Viewers are expected to travel a route of changing visual experiences, simulating a mental journey.

Journeys are about transformation. Ms. Thea's inclusion of herself among the figure images is a reminder that all creative people see their life and career as a kind of journey.

A fourth interpretation of transformation comes from floor-positioned pieces that combine a figure with a found object like an industrial steel washer, wheels, a small portable ironing board and a metal lamp shaft. Readings for both elements are altered by the new relationships.

Several monotypes make an impor-

"Van Quished," one of the works by Carolee Thea at the Hofstra Museum.



tant contribution to the exhibition. Each sheet is a white void until swiftly moving limbs in the lower left corner form paths so abstract that they are identifiable as body fragments only because of the show's thematic context.

The monotypes take part of their strength from the relationship of white surface to the figurative gesture. The boldest force, however, comes from the use of double echo tones of ultramarine. The paler shadow portion radiates shimmering light and reaches out with the soft indefinite edges of a neon construction.

As a whole, the exhibition is quite effective in the way it lively sparkle and dash tries to suggest universal energies, and in the way it uses these energies in combination with open-ended allegories.

"Carolee Thea: Images of Transformation" remains on view through June 9. It is in the Hofstra Museum gallery on the 10th floor of the AXMINSTER Library.

Weekday hours are 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., and until 9 P.M. on Tuesday. Weekend hours are 1 to 5 P.M. R