

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

FINE ART | By Peter Plagens

Breaking Out of Convention

Judith Shea

◆ Kent Fine Art

210 Eleventh Ave., (212) 365-9500
Through June 28

Two different forces have long tugged at Judith Shea (b. 1948), who mustered out of Parsons School of Design with a bachelor's degree in fashion design in 1969: the thrill of putting her exquisite design sense to work in costume collaborations with the likes of the choreographer Trisha Brown and the Eye and Ear Theater Company, and the compelling visual logic of Minimal art. Not surprisingly, Ms. Shea is best known for her bronze sculptures of empty, free-standing garments rendered in very reductive form. Some critics have viewed her work as, to quote a review from the 1990s, a "losing battle to modernize the classical tradition"; others see in it a powerful feminist leitmotif. While both sides are right, they each underplay the fact that Ms. Shea's sculpture is beautiful in a slightly eerie way.

Her current exhibition—a superb one—consists of seven new sculptures, including five life-size standing figures and two busts on high pedestals, with the human presence primary and the couture (albeit austere runway-worthy in itself) secondary. Three of the figures are of famous artists (Louise Bourgeois, Elizabeth Catlett and Marisol), though—with Ms. Shea's austere attitude toward likeness—one might be forgiven for having to learn this fact from the gallery checklist. Proud, stately, unaccessorized (save for Ms. Catlett's cane and Marisol's mallet and chisel), the ensemble makes a convincing statement about both art (no flim-flam, please) and life (soldier on!). What more can an art exhibition do?

