

Artforum

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Holding It In, 1983, cast iron,
19 x 13 x 3 in.

JUDITH SHEA

Judith Shea's sartorial themes make for elegant, witty sculptures. Whether she casts a dress in bronze, iron, canvas, or any more traditional haberdasher's material, she winds up with a modern figurative archetype and a succinct accommodation of our two abiding formal referents, human anatomy and the exposed esthetic of minimalism. Shea never strays far from the dressmaker's dummy or from the standard sectional organization of sewing patterns, which also places her work within shouting distance of the altered ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp and, surprisingly perhaps, a mere whisper away from some of Duchamp's less-known, later sculptural objects such as *Wedge of Chastity* and *Female Fig Leaf*, both of 1951, cast in bronze, and bearing fashion messages.

The dummy's suggested presence has the further, and felicitous, effect of transporting Shea's figures out of the realm of currency (the domain occupied by the tabloid-Gotham configurations of Robert Longo), giving them the status of mythic Modern citizens. Shea's female forms—bodices, skirts, full dresses, sleeve insets with darts—stand in as

women of substance who, while thoroughly contemporary, denote the original Gotham: a wartime and rather Amazonian New York when women hit the work force. Shea's own response to these various signals is anything but dogmatic. She is laconic. *Crusader*, 1982, a cast-iron sculpture laid out on the floor, is a halter top and skirt welded papoose-like at the "seams," whose near-epileptic stiffness suggests latterday, lightweight armor; *Form and Function*, 1983, in cast-iron and upright on a pedestal, takes the shape of a tight, straight, slit skirt; *Holding It In*, 1983, is a cast-iron wall relief of a crooked elbow with a seamed-in bust; *Taking Shape*, 1983, a horizontal bronze floor piece, suggests Eve-as-Adam, in a state of becoming, in a cocktail dress; *Black Dress*, 1983, in wool, felt, wax, and india ink, stands on a pedestal in mid stride, a headless and wingless victory.

In the formal-developments department Shea (who has also designed wearable clothing and, recently, performance wear for Trisha Brown's dance company) now holds a position that Joel Shapiro used to have more or less to himself, that of fusion specialist. Shea, however, is never coy.

—LISA LIEBMANN