

JUDITH SHEA: MONUMENT STATUARY

Max Protetch Gallery

by PETER SCHJELDAHL

AN INTERESTING THING ABOUT SKIN IS that it has two sides. The same goes for clothes (which might be considered elective skin, as skin is compulsory clothing). Inside, there is the important stuff that skin protects. Outside, there is the world. (My insides are "world," too, I suppose; only I don't believe it.)

I think most people feel mainly that their skin is the outer limit of themselves. It follows that most people are lousy dressers, unalert to meanings of clothes beyond comfort and concealment. (I am this type to an extreme. I never know what I look like and so rely on friends to inform me, gently.) But I am convinced that some people feel, in effect, that their skin is the inner boundary of the world, whose pressure — a pressure above all of gazes — they sense acutely. They dress great. Mutual incomprehension between the two types constitutes one of the fundamental misunderstandings without which social life would be rational and boring.

Is it possible to be both types? I fancy that Judith Shea is, reversible in her own skin, and that this makes her a terrific sculptor. A fashion student who turned artist in the mid-1970s, Shea over the years has created a body of work (or work of bodies) electric with an alternating current of self-consciousness and world-consciousness, a dialectic that she extends to problems of sculpture after Minimalism, sexuality under feminism, and everybody's being-in-the-world all the time. She has a frequent flaw of forcing more discursive meaning into sculpture than that mute medium can manage gracefully. Her current show of four bronze figures or figure-fragments creaks a bit with ponderous philosophizing. But Shea's sensitivity to the metaphysics of skin, a sculptural equivalent of perfect pitch, never fails her, unless perhaps by making her think she can get away with anything.

Shea cleanly fulfills the promise of this show's title, "Monument Statuary." Without being much larger than lifesize, her statues are as satisfyingly monumental as the classical precedents they headily comment on. I would want one for my formal garden, if I had a formal garden.

Shea emerged in an artistic tendency of the late '70s, known as New Image, that strove to insinuate figuration into painting and sculpture that had been caught in a cul de sac of abstraction by '60s formalism and Minimalism. She made a sensation with empty bronze or iron casts of articles of clothing — part of a blouse on the wall, a one-piece bathing suit front-down on the floor (*Crawl*), a pedestaled "little black dress" — swelled by the bodies of invisible wearers. Earlier she had sewn or constructed subtle caricatures of generic garments, a lexicon of fashion in odd materials. I well recall the kick of free-standing "checked pants" made of square-meshed wire fencing. (Shea is never not witty.) But the cast clothes were her major coup. They were, and still are, genius-touched. They brought a wealth of content and pizzazz into sculpture faithful to the self-evident literalness of Minimalism.

If nothing by Shea since then has had equal impact, it is because big changes in the art world drained urgency from her preoccupations. In retrospect, New Image was the last truly New York-generated modern-art evolution, eclipsed in the early '80s by the rangier agendas of German and Italian painters, English assemblage sculptors, French-theoried photographic artists, and international-circuit installational show-offs. Shea's once definitively New Yorkish characteristics of modernist idealism and stylistic erudition (for instance, in a startling bronze of a pair of shorts alluding at once to Brancusi and break-dancing) passed into a blind spot of contemporary taste. There she has struggled to reground her enterprise with reference to an ancient classical past and to present-day social and psychological vicissitudes.

Opus Notum Galateae Unum (The Only Known Work of Galatea), in the present show, is a gustily romantic bronze of classical drapery swathing a striding male figure from neck to ankles. The shape of one arm is visible beneath the fabric, held against the figure's chest. There are gaping holes where the other arm and the head would protrude. Metal posts in place of feet anchor the figure to a marble pedestal inscribed with the work's Latin title, which wryly surmises that Pygmalion's famous creature had her own fling at magic-making sexual obsession. The presence/absence of an idealized man is indeed magical, as a symbol of longing. Does the man long for the creator who longs for him? Able to manifest himself only through what contains him, he cannot say.

Like Shea's earlier work, the Galatea plays on the fact that, while fitting and projecting the human form, clothing breaks it up into parts. (Skin has no edges. Clothes do.) Here, clothes make the man, but only as much of him as they can reach. The same trope appears in *Post Balzac*, another pedestaled empty garment featuring a sex reversal. Here the robe of Rodin's mighty author gapes on the void of a body whose narrow shoulders, apparent in the drape of the sculpture's wonderful cascade of heavy bronze, indicate that it is (was? would be?) female. (This is the imaginary being I want installed in my imaginary garden.) While verging on smart-alecky, the sex-reversal motif is not a problem when I am looking at the work, to which it gives a decisive skew: the artist finding an efficient way to take personal possession of intimidatingly grand models.

Relatively troublesome, though still enjoyable, are the show's two other pieces, tableaux of statuary and fabric. *Apollo* is a splendid naked male torso (Shea can really sculpt, delivering exotically archaic pleasures of academic modeling) with, hung on the wall behind it, a schematic overcoat in stiff black linen. (This coat form, folded double lengthwise, recurs in her work; she has said it derives from seeing men on commuter trains fold their coats that way, in a gesture of peculiarly masculine fastidiousness.) You know what? I am disinclined to analyse Shea's *Apollo*, balking at a semantic gap between the work's halves that could be filled in, I suspect, only by an explaining-the-joke kind of exegesis. To put it another way, the classical torso and the abstract coat categorically repel each other, and to force them together strikes me as an uneconomical use of mental energy.

Shea's ambition to communicate can overstrain her means. The problem is interesting, in addition to distressing, because symptomatic of a present artistic climate that demands much of artists in terms of socially engaged meaning while giving them only the vaguest orientation in terms of style. As it happens, exactly that kind of dilemma — between responsiveness to the world and loyalty to self, between outside and inside — has been the dynamic of Shea's best work. Her case merits patience.