

## Rebecca Johnson

Larry Becker

43 N. 3rd St., Philadelphia, 215/925-5389

Rebecca Johnson filled Becker's newly expanded space with nearly 40 mixed-media sculptures and paintings—the largest show of this emerging Philadelphia artist's career. Her life-sized sculptural gestures transformed the gallery into a performance space, achieving a movement and atmosphere reminiscent of early Martha Graham productions.

Indeed, Johnson's work seems nostalgic for abstraction's heyday, when it so ruled culture that Alfred Barr and others could confidently consider it (in its tidy categories of geometric-and-rational or organic-and-intuitive) to be the glorious culmination of Western art. Johnson's work carries traces of the old bravura, as in *Fan Dance*, an ecstatic gesture in painted metal skewered to an Ionic pedestal.

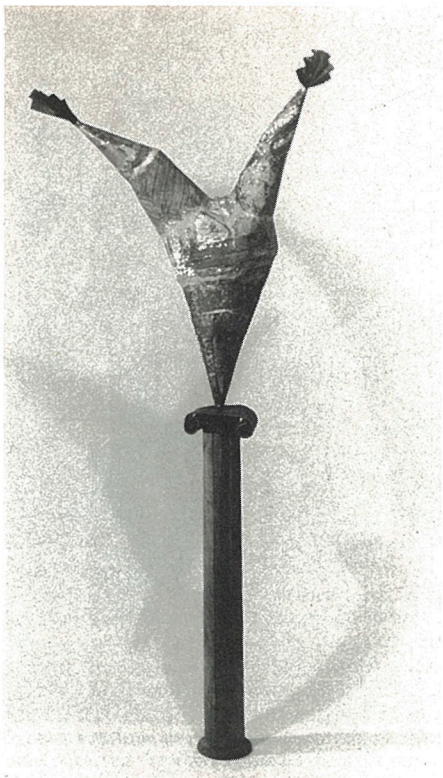
But in general these idiosyncratic works resist the old purity and certainty in favor of a less heroic, more contemporary equivocation. Although painstakingly crafted, Johnson's assemblages—paint on canvas, wood, stone, pebbles, wire, nets, tin, gourds—give an impression of being accidental and serendipitous. While they are pleasing enough in their measured disposition and sturdy construction to be pure studies in form, they hover at the edge of representation. *Dreamer* is a barely carved but humanoid branch on whose head is balanced a rough but intricately woven wood sphere, while *Old World* is a Constructivist composition that's gone off-balance, its constituent parts dancing in narrative disequilibrium. Even Johnson's titles reflect the

skepticism of the 1980s—for instance, three pieces are titled *What Was*, *What Is*, *What If*.

If this sculpture puzzles in its ambivalence—making heroic gestures and undercutting them with the appearance of happenstance, alluding to and denying grand passions—then Johnson may be finding a sculptural equivalent to our longing but uncommitted “thirtysomething” voices. It is unclear whether Johnson's art is setting itself out to challenge the underpinnings of abstraction or, by equivocating within the genre, just wants to make it uncomfortable. But it is unquestionable that work such as Johnson's is reclaiming abstraction from history and allowing it to live a richly nuanced contemporary life.

Price range: \$300 to \$4,000.

Anne Shuster Hunter



REBECCA JOHNSON, "Fan Dance," mixed media, 68" x 26" x 12", 1988. Photo courtesy of Larry Becker.