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Left: Joan Tanner, *Yellow Mesh*, 2020. Flex a Trac™, painted plastic mesh, painted plastic sheeting, wooden elements, metal rods, all-thread, rope, zip ties, hardware, painted sheet metal. Courtesy of Joan Tanner, © 2022. Right: Joan Tanner, *Staunch Drawing #2*, 2018. Oil stick, oil pastel, chalk, charcoal on Caslon. Courtesy of Joan Tanner, © 2022

Santa Barbara Museum of Art Presents *Out of Joint: Joan Tanner*

Exhibition is the most extensive presentation of artist's work in California

February 12 – May 14, 2023

September 15, 2022 — The Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA) is pleased to present *Out of Joint*, an exhibition of sculptures and large drawings by Joan Tanner. Presenting a total of 20 artworks, including two new installations and a new sculpture, this is the most extensive exhibition of Tanner's work in California to date and represents a homecoming for an artist whose first solo exhibition was held at SBMA in 1967. All of the artworks are from the past ten years.

Driven by a "curiosity to engage contradiction" and an impulse to disrupt "assumptions about spatial relations," Joan Tanner is an artist whose practice has encompassed many mediums, including painting, photography, video, sculpture, and assemblage. Consistently she has been preoccupied with ideas of history, impermanence, and inconsistency in her exploration of materials and form, creating, over a six-decades career, a large and provocative body of work that challenges the viewer's imagination and defies simple categorization.

While she originally trained as a painter, by the late 1980s Tanner began to explore the potential of working in three dimensions, a transition that anticipated the shift to large-scale installations and sculptures—made with what she refers

to as “generic” materials—that have occupied her over the past twenty years. While the sculptures and drawings in this exhibition are recent, they represent the fruit of more than sixty years of steady labor in the studio.

The earliest work in the exhibition, *Flying Buttresses* (2013), began life as an element in a previous installation, its title a witty identifying sobriquet based on its form rather than a reference to function. Indeed, as opposed to the structures employed to distribute massive weight in gothic architecture, these elements are constructed from light industrial materials held in tension, suggesting an orderliness that could collapse into chaos. As James Glisson, SBMA Curator of Contemporary Art explains, “The splayed rods suggest force vectors with internal stresses that simultaneously brace the buttresses in an arched position but also could also easily pull them apart.”

Joan Tanner’s aesthetic is one of unfinishedness that employs a discordant vocabulary of objects and forms that draw attention to ideas of order, durability, and resistance to orthodoxy and the inevitability of change. In *Yellow Mesh* (2020), bundled and spray painted plastic fencing is arranged against an awkward cluster of wooden placards, supported on steel tubes held together with clamps, whose stability is dependent on an array of ropes and pulleys attached to the gallery walls and ceiling. An unruly structure, *Mire* (2022), conceived especially for this exhibition, expands into and across the newly renovated McCormick Gallery. A large conglomeration of metal rods and painted vinyl tubes that intermittently pierce packed wads of brightly painted netting, it both embraces and challenges the confines of the gallery space.

The mass-produced plastics and construction materials in the sculptures have no emotive power, no artistic pretense. “I bunch painted netting, drape plastic sheeting, and puncture mounds of each with inserts of vinyl tubing. These gestures build up density becoming more architectural as I work without the necessity of an armature, never coalescing into a solid form.” Rather than trying to tame disorder, Tanner’s peculiar sculptures channel entropy and make the loose ends possibilities for endless revision.

While over time, Tanner’s work has moved towards three dimensions, throughout her career she has grounded her activity in the practice of drawing. While at times it tests design ideas that will be realized elsewhere in her work, in the main she employs drawing as a self-directing, exploratory medium. In this context her drawings can be considered “Thought Forms,” autonomous works that represent free forms of expression for grasping and clarifying creative ideas and emotional experiences.



Joan Tanner, *End of Water #2*, 2020. Oil stick, oil pastel, chalk, Conté crayon on folded Strathmore paper. Courtesy of Joan Tanner, © 2022

Like her sculptures, it is the process of drawing—its tools, methods, and restrictions—that determine the final form of these works. The titles she employs result from a combination of her interests and daily concerns as much as from the suggestions made by the image. For instance, *End of Water* (2020) might evoke the fragility of California’s infrastructure and looming desertification from climate change with marks and patterns that allude to maps as well as diagrams seen in science textbooks. However, these suggestive visual allusions do not coalesce into obvious analogies. The viewer toggles between title and image with a compulsion to break the code, but no key exists to make that happen. The drawings are a tour de force in the spectrum of mark making; heavily worked impasto, delicate filigree webs, layers of

color that fade to white, woven patterns like folds of mitochondria and cell surfaces, lines tangled together like membranes or sinews in an animal's body.

Tanner's ideas evolve through chance as she becomes absorbed in their invention, so that the outcome is not necessarily the ending she had in mind. It's an axiom that is as true in her sculptures and installations as it is of her drawings. Hers, however, is not a vague or unintentional activity, but one that shifts restlessly between seemingly contradictory forms and methods. Bringing about both visual connectivities and their disjunctions, flux is a principle that underscores and unifies her work, even as her drawings, sculptures, and installations make visible the fissures and breaks that exist in any unifying theory.

Bio

In 1957, Joan Tanner earned a B.F.A. in studio art at the University of Wisconsin and has regularly exhibited since the late 1960s. Among others, she has had solo shows at the Contemporary Art Center (Cincinnati, OH), Suyama Space (Seattle, WA), Speed Art Museum (Louisville, KY), Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College (Los Angeles, CA), Weatherspoon Art Museum (Greensboro, NC), and Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Her work is in many public collections, including Albertina, Vienna; the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum (PAFA); New York Public Library; Getty Research Institute; Harvard University; Weatherspoon Art Museum; and Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Over the years, she has been a visiting lecturer at the University of California Santa Barbara; Ohio University, Athens; Illinois State University, Normal; and the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

This exhibition is co-curated by James Glisson, Curator of Contemporary Art, SBMA, and Julien Robson, Director, Great Meadows Foundation, Louisville, KY.

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is one of the finest museums on the West coast and is celebrated for the superb quality of its permanent collection. Its mission is to integrate art into the lives of people through internationally recognized exhibitions and special programs, as well as the thoughtful presentation of its permanent collection.

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1130 State Street, Santa Barbara, CA.

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