

Joel Shapiro

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REVIEW - Joel Shapiro

BY MAX L. FELDMAN

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Main image: Joel Shapiro, 2017, installation view, PACE, London. Courtesy: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, and PACE, London; photograph: Brian Griffiths

New Yorker Joel Shapiro's first show at Pace London comprises seven vibrantly painted angular wood sculptures and some recent gouaches on paper. Placed directly on the floor or suspended by cords from the walls and ceiling, the sculptures' severe angles are offset by their bright colouring, which lends a playful feel. Shapiro works like a geometrist run wild, crafting gaze-resistant warped prisms that cannot be fully perceived from any single angle. They reveal their secrets only by forcing the viewer to move around their irregular faces and overlapping vertices.

Careful observation is rewarded. The light conditions (from overhead or streaming through the gallery's long window) affect the viewer's already partial perspective by covering the surfaces in uneven shadows. This alters them such that the paint looks matte or patchy depending on the time of day or angle of vision, deepening the declivities in *Really Blue* (after all) and elongating the curves on *Flush* (both 2016).

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Joel Shapiro, 2017, installation view, PACE, London. Courtesy: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and PACE Gallery, London; photograph: Brian Griffiths

It would be a mistake, however, to treat them as ‘picture puzzles’ to be reconstructed in your mind’s eye. They have no ‘original’ regular form, as if they were distortions of mathematical constructions that need to be corrected after the fact. This is also true of the gouaches, which originate as pairs made by blotting compositions on clean paper. This creates a mirror image that Shapiro then complicates by adding new colours or changing the orientation of the paper. The sculptures’ mangled geometries and the shifting conditions of visibility make them what they are, so you can never recover your first glance like a photograph or unsee the inconsistencies.

Shapiro counters the sculptures’ illusionism by foregrounding their material fabrication. Three-millimetre plywood is used to make hollow forms, which makes it possible to hang Yellow Then, Orange, and Flush (all 2016) from the ceiling. From a distance, these look like solid constructions; up close, they seem to melt into air, appearing almost weightless. They resemble constructivist architecture models reimagined as maniacal interior design: a twisted dinner table in *OK Green* (2016) or an elevated chair in *Untitled* (2017). Mundane objects become monuments, only to be undermined by the visibility of the screws and glue that holding them together, while scuff-marks, fingerprints and a painted-over trade sticker reveal processes of construction and transportation.



Joel Shapiro, 2017, installation view, PACE, London. Courtesy: Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and PACE Gallery, London; photograph: Brian Griffiths

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Really Blue (after all) and Yellow May (2016) are the most complex and peculiar objects in the exhibition, making the deformed cuboids of the other pieces look comparatively straightforward. Really Blue (after all) resembles a thick, contorted rocking horse whose body parts have been haphazardly jammed together. A cuboid head sits on a gradually narrowing triangular prism neck and its awkward, two-part polygon body tilts into the air. Depending on your angle, Yellow May could be a fluorescent iceberg with one threatening triangular peak, a sorrowful cardboard box bending in the wind or, when the shadow falls on its overhanging surface, a deceptively solid pyramid. They stand at a diagonal from each other, either side of a dividing wall that partitions the space, the awkward innocence of the former intensifying the danger suggested by the latter.

Shapiro realizes his interest in anthropomorphic and architectonic form through a set of contradictions: he subverts the grandeur of monumental sculpture by minimizing its scale, exchanging solidity with rickety hardware store materials and tempering its formal austerity with bright colours. Though there is an element of public sculpture in Shapiro's work *Verge* (2003-08), a commission for the nearby 23 Savile Row, comprises four bronze cuboids that seem to hover above the street – for the most part its energies are turned inwards, creating private experiences, seemingly untroubled by the political ambitions that often breathe life into such projects.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘Joel Shapiro’ Review: Forms in Flight

A career overview of a master of Minimalist abstraction, with a focus on a new, site-specific work.

Willard Spiegelman

May 23, 2016



Joel Shapiro's '20 Elements' (2004-05). PHOTO: KEVIN TODORA

Instead of giving Joel Shapiro another retrospective — this 74-year-old sculptor has had several — the Nasher Sculpture Center is taking a different approach to the idea of a career overview.

Through Aug. 21, a show called simply “Joel Shapiro” allows visitors to have a modest backward look at art from the range of a long career and, more interestingly, see a new site-specific, untitled work that does what any creation by an important artist should do: Extending his reach rather than merely repeating his past moves.

Long revered as a master of Minimalist abstraction who has worked in bronze and cast iron as well as wood, and whose art plays with the elements we most prize in sculpture — form, volume, space, and even (in much of his recent work) color — Mr. Shapiro has produced an oeuvre both solid and light, serious and whimsical.

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Joel Shapiro's 'Really Blue (After All)' (2016). PHOTO: KEVIN TODORA

Since 2010 he has also been using buoyancy as a principle, suspending simple pieces in complex spatial installations. (Think Calder, but more solid, and not swaying in the breeze.) The five new pieces here, all painted wood, do not disappoint. We experience them separately and, more profoundly, as a single environment. Looking like a throne, the largest piece, “Really Blue (After All),” sits on the floor; it also repeats Mr. Shapiro’s lifelong interest in abstraction bearing traces of a human figure. Like all the others, this one (roughly 8½ -by-6½ -by-4 feet) began life as a maquette, and then grew into itself as a series of hollow wooden parts joined by dowels.

Color, casein with pigments, came last. Mr. Shapiro has worked with brightly painted woods since the 1980s. He said he knew he wanted blue for the largest piece. The other four, with titles both bland and flippant (“Orange,” “OK Green,” “Yellow Then,” and “Flush”), are suspended by almost invisible guy wires at various heights, from the ceiling, floor and walls. They are dynamic, poised like dancers who have taken flight or, to change the image, like a quartet of figures coming in to pay homage to that big blue throne.

It’s hard to imagine these pieces having as much impact when they are removed from the site for which they were intended. That’s because they complement their space, and vice versa. The dimensions of the sublime gallery are 32 feet by 110 feet. Its height is 16 feet at the wall line, 17 at the apex where Renzo Piano’s signature eggshell rooftop allows light to filter gently down.

Mr. Shapiro modestly changed the work to fit the space. He softened the hue of “Orange.” All four of the floating pieces were originally hung higher than they are now, but Mr. Shapiro said he wanted to keep the viewer’s eye away from the ceiling, so he brought them down.

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Installation view of the exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center. PHOTO: KEVIN TODORA

The works' shimmering colors contrast with the gallery's sumptuously muted wood and stone. The red, blue and yellow pieces cluster at the gallery's street end; the more muted green and orange ones are at the back, giving on to the garden. The heaviest, "OK Green," weighs in at 70 pounds. It is an open, floating, triangular pyramid, looking like an upended table. The others, more compact, have differing planar surfaces. The 12-pound, seven-sided "Yellow Then," also floating, is what you see first, framed by a doorway, before you enter the gallery. All the pieces emit brightness and clarity, as well as a luxurious inhabiting of their space. They respond as much to the surrounding air as to the materials of the building.

Like any site-specific work, this one alluringly requires watching from multiple positions as you move around, taking it in as a whole greater than its parts. Things realign as they shift in and out of sight. For me, the best viewing came from the western end of the hall, on the garden side, facing onto the street at the front entrance. I looked, as the pieces seemed to rise before and beyond me, culminating in "Flush," almost at a vanishing point, all Euclidean geometry and anti-gravitational charm.

As they enter the museum, visitors are greeted by "20 Elements" (2004-05), another Shapiro piece, purchased by Nancy A. Nasher (the late Raymond Nasher's daughter) and her husband, David J. Haemisegger. It normally occupies space in NorthPark, a Dallas shopping mall that Raymond opened in 1965, in which he installed pieces from his collection. It is a playful ensemble of plain wooden rectangles as colorful as a crayon set. It is capricious and deep, expansive and solid. In 2005 it was displayed at the Musée d'Orsay beside Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's "La Danse" (1865-69), which captures dancers' movement and precarious balance in the solidity of stone. What Carpeaux could do in one medium, Mr. Shapiro did in another one, making a work equally complex, even convoluted, but also buoyant, light and sweet-spirited.

Other Shapiro pieces collected by Nasher and his wife, Patsy, appear throughout the museum and the garden. A recent series of works on paper (another medium Mr. Shapiro has always loved) hangs on the walls, shaded from the light. In these, abstraction remains but geometry has given way to biomorphic, Rorschach-like inkblots. Brushwork supplements poured ink to make pictures as luminous, and almost as three-dimensional, as Mr. Shapiro's sculptures, like so many smaller side chapels in a grand cathedral.

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The New York Times

Joel Shapiro: 'Sculpture and Drawings 1969-1972'

ROBERTA SMITH

MARCH 14, 2013



“One Hand Forming” is a log pile of bumpy, sausage-like shapes. Credit Collection of the artist and The Museum of Modern Art

As this elegant exhibition demonstrates, the sculptor Joel Shapiro began his career in the late 1960s, making works that reduced art to small, unassuming, hand-centered gestures. It was as if Minimalism, the dominant style, were too much to deal with. He wasn't reacting alone, of course. In the phenomenon soon known as Post-Minimalism, all kinds of artists his age were applying Minimalist tenets—Donald Judd's notion of composition being “just one thing after another,” for example—in ways that favored repetition but implicated afresh the body, materials and life itself.

Mr. Shapiro took drawing and sculptures back to basics. He made drawings by repeatedly pressing his finger to an ink pad and then onto pieces of paper, mimicking the rows and grids of Minimalism, but irregularly. In a mural-size effort, the prints are big and deliberate, forming long, wavering horizontal rows.

On smaller sheets, the prints can be dense and atomlike, resembling an incoherent, color-free pointillism. They can stutter along, running out of ink and then replenishing themselves; or they may be completely free-range, finger-tippy and even red.

In sculpture, Mr. Shapiro took up clay and severely limited his forming processes, as his titles reflect. “One Hand Forming” is a log pile of bumpy, sausagelike shapes, 77 in all, in fired terra cotta. “Two

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Hands Forming” consists of 93 more adept and spherical shapes, clustered like little cannon balls on the floor.

For a third work, Mr. Shapiro made small clay pancakes, quartered them, and reassembled the pieces, each time in a different combination. It is as if the eggs of several dozen of Frank Stella’s parallelogram paintings had hatched and were flailing about, struggling to survive. These works are immensely appealing, nonthreatening and even childlike, but they are every bit as intent as Richard Serra’s early lead prop pieces were about getting sculpture up off the floor — where Carl Andre left it.