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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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‘Joel Shapiro’ Review: Forms in Flight

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



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

By **WILLARD SPIEGELMAN**

May 23, 2016 5:49 p.m. ET

Dallas

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.

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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.

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 81/2 -by-61/2 -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.

Joel Shapiro’s ‘Really Blue (After All)’ (2016). *PHOTO: KEVIN TODORA*

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.

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

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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.

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

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.

Mr. Spiegelman writes about the arts for the Journal.