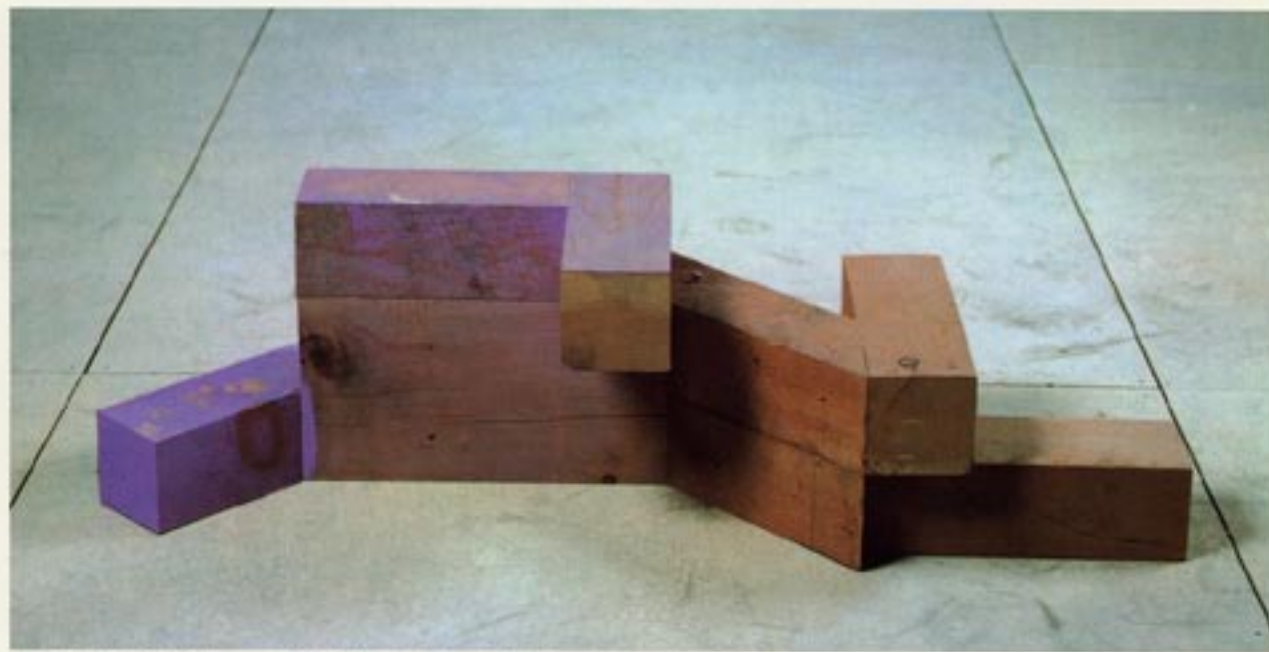


DIRECTIONS

JOEL SHAPIRO: PAINTED WOOD

DECEMBER 2, 1987 - FEBRUARY 28, 1988



Untitled, 1982. Oil on wood, 12 3/8 x 43 1/4 x 13 1/4 inches. Douglas S. Cramer, Los Angeles. Photo: eeva-inkeri.

JOEL SHAPIRO'S EVOCATIVE SMALL-scale objects of the early 1970s earned him a position as one of the most important sculptors of his generation. These diminutive houses, chairs, horses, and bridges milled or cast in bronze or iron were radical departures from the large-scale, reductive sculptures that had dominated the previous decade. While these metal sculptures initially established his reputation, it is Shapiro's figurative work, in particular his painted wood sculpture, that fully attests to his achievement of mollifying the rigorous hard edge of Minimalism.

Wood is an organic material that grows vertically against gravity. The physical disposition of trees, a torso-like trunk crowned by spreading branches and limbs, evokes the human figure. Lumber, the industrial form of wood, is sections of trees, stripped bare of bark and milled into varying sizes of geometric shapes in order to facilitate assembly into structures that require precisely fitting junctions. In his painted wood sculpture from the past fourteen years, Shapiro has created a body of work that essentially fuses and balances the vital aspects of this natural material with the imposed manmade regularity of lumber.

Wood has been used for sculpture throughout the history of art. Because it is less durable than metal or stone, however, fewer works have survived. Making sculpture of wood requires techniques different from those used with clay, bronze, wax, or marble. Because wood can be worked in many ways—cut, carved, gouged, glued—it affords the artist a flexible, more experimental working method. From the second decade of this century, Pablo Picasso's painted wood wall reliefs, which hover equivocally between the realms of painting and sculpture, are important examples of an artist using these materials to advance the conventions of art toward new horizons. In general, applying paint to wood can lend a layer of meaning beyond mere decoration, for the paint seals the wood and, in another sense, clothes it.

For Shapiro, paint has many functions. In an untitled work from 1973 (fig. 1) he used paint to veil the small horse mounted by a rider facing backward, spraying it in a spontaneous gesture. Given the spatial demands and nonobjectivity the sculpture of the 1960s had established, he thought it necessary to conceal this vulnerable, image-oriented work, which is clearly personal in nature. Despite its size, the object commands considerable space on the wall; in that light, its scale is not in fact small. Although this work can be discussed in formal terms, the drips of green spray paint signal its emotional impact. The sculpture addresses



Figure 1. Untitled, 1973. Enamel on wood, 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 1 1/8 inches. Michael and Nadia Goedhuis, London. Photo: Geoffrey Clements.

Shapiro's insecurities and the feelings of awkwardness that had been a part of his work to that point. He stated:

When I made [it], it seemed embarrassing. It seemed not as serious as I thought work should be at that time. I used paint and color to camouflage the piece, to deny it.

The spontaneous use of spray paint suggests that this sculpture is process oriented. In such works, traces of how they were made are left visible or are essential to their appearance. Process was important to many of Shapiro's early works. According to the artist, spray painting this sculpture was tantamount to casting it in metal in that "painting it made it irrefutable, gave it a solidity, and was like a metaphor." In this sense, the paint gives the form its integrity and a layer of protection, much like a skin. In a curious way, the paint simultaneously masks and draws attention to the imagery.

Shapiro's early works involved a compression and an extraction of meaning, as if each tiny object symbolized isolation. Later in the 1970s he began to make more abstract, less enigmatic wall sculptures of wood. In their geometry these works showed the influence of the Constructivist aesthetic. Seen from the front, an untitled work from 1978-79 is flat and appears to float on the wall. A side view of the pale green trapezoid reveals an empty space behind the primary plane—a private, intimate realm that is shielded by the geometric shape that created it.

Color functions in a very different way here than it does in the earlier work. As Shapiro described it, he was inspired by Barnett Newman's use of color:

It must have been not symbolic, but a metaphor for a whole series of thoughts. He would pick a color that had a particular location in relationship to where he began. There was a kind of dislocation of the plane based on the color. I wanted the color to locate in a different place.

Indeed, this sculpture concerns the location of an area sheltered by a geometric frontal plane, which is softened by the pastel color. Shapiro underscored this, saying:

The paint functions away, does not locate itself on the surface because of the lightness of the color. It is more of an atmospheric effect.

In this respect, this work polarizes interior and exterior both formally and psychologically.

The work from 1978-79 looks carefully planned and executed. In a sculpture from 1979 Shapiro began to work more intuitively. Anxious to extend the content of his sculpture, he abandoned the hard-edge finish of the earlier series. While the premise for the 1979 work is much the same as the earlier one, that is, cutting up a piece of wood and rearranging its components to present the same material in a wholly new disposition, the look is quite different. This piece aggressively breaks into three dimensions from the wall; the earlier one masks a space as a hidden volume. Here jagged, almost violent, cuts are visible; the alignment and congruencies of the earlier work are graceful and elegant. Shapiro talked about the 1978-79 work as "self-contained, insular." The 1979 piece is more gregarious, "the lines go out, it really refers to other locations." He continued:

There really is a sense that it's just been thrown on the wall. I wanted it to be like a bunch of darts, just chopped up, turned around, and then located and referred back to where it was. It was active enough, it had enough energy, to do that. I painted it to homogenize it somewhat.

Again, the artist discussed the paint in terms of bonding the sculptural elements into a whole, not unlike the casting process.

The following year, Shapiro reasserted his need for clarity and definition of form. For an untitled work from 1980 he selected cherry, an intrinsically beautiful wood that is hard and thereby provides a good cutting edge. The geometric units, three rectangles and an irregular six-sided figure to which the others are attached, create a shape reminiscent of a torso. By painting only the diamond form blue, the artist isolated the color element while simultaneously suggesting this area as "not natural, not factual, but something other." The "other" in this case may well be the reintroduction of the figure. In fact, Shapiro has said he regards this painted area as the hip or groin of an abstracted torso.

With the shift away from his nonobjective work, Shapiro soon became identified as one of the leading artists in the re-emergence of figuration that was soon to pervade the art of the early 1980s. In a sculpture from 1980-82 Shapiro used six pieces of wood to create a poignant tension between the tragic and witty aspects of the human condition. Is this a depiction of the fall of man or merely some gymnast or tumbler? The figure is deftly balanced between the L-shape created by the arms, which together with the head form the tripod required for stability, and the splayed legs, which reach up and cantilever out into space. Despite its precarious posture, Shapiro believed "somehow it seemed too static. It did not have the level of drama and intensity that I wanted." Even after the paint was applied, in a visibly spontaneous manner, he felt that something was missing. To finish the piece, Shapiro burned it slightly.

A sculpture from 1981 (fig. 2) suggests a comparable primitivistic urge as well as a relation to tribal art. The protruding nails evoke African fetish or votive figures. While small, it has extraordinary power, but what is most subtle and moving about this work is its posture. Drawn close to its upper torso, its bent legs are enclosed by its two arms, which describe a cube-like perimeter that contains the figure.



Figure 2. Untitled, 1981. Oil on wood with nails, 11 1/4 x 8 1/4 x 8 3/4 inches. Lewis and Susas Manilow, Chicago.

Another figurative work from 1982 (cover) discloses the dichotomy between the active and passive states of mind. The figure is lying on the floor on its side, but it appears to be running, with left hand extended and right knee fully flexed. The paint covering the head and neck area was inspired by the cobalt-violet color Picasso had used in the 1930s to depict reclining figures in a dream state. "It is a color that tends to dissolve form," Shapiro explained. Instead of camouflaging or unifying the work, the pigment calls attention to specific areas. The sculpture fuses the sleeping state with a posture that suggests someone pursuing a dream, and the arrangement of the blocks of wood seems almost temporary. Like the other overtly figurative works, however, there is a balance between the abstract, formal elements and the subject matter.

Recently, Shapiro has been probing further the relationship between color and form. A vertical figure from 1986 is nearly life-size and has a white pigment stained into its torso. In combination with the natural grain and knots of the wood, the pigment creates the effect of a flowing diaphanous gown over a nude body. With three heavy and tenuously joined blocks of wood, Shapiro created a classically sensuous abstract figure.

In a later untitled work also from 1986 (fig. 3) Shapiro moved away from the human figure toward an animal-like form.

The original intention was to take a block of wood, something stable and object-like, and make it something unstable and animate. I needed to get it up in the air and somehow make it stay there.

Once again, Shapiro used a tripod base. In this instance, the long, spindly sticks of wood function like legs supporting a hollow rectangular box of wood made of four flat boards and cut to fit edge to edge. The outside of the box is an indigo blue. Since the inside is unpainted, the work has a volume that is visibly announced on the interior, yet denied by the continuous blue on the exterior. Moreover, the rich, deep color adds perceptual weight that is illusory but generates tension. This three-legged creature appears to amble along on its weak legs in a manner reminiscent of some of Paul Klee's pictorial musings. Yet this animal asserts its reality in the viewer's space in a way that no painting or drawing could possibly achieve. The artist has said of this work:

What I have always wanted to do is take a chunk of space and declare it. Then the material is a boundary. Somehow, in a way, the material gets in the way. By utilizing the paint, you dematerialize the material.

Shapiro's painted wood sculptures cover a wide range. He has cut, sawed, carved, and joined pieces of wood. He has used paint to obfuscate forms, unify them, and articulate particular elements, as well as charge them with a primitive energy. Combining wood's natural warmth and the geometric forms of lumber with his impulse to configure, Shapiro has evolved a body of work that humanizes the austere structures of Minimal art.

Ned Rifkin
Chief Curator for Exhibitions

All quotes are from a 1987 interview with the artist.



Figure 3. Untitled, 1986. Oil on wood, 65 x 55 x 62 inches. Mr. and Mrs. Raymond D. Nasher, Dallas. Photo: James Dee.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in New York, September 27, 1941

Educated at the University of Colorado and New York University, 1961-69. BFA, 1964; MFA, 1969.

Awards include a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1975, the Brandeis Award in 1984, and the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture in 1986.

Lives in New York City and Westport, New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1970 Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (and shows in 1972, 1974-77, 1979-80, 1982-84, 1986).
- 1974 Galleria Salvatore Ala, Milan. *Works by Joel Shapiro*.
- 1980 Whitechapel Art Gallery, London. *Joel Shapiro: Sculpture and Drawings*, and tour to Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, West Germany, and Moderna Museet, Stockholm.
- 1983 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; *Joel Shapiro*, and tour to Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.
- 1985 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. *Joel Shapiro*, and tour to Kunstmuseum, Dosseldorf, and Staatliche Kunsthalle, Baden-Baden.
- 1986 John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, Florida. *Joel Shapiro: Sculpture and Drawings 1981-85*.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1969 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Anti-Illusion: Procedure/Material*.
- 1970 Museum of Modern Art, New York. *Paperworks*.
- 1971 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *1970 Annual Exhibition: Contemporary American Sculpture* (also included in 1977, 1979, and 1981 Biennials).

- 1976 Venice Biennale, *International Tendencies 1972-1976*.
- 1977 Kassel, West Germany. *Documenta 6* (also included in *Documenta 7*).
- 1984 Museum of Modern Art, New York. *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, Kenneth. "Artist's Dialogue: More Motion, More Dislocation—the Art of Joel Shapiro." *Architectural Digest* 41 (June 1984): 170-76. Interview with Joel Shapiro.
- Bass, Ruth. "Minimalism Made Human." *Artnews* 86 (March 1987): 94-101.
- Copians, John. "Joel Shapiro: An Interview." *Dialogue* 1 (January-February 1979): 7-9.
- Fields, Marc. "On Joel Shapiro's Sculptures and Drawings." *Artforum* 16 (Summer 1978): 31-37.
- Gibson, Eric. "The Minimal and the Magical." *New Criterion* 3 (January 1985): 42-44.
- Gilbert-Rolle, Jeremy. "Joel Shapiro: Works in Progress." *Artforum* 12 (December 1973): 73-74.
- Joel Shapiro. Exhibition catalog. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1985. Texts by Marja Bloor, Karel Schampers. Statements by Joel Shapiro.
- Joel Shapiro. *Sculpture and Drawing*. Exhibition catalog. London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1980. Text by Roberta Smith.
- Krauss, Rosalind. *Joel Shapiro*. Exhibition catalog. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1976.
- Kuspi, Donald B. "Manifest Densities." *Art in America* 71 (May 1983): 148-52.
- Marshall, Richard, interview, and Roberta Smith, text. *Joel Shapiro*. Exhibition catalog. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982.
- Ormond, Mark. *Joel Shapiro: Sculpture and Drawings 1981-85*. Exhibition catalog. Sarasota, Florida: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, 1986.
- Schwartz, Sanford. "Little Big Sculpture." *Art in America* 64 (March-April 1976): 63-65.

CHECKLIST

- Untitled, 1973
Enamel on wood, 6 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 1 1/8 inches
Michael and Nadia Goedhuis, London
- Untitled, 1978-79
Gouache on wood, 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 3 1/8 inches
Courtesy Hieschi and Adler Modern, New York
- Untitled, 1979
Oil on wood, 9 1/2 x 3 x 7 inches
The Grinstein Family, Los Angeles
- Untitled, 1979-80
Oil on wood, 9 1/4 x 7 3/4 x 3 1/16 inches
Marin Sklar, New York
- Untitled, 1980
Oil on wood, 11 1/4 x 11 1/4 x 3 5/8 inches
Collection of the artist
- Untitled, 1981
Oil on wood with nails, 11 1/4 x 8 1/4 x 8 3/4 inches
Lewis and Susan Manlow, Chicago
- Untitled, 1980-82
Gouache and casein on wood, 25 1/4 x 15 1/2 x 22 inches
The Edward R. Broida Trust, Los Angeles
- Untitled, 1982
Oil on wood, 12 3/8 x 43 1/4 x 13 1/4 inches
Douglas S. Cramer, Los Angeles
- Untitled, 1985
Oil on wood, 54 x 12 x 10 inches
Ernie and Lynn Mieger, San Francisco
- Untitled, 1985
Oil on wood, 65 x 55 x 62 inches
Mr. and Mrs. Raymond D. Nasher, Dallas
- Untitled, 1984-87
Oil on wood, 35 1/2 x 17 x 11 inches
Private collection

This exhibition is supported in part by a grant from the Smithsonian Institution Special Exhibition Fund.



HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND
SCULPTURE GARDEN
Smithsonian Institution