

Joel Shapiro



Meaning in Geometric Form

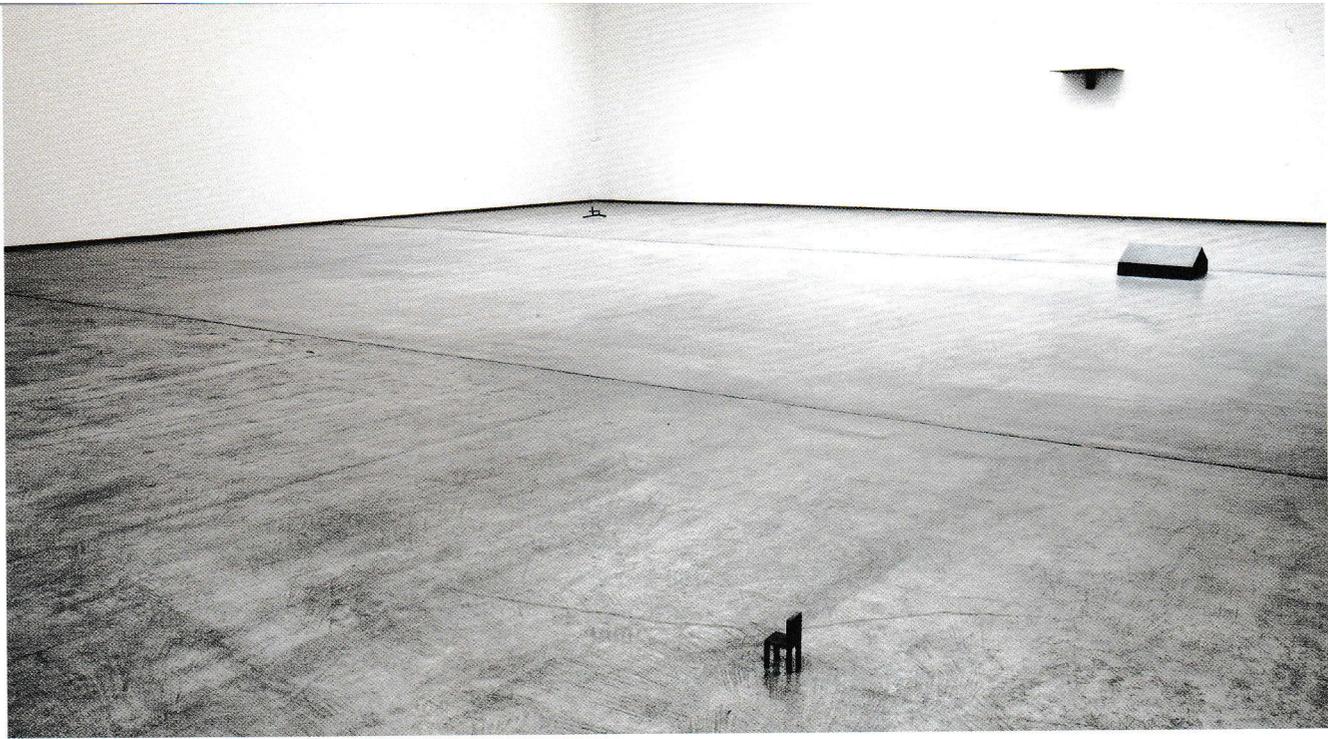
BY BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

How best to square Joel Shapiro's long-term sculpture project? He has been on a lifelong quest to determine how geometric form can convey complexities of introspection, "an emotional state," as he described it recently in his Long Island City studio.¹ In fact, geometry has preoccupied him since the early 1970s, when he burst onto the scene with a body of bronze and iron works that sat directly on the floor but never mimicked the horizontal plane. He is adamant that materials are a secondary concern, a prodigious admission for a sculptor: "I think material is not so important. It doesn't make that much difference. What is important is the utilization of the material." Because he has no signature material (he has worked in bronze, iron, steel, wood, plaster, and clay), his work is propelled by his relentless implication of the rectangle as a sign of "meaningful form." The fundamentals of that investigation have shaped him for four decades.

As a young artist, Shapiro took on the orthodoxy of the Minimalist movement and secured a new role for geometry in sculpture through imagery from everyday life—a bridge, a chair, a house, a human being—pared down to essential forms in space. While his large-scale public and private commissions continue to troll the visual language that he adopted in his 30s, his recent painted wood constructions vie with some of the most current concerns in sculpture: ephemerality versus longevity in material, viewer interaction, coloration as a riff on Post-Modernism, and the revitalization of Modernism's iconicity. Though he has shown painted wood sculpture in a number of exhibitions, he remains best known for metal sculptures of the geometric figure in motion—despite the fact that his invention now rests with works that appear more transitory. The polychromed wood pieces, which he started in 2001, hang by threads in an installation or dangle from the ceiling supported by wire or filament. Shapiro calls these projects "suspended installations." It is as if all those years of wresting the figure from a largely monotone palette of unpatinated metal finally exploded: these painted shards maintain a

Opposite: *20 elements*, 2004–05. Wood and casein, 10.17 x 11 x 7.08 ft. Installation view at Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2005.
Above: *untitled*, 2002–07. Bronze, 13.33 x 27.79 x 12.92 ft.

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Installation view of “Joel Shapiro: Works 1969–1979,” Paula Cooper Gallery, 2010.

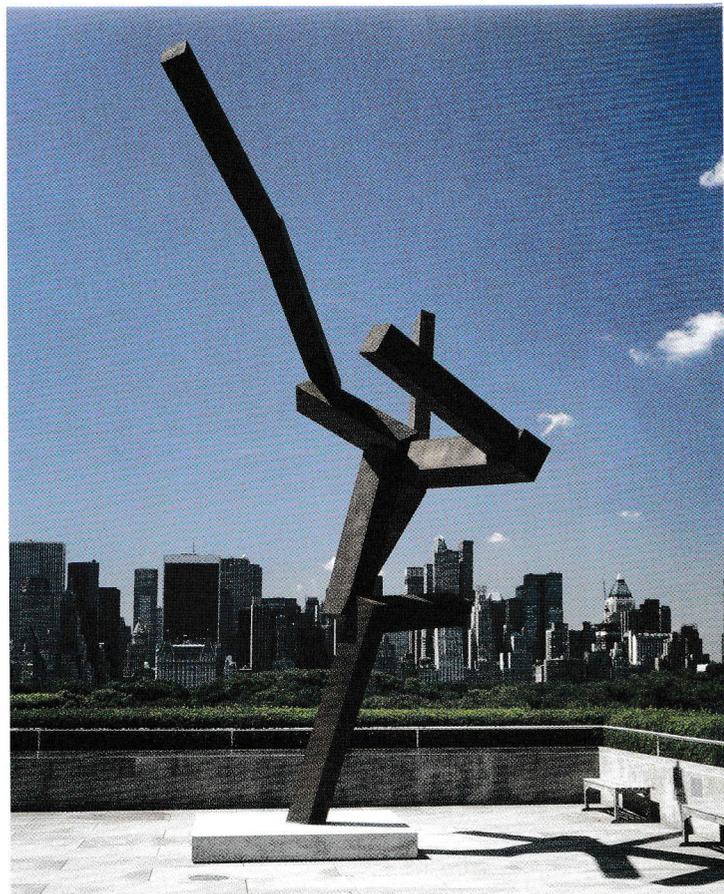
geometry, but dispel the figure, space, and the picture plane. In a sense, Shapiro is confronting in three dimensions what Kasimir Malevich and the Constructivists achieved in two-dimensional painting 100 years ago: “What interests me in Constructivism...is the unprecedented level of faith. Energy invested in abstraction—which was collective and so much about the enormity of the revolution.”

Shapiro was born in 1941 in Sunnyside, Queens, and received his BA (1964) and MA (1969) from New York University. His father was an internist, and his mother was a biologist, both having also graduated from NYU. Shapiro has said that his parents “were FDR democrats, very liberal, pragmatic, and too individualistic to join the CP [Communist Party].”² After joining the Peace Corps, Shapiro spent two years (1963–64) in India, where he supervised vegetable gardening and facility maintenance. He returned to New York City in 1965. Since then, his work has entered a number of distinguished museum collections, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas; Tate, London; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. His outdoor sculp-

ture has been installed at national and international venues. Shapiro received the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture in 1986. He was elected to the Swedish Royal Academy of Art in 1994 and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1998. He has been selected for four Whitney Biennials (in 1977, 1979, 1981, and 1989) and was included in Documenta in Kassel, Germany, in 1977 and 1982. For Shapiro, the International Sculpture Center’s 2015 Lifetime Achievement Award means looking retrospectively at his oeuvre. His early sculpture continually informs his current projects: “I am always looking back on my work. I am always dealing with older work. You constantly re-assess and evaluate what you’ve done.” Currently, he is creating an installation for the Museo di Palazzo Grimani in conjunction with the 2015 Venice Biennale, and an exhibition of new and recent work is planned for 2017 at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin.

In 1970, Shapiro had his first solo exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery. Two years later, he showed a body of work that included the terra-cotta pieces *One Hand Forming* and *Two Hands Forming*. A 1973 show at Lower Manhattan’s The Clocktower, Institute for Art and Urban Resources featured a tiny cast iron bridge. By 1974, a cast iron chair and three house forms—all of diminutive proportions—resided directly

on the floor. This was breakout work, and the scale was unsettling: outsize, often architectural-scale objects became elfin. Forms were spare, but recognizable. Shapiro’s strike at the predominant movement was insurrection, no matter how subtle. These works were a reaction to the austerity of Carl Andre, Donald Judd, and Sol LeWitt, art that eschewed recognizable imagery or subjective thought. Shapiro became known as a Post-Minimalist, a term coined in 1971 by critic and art historian Robert Pincus-Witten.³ Eva Hesse, Mel Bochner, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Shapiro, and others are considered Post-Minimalists. It is a label that Shapiro can take or leave: “It was a generational issue. Artists born in 1941 or 1942 are called Post-Minimalist because they emerged at a certain time on the scene.” He explains that there was no circumventing the impact of the Minimalist movement: “Minimalism was something you had to digest, and that’s what you cut your teeth on. You have to buy into the belief system and then differentiate.” Shapiro chose to “differentiate” first through small objects that reeked of domesticity but somehow assumed a larger-than-life role in memory. He then walked the tightrope between figuration and abstraction through geometric forms that strikingly resembled stick-figure drawings, but in three-dimensions. By the early 1980s, he was identified as the artist



Left: *untitled*, 1989. Bronze, 5.42 x 6.42 x 5.21 ft. Right: *untitled*, 1996–99. Bronze, 24 x 14.25 x 11.46 ft. Work installed at the Metropolitan Museum, NY, 2001.

who created hard-edged forms of soft-edged figures. He repeated this motif and style in numerous variations. These objects became a lifeline to anyone seeking relief from the raw, messy surfaces of Neo-Expressionist painting, the dominant trend of the international art scene at the beginning of the 1980s. Shapiro continued to plumb the depths of austerity, but through the figure.

In the 1980s and 1990s, his figures were acquired by major museums and private collections; some were shown outdoors in sculpture courts and gardens. The bronze *untitled* (1989) entered the collection of the National Gallery of Art in 1990, where it remains on view in the Sculpture Garden alongside works by Louise Bourgeois, Scott Burton, Alexander Calder, Mark di Suvero, and Ellsworth Kelly. *untitled* has a buoyancy, an optimism, as the figure sashays into the greenery, kicking up a leg, abandoning caution. Though the sculpture stands more than five feet tall, it is a study in horizontality as it hugs the ground plane and stretches more than six feet in length. At the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Shapiro's *untitled* (1996–99) presents a complex vertical. It has figurative elements such as legs, arms, a torso, and head, but

additional thin rectangles spring off of these surfaces. The dynamism of the sculpture stems from the human form in motion, as well as the agitated extended appendages. By this period, Shapiro was best known for his figures, which continued to gain in complexity through the inherent ambiguity of added parts.

But by the 1990s, some critics had come to consider his work formulaic. Roberta Smith, for instance, observed that “judging from the lifestyle magazines, it often seemed that a Shapiro figure poolside was *de rigueur* in Hollywood.”⁴ Or Donald Kuspit: “[In] Shapiro’s sculpture...the minimum of geometrical means no longer worked to maximum expressive effect.”⁵ Both writers recognized an emphatic shift in subject matter that propelled Shapiro into revivifying his work.

It took a 1993 commission for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, to reinvigorate Shapiro’s quest for “meaningful form.” *Loss and Regeneration*, the bronze sculpture sited on the museum’s brick plaza, found resolution in a search for significance. Two sculptural images—a nine-foot-high house and an almost 26-foot-high figure—stand 100 feet apart, but within eyeshot of each

other. Shapiro’s customary stick figure has been called both a tree and a human; the pairing, however, stands metaphorically as two hovering forms, both off balance. An overturned house—symbolizing how family life, community coherence, and comfort were upended in World War II Europe—and a sculpture of angled, acute rectangles sustain a powerful allusion, this time in the public realm.

Other contemporary artists have, of course, been commissioned to create works addressing the Holocaust—and they often respond with an abstract vocabulary infused with references. For the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Richard Serra composed *Gravity* (1993), a 12-foot-square steel plane lodged into an interior staircase to form a barrier. Architect Peter Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, which opened in Berlin in 2005, coaxes visitors to walk through an almost five-acre site where 2,711 progressively taller concrete stelae are arranged along hilly paths. In Vienna, Rachel Whiteread’s *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* opened in 2000. It is a ghostly form, a steel and concrete casting of a library interior. The spines of the books face inward so that only the linearity of the



Loss and Regeneration, 1993. Bronze, figure: 25.75 x 17.67 x 7.67 ft.; house: 9 x 7.67 x 7.67 ft. Work at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

book form is visible. Individuality is masked, as it was for the six million people who succumbed in the Holocaust. In these works, bleak asceticism solved the problem of how to convey one of the overwhelming tragedies of the 20th century.

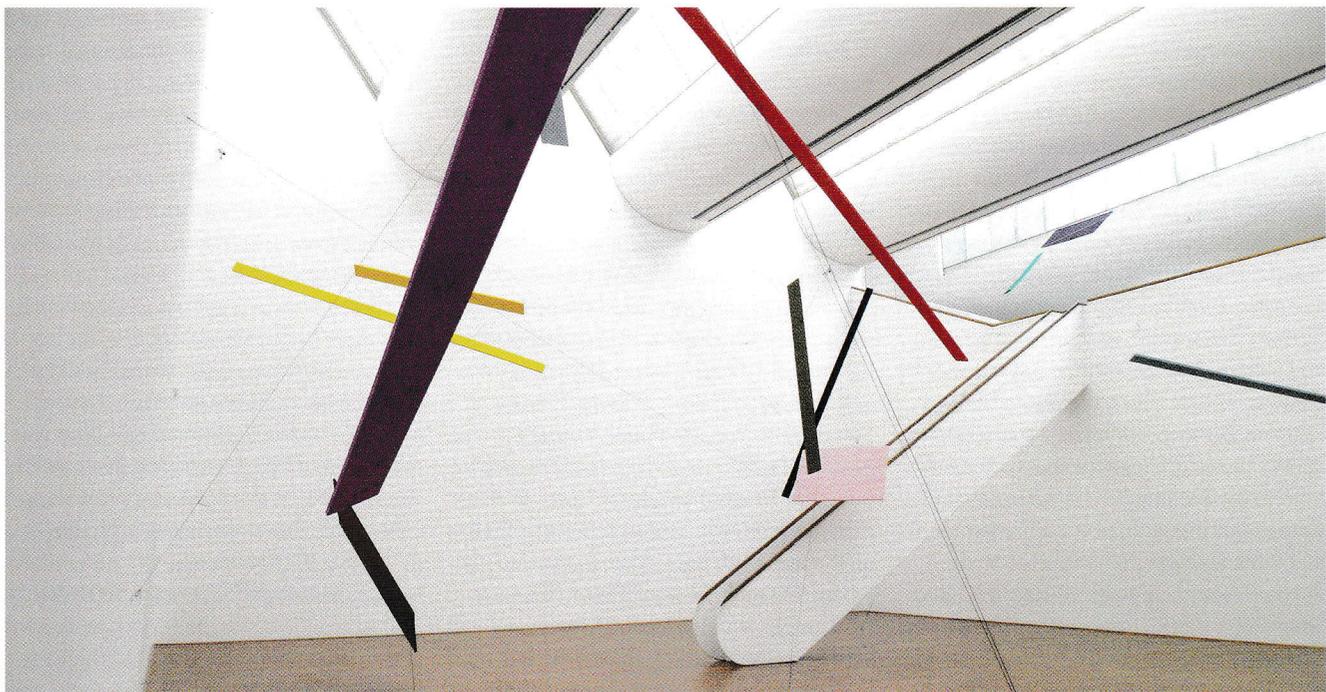
Shapiro was born about two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which drove the United States into World War II,

and the conflict loomed large in his childhood. "The Holocaust is something that one thought about all the time," he explains. "It's the incomprehensible situation that is horrendous and not fathomable." He questioned how his sculpture, in the face of the enormity of the subject matter, could summon the gravity of history and the potential for any future: "How would one

use figuration to show such devastation? You can't in the end, particularly because it is outside of your experience." If that foray into high-profile outdoor sculpture, into the public realm, pushed Shapiro's work to an existential state, it may have also prompted his newest vanguard body of work, the series of suspended forms.

In the Holocaust commission, flat planes form the sculptural surface. They also serve to activate the void surrounding the work. And while Shapiro continued working in a similar fashion through the last years of the 20th century, his inquiries also augured his next body of work. Not quite a decade after the Holocaust Museum commission, he debuted the hanging, suspended installations in a 2005 exhibition at Pace-Wildenstein. He used "wire to string wood shapes together, which I would twist and manipulate until I found what I would consider an engaging form." It is as if Shapiro's planar figures found new resonance by dismembering recognizable imagery into

Installation view of "Joel Shapiro," Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, 2011.



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Installation view of "Joel Shapiro: Work in Wood, Plaster, and Bronze: 2001–2005," PaceWildenstein, NY, 2005.

three-dimensional abstraction. Like some of his sculptural work, these installations or discrete objects use blocks of surface color to add visual interest. "I'm interested in chunks of color suspended in space, and in reconfiguring the perceptual experience, the engagement in the present, when in it," he reflected when discussing his use of color.

In Shapiro's Long Island City studio, suspended wood installations take form alongside models of commissions for large-scale figures. The two bodies of work are in sync, but they also fundamentally contrast: they demonstrate transience versus permanence, abstraction versus figuration, storied bronze juxtaposed with informal, painted plywood. Perhaps the greatest discrepancy may be that the bronzes are earthbound and the installations literally hang by a thread. "All of the work has a figurative element whether it's passive, active, or abstract," Shapiro says. "In the end, the work is a surrogate for anyone who makes it...To me, that has a human

Installation view of "Joel Shapiro: Sculptures and Works on Paper," Texas Gallery, Houston, 2008.



component. And a piece where I'm trying to break away from the figure has figurative aspects. I can't avoid that and I don't try to."

Shapiro's spring/summer 2014 exhibition at Galerie Karsten Greve, which traveled to the gallery's Cologne location this year (through April 11), includes work in wood, plaster, and bronze. His fall 2014 exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery in Brussels included a number of the suspended works as well as polychrome wall reliefs. The hanging pieces were spontaneous. Nails protruded from the multi-part wood rectangles, serving to hold the work together while agitating the viewer, throwing us off kilter. Shapiro's work has regularly confronted the dynamism of the sculptural

figure. He's now implicating the viewer in that momentum.

Notes

¹ All quotations from the artist, unless otherwise noted, are from an interview with the author.

² Phong Bui, "In Conversation: Joel Shapiro with Phong Bui," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 4, 2007.

³ Robert Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalist into Sublime," *Artforum*, November 1971.

⁴ Roberta Smith, "Art Review: Joel Shapiro Looks Back, Differently," *The New York Times*, March 31, 1995.

⁵ Donald Kuspit, "Joel Shapiro," *Artforum International*, November 1993.

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