

New Installation: Interview with Joel Shapiro

by JOSHUA FISCHER on Apr 23, 2012 • 1:23 PM 1 Comment



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 2012. Commission, Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas. Photo: Nash Baker
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Joel Shapiro and I sat down for an interview in his New York studio the week before his New Installation exhibition at Rice University Art Gallery in Houston, Texas which closed on March 18, 2012. The installation at Rice is part of a new body of work where Shapiro creates site-specific sculpture using painted wooden boards, planks, and beams held in tension by string stretching from the floor to points on the ceiling. With the close of the installation looming, I was interested to know Shapiro's thoughts on the temporary nature of the work and where the Rice installation may be leading him.

Joshua Fischer: What does it mean to you that the installation at Rice is a temporary work and will never be seen the exact same way again?

Joel Shapiro: Well, I actually call the work a sculpture.

Fischer: Why?

Shapiro: Because I think that the work can be reconfigured slightly differently elsewhere. There is no reason why, just because the context is different, you cannot make adaptations and adjustments, as long as you're alive. It has everything to do with the space, but once the work is complete it has its own life independent of the space.

I was really trying to avoid making a tableau, and I think that the fault of most installations is they become a stage set or a tableau. Am I wrong? Maybe I'm wrong?



Joel Shapiro. "Bridge" 1971-1973. Milled grey cast iron, 3.5 x 22.5 x 3" © 1971-1973 Joel Shapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Installation view at the Clocktower, New York.

Fischer: What do you mean by that? Can you explain?

Shapiro: Tableau? A tableau is a little scene of events. You look at it pictorially. So I want it to be all about space. I don't see that piece [at Rice Gallery] as a dead piece when it's not in that space. I think the space itself, at this point, is more dependent on the work than the work is on the space. So you could alter and adapt it and change it. You could actually take elements out of that piece, and I think they function on their own. It's not a linear narrative like a novel, but you can definitely see it more the way one could read an aspect of a poem. One part of a poem can be significant in itself. Poets might disagree.

It's the installation of a sculpture in a specific space, but I think it can readily be altered or adjusted for other spaces – even if you cut one or two pieces out. Well, I don't know if you can cut a piece out. How this thing operates is symbiotic, so the space has to be similar or there has to be some adjustment.

But the word installation just makes me crazy, and the only reason I am saying that is because I did a show at the Clocktower in 1973 with one small bridge installed in this vast space. It was as much of an installation. Why was that not an installation? I mean I'm not an object maker anyway. I think that the kind of sculpture that interests me is sculpture that deals with space, with condensing space, expanding space, and that actively engages negative space. So all these things have always been aspects of sculpture, from Stonehenge through the classical period.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 1973-74. Cast iron. 3 5/16 x 1 13/32 x 1 11/16" (8.4 x 3.6 x 4.3 cm) © 1973-1974
Joel Shapiro/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy of The Paula Cooper Gallery.

Fischer: Is there a difference for you having something integrated and joined or fixed versus something that is separated?

Shapiro: Yes, there is a massive difference in that. Yes, I think that is true.

If a piece is joined together, it is still operative in space. It doesn't mean that it is not about the ambient space. Because, at least in my work, I don't think that the narrative is necessarily within the piece, it's how you as a perceiver respond to the sculpture and how you see it in space. So I mean the classic thing is the small chair and how Rosalind Krauss talked about how it invokes memory. It's not just the object. I have a rough time with objects. I would rather look at a piece of pottery or something than a lot of little sculptural objects if they don't do something spatially.

Fischer: You're interested in that relationship.

Shapiro: Absolutely.

Fischer: Not just the object in and of itself.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 1998. Wood. 94.5 x 9'9" x 8'2" © 1998 Joel Shapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Shapiro: The object in and of itself is totally boring. The only interesting sculpture is sculpture that deals with spatial issues of perception.

Fischer: Is there something more though about the difference between something integrated and something that can be reconfigured? It seems like there is something freeing about what you have developed recently.

Shapiro: There definitely is. I had reached a limitation of sticking things together, joining piece to piece – that is a simplification of the process. I had to expand out. But you know I've been sort of suspending pieces forever anyway. I was placing forms in the air and then building a very improvised wood structure (matrix) to hold them in place. I did some really early work that no one has ever seen, in which one element would chase another element. It had string and pulleys and little motors, going around the ceiling and there was slippage, so it would always sort of change itself.

Fischer: And would that be installed somewhere?

Shapiro: Right. I remember doing it one summer, during the first year of the Whitney Museum Program – it was the pilot program. I have always been involved with ambient space.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 2002-07. Bronze. 13' 4.0625" x 27' 9.5" x 12' 11.0625" (406.6 x 847.1 x 393.9 cm)
© 2002-2007 Joel Shapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Anyway, there was a certain point where I felt I could no longer make sculpture that was joined. I'm still doing it, but it seems ever less engaging, that the very nature of it is limiting. Now you could say for an artist like Giacometti, maybe that's not the case. I mean he keeps putting more into the form and the form gets loaded up with a deeper kind of meaning. But in my case, I just felt that I couldn't do it. I had taken things and rearranged them, inverted them, and cut them, and reconfigured them, and I did everything. I could only go so far. There was nothing else to do. It was something I think I fully digested, and now I can go back to it. I began doing things like the piece outside. You can look at it when you leave. Where the pieces were tangentially joined, they were breaking apart and I was incorporating the break into the piece, and at some point it just became logistically impossible. I had to break it apart.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 2001. Wood and wire. 48.5" x 13" x 12" (123.2 x 33 x 30.5 cm) © 2001 Joel Shapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

This is a model of an earlier piece that was never realized. It was not that radically different in conception from the Rice Gallery show. Except instead of using a rigid matrix, which is structurally demanding and takes a lot of planning – so difficult to realize and requires lots of engineering and clearly has to be commissioned by a patron. I also began doing smaller pieces with wood and wire. This is post 9/11, and I'm just joining things much more capriciously and spontaneously. I wanted immediacy. I think the step after this was to really begin to suspend elements in space.

Fischer: You mentioned suspending things and being capricious about it. Is there anything to the fact that what you have at Rice Gallery right now is in a sense just a moment. It is time based. It is not forever. People have this window to see it, and it will just change. I guess all your sculptural work might be installed differently though based on the space.

Shapiro: In the ideal world, yes, each time you install something you install it in some sensitive way in relationship to the context. Even if it's on a base you do that, where somebody can really see the intent of the work. So you become good at that.

I would love for the Rice show to be permanent. It would be great. In fact, if someone wanted that would I reconstruct the room? That would be the question. If somebody wanted that sculpture permanently, wishful thinking, would I reconstruct the room or would I adapt the piece to the room? It would be some kind of combination of both.

I think the commission aspect of it is perhaps more interesting than the word installation, which I always find to be kind of a trendy word. Maybe its temporal-ness serves as a vehicle to abdicate responsibility? It is only there for six weeks so who cares so much if it's good or bad or what not. So of course if I thought it was lousy and did not work I'd say, "Well, it's temporal." This [at Rice Gallery] actually engages me, and it does all these things perceptually. I really like it, so yes, now I'm calling it a sculpture.

Fischer: Well, I think the flip side is that because it is temporary it frees an artist up from a lot of concerns about permanence, etc.

Shapiro: It's all made to last. I do think being commissioned for something that is up for a short period of time does give you a certain amount of freedom, but it is very challenging. I thought about that [Rice Gallery] space. I kept thinking about it. I built the model and had some trepidation until I started, as is always the case with something new. I did not think it would be successful, and it was the antithesis of the installation that I did at the Ludwig Museum, which is a much more dramatic and colossal space. This [Rice Gallery] space is not dramatic. It's kind of an intimate, smaller space.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 2012. Commission, Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas. Photo: Nash Baker
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Fischer: The gallery's front glass window can give a sense of something that could be like a diorama.

Shapiro: I was really worried about that. I haven't seen all the shows, but I would imagine a lot of them ended up being dioramas or tableaux or a stage set. You are perceiving it from the outside rather than participating inside the piece. I don't like the shot through the glass. For me, it looks dead. It looks like a diorama. But inside [the gallery space], you have some experience of disappearing form, the fading away and the reconfiguration of a piece – constant complexity. On the other hand, I would not like it if it was a wall. Anyone ever do that? Has anyone ever walled off the glass?

Fischer: The glass has been painted black, but that's as close as you get to being obscured but not walled off. The space has been condensed where a wall has been built behind the glass and things are done on the wall. That is more treating it as a tableau because you do not walk into the gallery space.



Joel Shapiro. "For Jennifer" 2007-11 Paint on aluminum 32' 3/4" x 16' 5 1/2" x 16' 2" approx: 32' 16" 16'
© 2007-2011 Joel Shapiro/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy of Denver Art Museum,
Photo: Jeff Wells, 2011.

Shapiro: I think that can be really exciting. That idea of being commissioned to do something that is temporal is great, and it is challenging and makes you reach into areas that you normally would not. I had installed this piece in Denver at the Denver Art Museum earlier. I had not been interested in singular form, but this piece was so magnetic and integrated so much space and architecture around it that I really thought, "I want to suspend one big figure in the [Rice Gallery] space." That was my initial instinct. Then I thought I would do that, but I would have a figure that was being pulled apart and that's how I started out. To subvert the diorama aspect of it – I think this was not necessarily intentional, and I wasn't aware of it until the end – but I ended up constructing along the diagonal of the room.

Fischer: Right, so you did not approach it head on. One thing Richard Shiff commented on when he visited, which I think is really true, is that every part of this space is really active. There is no empty space. It might be negative in the space, but it is still such a huge part of what you have done compositionally and spatially.

Shapiro: It [the Rice Gallery installation] was actually a formative experience, and I think that it pushed the work into some other realm. This had a different sense of organization. Perhaps it's not as capricious as the piece in Cologne [at Museum Ludwig], which had active elements that re-enforced each other, but it was missing a more cohesive narrative. It's an abstract narrative, but it still has a kind of cohesion to it or concentricity.

Fischer: When you talk about an abstract narrative what does that mean exactly?

Shapiro: I don't know what it means.

Well, you have a group of forms that have some cohesion – they are bound together in some inexplicable way. I think that is what I am talking about. It's an abstract story of the relationships of parts that really integrate and activate and change and alter, but they seem that they are doing something that is knit together in some way. Perhaps the will of the artist or the will of the piece is to insist on something. You sense that insistence. That is there. That's all it is. I think it's just about laying out what you have been thinking about and having a series of thoughts develop into some kind of program or theme. But it's not story telling.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 2012. Commission, Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas. Photo: Nash Baker
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Fischer: One thing that interests me was that when you were talking about the big beam you painted purple, you described it as “coffin-like,” and at one point you said you were thinking about painting it black but that seemed too obvious. So there are these thoughts, which are not just formal and spatial, but have an eye toward some kind of content or subject matter.

Shapiro: I think it is very hard to locate content in work. It's an impossible task, unless it's explicit. If you go to the MET and look at the Ghirlandaio painting, *Old Man with His Grandson* (1490) of the guy with the diseased nose holding up his grandchild and looking at him, it's not that it's an old man and a young boy, but it's the depth of passion and profound sense of time that informs the work. It is what the artist projected into the form that makes it such a riveting picture. It is this human condition that enters into it. So I think in my own work – I'm not comparing myself to Ghirlandaio – but I do think you invest something with meaning, you try to anyway.

But it is all snobbery. Now I'm talking about values. Other people may see it [the Rice Gallery installation] and hate it. I'm sure that people have walked into the show and walked out and don't like it.

Fischer: One of the things that I think relates to this is that during his conversation at the Menil Collection, Richard Serra got into an exchange about any kind of emotional quality of the work or transcendence that anyone might feel in front of it, and Serra said that he has zero interest in that. What you think about that? Do you want people to come in and have some experience beyond a perceptual, spatial one? I feel that is what you are getting at by saying abstract narrative, but maybe I'm wrong.

Shapiro: It's there, but it's nothing you can approach with a word or with language. I can't speak for Richard Serra, but people have very powerful emotional responses to Richard's work, whether it is fear of literally entering an unknown situation, the sense of compression and release or something else. All those things have a metaphoric parallel or are a metaphor. They have an equivalent emotionality in the world.

Architects deal with that all the time. You go from intimate to public to private to a huge expanse that, in theory, perhaps might be spiritual. You try to project beyond the space. I think artists deal with that endlessly. They may not think about it in those terms and may be hesitant to identify that. But any artist that talks about the spiritual is generally full of shit – a conscious effort to articulate the spiritual is a silly pursuit, it's either there or not, and entirely subjective.

Everyone has drive and spirit, and it enters the work. I don't know if that is what spiritual is. Spiritual is about some other worldliness. That the pink form was delicately painted, I was very careful with it. It is tender. Yes, it is tender compared to the blue one. But tenderness is not spiritual; it is just a quality of touch, and it is a quality of feeling. I don't know if it is an emotional quality. Those things you put into work because I have a different intent for each piece. What the intent is I don't quite know, and sometimes you have no intent. Artists shape and form meaning by manipulating material.

Yes, one element I thought of at one point as coffin-like – I did not set out to make a coffin but wanted a hollow form that corresponded to a body or a surrogate form of torso. Another was about dreaming – the soft and sensuous. Another more priapic. One was an entry or door beyond. Another was floating – otherworldly. This stuff is never spelled out – perhaps it was in earlier sculpture of mine. Insistence on meaning, regardless of how fleeting it might be, is accumulative.

For a short period of time I saw it as a coffin – this could also be a manifestation of my own fear – associations are about the perceiver's state of mind, including the artist's as the work is made. Regardless, if it lost some of its "pine box" association when painted – the association, although masked and in a broader context, is still there but perhaps more of a trace. Work is an accumulation over time and nothing is really lost.

The answer is that, yes, work can be spiritual but always informed or transmitted by the physical.



Work in progress, 2012. © 2012 Joel Shapiro/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Fischer: So is the work at Rice leading you somewhere?

Shapiro: We will see. I unfortunately have not been able to do any work since. I painted a wood piece that I liked. The stuff that is joined together bores me. I think that in order to feel good about that work, I want to be actively engaged. I did a piece downstairs, did you see that one? The bow. That's new. But I've been thinking about that for a year and a half. I just haven't gotten around to it. I have a lot of ideas, and I just have not had the time to implement them. The Rice thing took eight months of work. Maybe more? I do not know when we built the model. I think I had that model all summer. I didn't know what to do with the goddamn thing.

It was very inhibiting. You really become a blank slate. I would say this is true about any new situation. When you first approach it, it is an alien space. It isn't your space, somebody else's space, and it is a bit of a blank space. You begin again. It becomes this whole new beginning. It's not the kind of continuum of work with a series. I did throw in one element that I had used before, the red one, but in the end I used it in a much more inventive way.



Joel Shapiro. Untitled, 2012. Commission, Rice University Art Gallery, Houston, Texas. Photo: Nash Baker
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Fischer: The door?

Shapiro: Yes, somehow, the turning it around made a big difference.

The danger with this installation was taste. I had used color in a much more thoughtful, less capricious way, in a more painterly way perhaps.

Fischer: I see what you mean about the concentration of the form or the arrangement. Looking at the Museum Ludwig model, it is different how it looks more spread apart. It's not revolving around a focal point. You found this different resolution.

Shapiro: It was an entirely different resolution. The space wasn't vast enough. That is a very small space. It is not small, but it is not extraordinary.

Fischer: No, it is not like the Ludwig space.

Shapiro: It [Rice Gallery] is not like the room at the Mies [van der Rohe] part of The Museum Fine Arts, Houston [Cullinan Hall]. When you walk in, you see this big vast proscenium. That is a big theatrical space. This is the opposite. This is relatively domestic within the realm of a small public space. It is a brilliant use of the space, very smart, but it is kind of an entry court or something.

Someone said the Rice installation looked like an El Lissitzky Proun thing? Those things are dead.

Fischer: They did not say it looked like it. Lissitzky's Proun is so different. It's wall based.

Shapiro: They are early 20th century relief. I am more interested in explosive sculpture.

Fischer: Isn't that something that comes up again and again – the constructivism thing?

Shapiro: It's endless. I've said this repeatedly, that I never thought that I would invent a form. But I think I can come up with a personal, new and meaningful configuration of form.

I tried that [reference to modeling form]. It didn't work. I don't believe in it. I do not have the attention span. So I am better off grabbing something and using it, or making something and using it.

Josh: I think you also said that everything you made could not escape some association with the landscape or a figure. Meaning that you couldn't invent something from scratch that is totally...

Shapiro: I think artists are always inventing something, but it has reference to the world. It has reference to other artists, to art history. There is nothing entirely new. We all, more or less, have the same physiology, or the same intelligence, the same information, and you are working on problems that people have been addressing for thousands of years. So there is more in common between 19th, 20th, and 21st century sculpture than there is not in common. It is a language that is evolving. People are delusional who think that constructivism is not an active element in minimalism, for instance. It is! It was there before. You can't talk about Judd and not talk about Rietveld. It is just impossible. The facts are there. The difference is that Judd's intent was entirely different, not so much his intent, but his character, his person, was radically different so the work is different, but it definitely has precedent. There is precedent for all work. Anyone who thinks they are doing something entirely original is delusional. Everything is original, but everything has history behind it. It's not like you are discovering a new element. I guess it is possible. Usually in art, somebody might synthesize something from outside what we considered art into the realm of art, but that does not mean it did not exist outside. Duchamp. The urinal existed. It was a form, and it was re-contextualized.

How is it [the Rice Gallery installation] going to affect my work? Let's see. There is this big installation I wanted to do – I am using the word installation – in Valencia. But [the word] installation is fine. I do not know why it bothers me.

Fischer: Is it because it is used so casually? It applies to so much that it has lost its meaning.

Shapiro: You do an installation when you decorate your dining room or your living room. Everything is an installation. You put on clothes, you're thinking about it. Some people care about it, some people don't care.

Fischer: Generally, at Rice Gallery, we define installation in terms of a work that has a complete spatial presence and something that is not just tableau, something that brings someone in and changes as you see it.

Shapiro: I think that is true, but I also think that those qualities are the qualities that have always made sculpture and architecture really interesting, or the more interesting work seems to incorporate that quality. I'm trying to think of examples. They are not so easy to come up with.

I went to the Renaissance portrait show at the MET, and there's a Desiderio that's so powerful. The quality that makes that work interesting is its liveliness. That somehow it has this inner vitality, or at least it refers to the inner vitality of the subject. In contemporary work, the subject, for the most part, is the artist's response to society or culture, or it is more individually driven since you are not being commissioned to do the portrait of the duke of this or the duke of that. There is this other quality that differentiates ordinary work from more interesting and perhaps extraordinary work, and that has to do with the ability to infuse meaning into the form. How do you do that? I don't know. That is the challenge as an artist. That's some common thread – being able to enter into the work, participate in the work, see it this way, see it that way. But is that always uplifting?

Fischer: Not necessarily.

Shapiro: That is what I am saying. It's not. It is not uplifting. It is not necessarily transformative or joyful.

Fischer: But that is what you want, right?

Shapiro: Yes, I am interested in that. I would not call it spiritual, but I am interested in a buoyancy and engagement. To have something that is transformative, at least when you are in it. It is not going to change your life. Science might change your life. Relationships might change someone's life. Looking at art would reinforce one's transformation or development not unlike reading a book.

Fischer: It is engaging just to see what you can do with form and material to make something, as you've said, something that is inanimate explode. There is something there, just that transformation alone on that level.

Shapiro: It is just about will and skill.

Fischer: I like that

Shapiro: Will and skill. That is a good sound bite.

Fischer: Maybe that will be our title for the interview, "Joel Shapiro on Will and Skill"?

Shapiro: I do think there is something about that. Having the will and the intent, and purpose and then being able to do it. One reason I choose simple forms is because I know I can do it. I can't sit around carving stuff. To what avail? What the hell am I going to carve? A Madonna? What am I going to chip away at? What is there to chip away at?

I don't get it. I am interested in a reduced and rich vocabulary. I see so much stuff that is complicated and nothing is there except its complication. Some of the work is interesting, and some of it is just appalling.

Fischer: Is there any trend right now that disturbs you the most?

Shapiro: Disturbing, no.

Fischer: Or not disturbing, that is too heavy of a word, but that you find the least interesting?

Shapiro: I think there is a tendency to think that illustration and language can be meaningful in and of itself. I am not so sure about that. I see a lot of stuff that looks like an illustration of something. Ok, so you are thinking – what are you doing with the thought? There is a kind of reverence of conceptual art that is going on.

I think it is always the same. There's just a lot more work going on. I do not think there is anything that I particularly find upsetting or distasteful. There is a lot of work that is market driven, but work has always been market driven. You sat around and painted a painting at the bequest of the king. That's the market. I see it all as some continuum. There is a lot of junk; a lot of meaningless work, a lot of work that people think is important or significant that I find empty and meaningless. But perhaps that is my problem. But it is not up to me to be the great oracle and say this is good and that is bad. I don't believe in that. I think there is more interesting work and less interesting work, and every once in while there is some piece that's extraordinary and really engaging, at least as far as I'm concerned. I might learn something, or question some of my beliefs, or help solve or add some aspect to the discourse. And I think that is what artists really do, add to the discourse. They want to be active.

And the worst feeling is feeling that somebody perceives you as not part of the discourse. So that is how artists locate themselves – so at least they are involved in some kind of active dialogue with peers. I may not be interested in a certain group of artists and their thoughts may not interest me, but they interest and reinforce each other. It is about discourse in the end. It is a serious discourse, not all the time and not all the time with everybody. I think people reiterate what they know endlessly because they don't quite know what to do. I think things are relatively ok. There is a lot of work around and a lot of galleries, a lot of pandering, and salesmanship and this and that, but artists have to eat so I am glad that they do ok, or some do. It is really tough not to.

Joel Shapiro: New Installation *was on view at Rice University Art Gallery in Houston, Texas 2 February-18 March, 2012.*

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