

Wonders Leap out of These Boxes

Review: Joel Shapiro at L.A. Louver Gallery

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Modernist sculpture generally attempted to resist gravity — to fly free from earthly bonds and restraints as an expression of a new era of dissolving norms. Since the 1970s, New York sculptor Joel Shapiro has reversed that course — not succumbing to but instead courting gravity as a sculptural partner. His art plays with its pull in an interactive tussle.

One result is abstract sculpture nonetheless endowed with emotive qualities — with gravity of an affective rather than scientific meaning. A dozen sculptures from the last two years at [L.A. Louver Gallery](#) continue that project.

In wood or bronze, most elaborate on Shapiro's familiar linear forms, which loosely evoke stick figures under stress. But the most powerful work is a new one, composed instead from a dense tangle of 26 thin, milled-wood boxes, some painted black and some left raw.



It stands just under 6 feet tall. The marvelous sculpture is caught between implosion and explosion, between troubling collapse and exuberant release.

The contradictory effect is partly achieved by the arrangement of forms, but it's also a result of the surprisingly deft use of casein paint. The soft sheen of the unpainted wood stands in subtle counterpoint to the equally soft blackness of the milk-based casein, which absorbs light. The flapping bundle of broad and narrow boxes is masterfully poised.

-- Christopher Knight

L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through Feb. 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

Above: Joel Shapiro's "Twenty Six" (2008), wood and casein. Credit: L.A. Louver Gallery