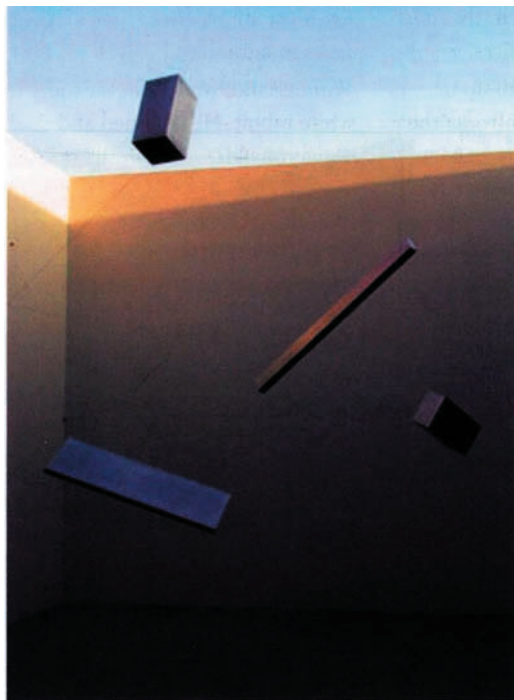


# MODERN PAINTERS

Spring 2004



LOS ANGELES

## JOEL SHAPIRO

LA Louver Gallery

16 January - 21 February

JOEL SHAPIRO HAS REACHED WHAT is perhaps the riskiest point in a successful artist's career, and seems to be negotiating that point with a newfound grace. Having established himself securely in the trajectory of late and post-modernism, Shapiro could, if he wanted, rest on his laurels and respond to the demands of his market - the School of Paris gambit, you might call it. He could reaffirm his signature style with reiterations of his art's salient characteristics and leave it at that.

But rather than churn out 'Shapiros,' Shapiro has built on and opened up his approach. The stick

figures that the artist has sent dancing across countless gallery floors over the last twenty-odd years recur in this latest body of work, but they no longer merely rely on their identity as human ciphers. If anything they revel in an enhanced pictogrammatic presence, taking on new drama and a new pathos. Shapiro poses them against (yet) more abstract forms, expanding their implied kinesic.

In one work - whose contrasting combination of materials is itself startling - a white plaster figure hovers over, or falls towards, a blockier, recumbent bronze figure. In another (given a room of its own in this exhibition) a truncated figure tilts at an extreme angle away from a pair of slightly askew rectangular blocks, all cast in white bronze. Several other, simpler structures extend their 'limbs' in ways more awkward than normal for Shapiro's entities. The choreography evident in these and other arrangements almost has the aura of ritual enactment, and it is not too presumptuous to see in them a response to the events of September 11th 2001, which occurred only blocks from the sculptor's home. (Indeed, a number of New York artists have made work, in various ways, based on the particularly horrific images of people falling from the burning towers.)

It would be stretching the point to read the larger, less referential work in this light, as conscious assertions of renewed human (much less American) resolve. But in their architectonic power, their rhythmic vivacity and their landscape-like sweep - not to

mention their unembarrassed, if still oblique, conjuration of modernist sculpture, from Brancusi to David Smith - these near-monuments do combine formal gravity with compositional exuberance. They project, if anything, a durable lightness of being. *PF*