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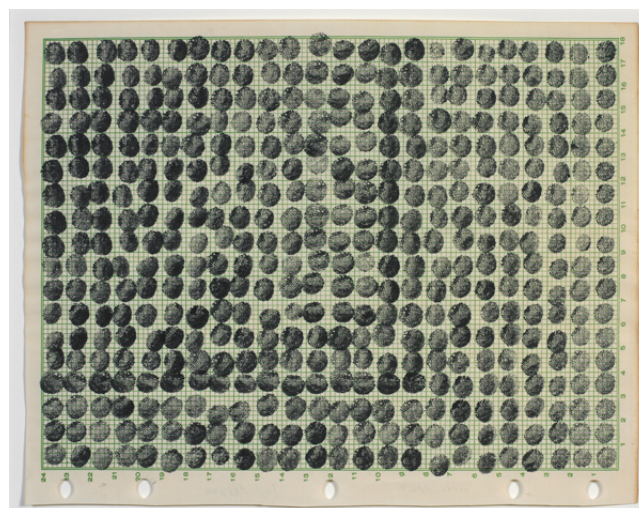
JOEL SHAPIRO *Sculpture and Drawings 1969 - 1972*

by Phong Bui

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During an artist's journey, when he or she leaves home decisively, they're usually gone for good—but they will always have their roots. Many of Joel Shapiro's admirers remember his early attempts to evoke space through memory and metaphor in the condensed geometric solids of his small, haunting, monolithic houses. They may also recall his landmark figures walking, running, dancing, tumbling, tripping; Shapiro's own version of a "Verb" list. However, this rarely seen group of early works offers a splendid opportunity for younger admirers (like myself) to see the formation of the thorough exploration of touching and counting that consequently led to his mature years.

From the start Shapiro used his bare hands as tools to claim authorship, as in Pollock's or Johns's works. This is evident in the (index) fingerprint drawings, as well as the formed spheres and rolled cylinders of clay—a primordial, pliable material—which are treated with repetitive movements, where every mark and manipulation has knowingly recorded the imprints of his palms and fingers. Each gesture in these works is composed of modular units. The serialization doesn't function solely as a pictorial device: one becomes hypnotized by the psychological presence of each gesture, a hard won act of simple meditation over a veneer of intense anxiety.



Joel Shapiro, "Untitled," 1969. Ink on numbered graph paper, 7-13/16 × 9-15/16". Private Collection.

In several cases Shapiro overtakes an invisible grid with aligned inked fingerprints; the varying pressure with which he applies them produces marks with a variety of weights, as in "Fingerprint Drawing" (1969). The effect is a pulsating, yet resolutely frontal field, a rhythmic vibration akin to

the shimmering sounds of soft ocean waves. Other works with freely built overlapping marks, whether open or dense, yield a more atmospheric space. In either case, due to his heightened awareness of the entire sheet of paper and commitment to remaining within constrained parameters, the pressure and pace of printing is applied consistently. The surprising result evokes repetitive devotional acts like chanting or praying the rosary; perhaps it's Shapiro's response to non-violent philosophy and post-minimalism.

The exhibition features three sculptures comprised of many identical units. "One Hand Forming" (1971) has 77 fired clay cylinders, "Two Hands Forming" (1971) 93 clay balls; both are displayed on the floor, while the 49 pinwheel-like terra cotta shapes in "Untitled" (1971) are displayed on a table. Each evidences Shapiro's concern with materials and process, as well as with site-specificity. He has eliminated the pedestal and

expanded into the floor or altered into different forms, a definitive break from tradition common to many of his post-minimal precursors (such as Richard Serra, Eva Hesse, and Bruce Nauman). Yet Shapiro's clay remains a traditional medium, which rather unheroically bears no trace of alluring tactility that might demonstrate masterful dexterity. His sense of scale remains close to the body, which differs from the minimalist monumentality of his predecessors (who adapted their geometric structures to respond to the new, large white cube spaces in late '60s SoHo). Yet one more nod to traditional lineage, "One Hand Forming" and "Two Hands Forming" are in rapport with Cézanne's triadic forms: the sphere, cylinder, and cone. (Shapiro's welded metal cone shape has not been shown since his second solo show at Paula Cooper in 1972.) The sculptures must be seen as a group in order to emphasize their accumulative power and unassuming vulnerability against the floor, while demanding our attentive viewing. Like Cézanne, the more he desires stability and order the more unstable and random his forms become.

"Untitled," with its half- and three-quarter circular shapes festively combined in a variety of arabesque configurations, anticipated the emergence of the figure in his sculptures in the mid '70s, as well as the endless experimentation with shifting scales and elevation of forms on and off the floor. After all, as Shapiro, as quoted in Richard Shiff's insightful catalogue essay, says, "Let rational justification wait until the sensory act." There is such a thing as the intelligence of the touch, but who's counting.



Joel Shapiro, "Untitled," 1971. Terra cotta, 49 units, approximately 6 1/4 x 8 x 5 1/2" each.

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