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ARTS & CULTURE

Critic's Choice

Art Review: Step inside Joel Shapiro's fascinating work at L.A. Louver



An installation view of Joel Shapiro's sculpture at L.A. Louver Gallery. (Jaff McLane / L.A. Louver)

By David Pagel

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To step into the main gallery at L.A. Louver is to feel as if you are inside an abstract painting.

What's even stranger is that you don't experience your body as if it is part of the figure-ground ambiguity that animates so much modern painting. Nor does it seem as if you're an actor called on to improvise a performance with the minimal props Joel Shapiro has set out in his nine-part work.

Strangest of all is how joyous it is to forget about yourself and to stroll, more or less aimlessly, as your eyes dart this way and that, speeding off to one end of the space and then rebounding back, to report on what they've discovered, all in a split-second.

There's no end to the fun Shapiro's sculpture delivers as you rearrange its loose composition, not just in your mind's eye, but in the space you share with others. Possibility and reality commingle, playfully, peculiarly, pleurably.

Throughout the space, Shapiro has suspended nine planks and chunks of wood, each covered with a thin coat of paint that leaves the grain visible. The steel cables that hold the lumber in midair are fully visible, so there are no tricks. Shapiro is a sculptor, not a magician.

In a sense, the 72-year-old New Yorker has built a jungle gym for vision. It's the perfect cure for people who spend too much time with their eyes glued to tiny screens; their minds locked into scripted stories.

In a small adjoining gallery stands a 9-foot-tall tornado of brightly colored building blocks. Upstairs, four tabletop bronzes and a body-scaled floor piece compress the sweeping movements of Shapiro's downstairs work into compact dimensions. Your eyes run wild, reminding you that they are part of your body and that there's no substitute for first-hand interaction with 3-D reality.

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 822-4955, through Jan. 11. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.lalouver.com

<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-et-cm-art-review-joel-shapiro-at-la-louver-20131217,0,5676718.story#ixzz2o2RxHm7t>