

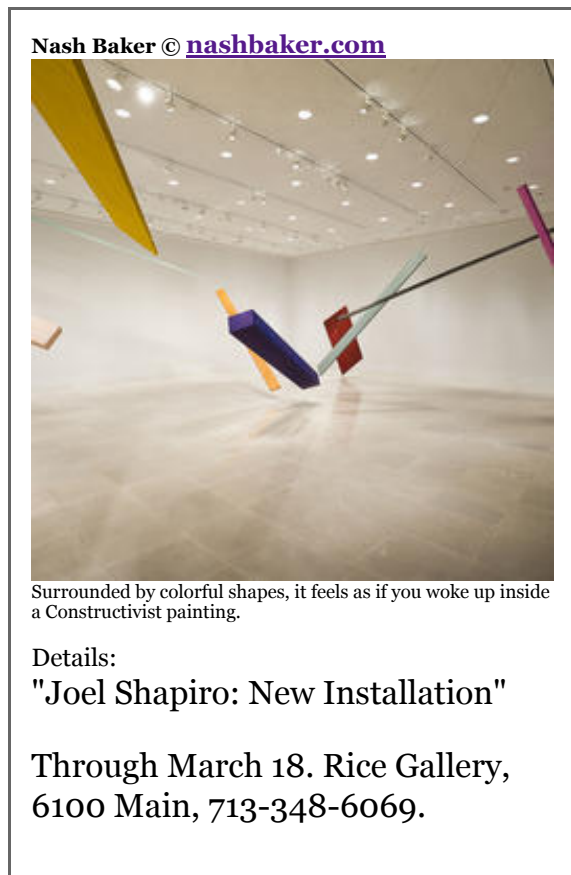
Suspension of Convention

Joel Shapiro's rebellious spirit explodes at Rice Gallery.

By Meredith Deliso

published: February 16, 2012

Joel Shapiro wouldn't touch convention with a ten-foot wooden plank. That includes even the most standard of art conventions. Rather than lay his work flat against a museum wall, he spreads it out across the whole room, bounding through the air and taking up the space above and around you. Whereas most sculptors would build a piece from the ground up, he'd do the same and then flip it over.



It makes sense that with such a rebellious spirit, Shapiro would be drawn to sculpture, which has a little more breathing room to challenge such conventions as form and presentation. And in the aptly titled "**Joel Shapiro: New Installation**" at Rice Gallery, that spirit is on full display. The site-specific work features wooden planks hanging from the ceiling, suspended with the help of black twine. Each plank is saturated in pleasing, solid hues such as blue, yellow and red. The wood pieces consist of mostly flat, thin rectangles, save for one thicker blue one in the middle, and hang from the ceiling at varying angles. Some are above your head, way out of reach, while others jut right towards you, blocking your way so that you tiptoe out of their path. One red door-like piece just barely, teasingly touches the ground, just an inch from letting the whole thing collapse and fall abruptly to the floor. Surrounded by all these strong, colorful geometric shapes, it feels as if you woke up inside a Constructivist painting by Malevich or Kandinsky, their sharp rectangles in vivid 3-D.

Shapiro's work hasn't always been on such a grand scale or as abstract as fans have come to expect it to be. In the early 1970s, at the start of his career, the New York artist gained acclaim making miniatures — little bronze or wooden chairs

and houses — which soon became his trademark, setting him apart from the Robert Morrises and Richard Serras of the time. In the 1980s, Shapiro left furniture for sculptures of people — well, what you'd infer were people. The long rectangles were abstract representations of the human form caught in mid-movement.

As of late, Shapiro's most ambitious projects find him suspending pieces in the air, in what can be seen as a collapsing of the style he's worked in most of his career. It's also one that's even more freeing — he's not constrained by space or architecture, and his works have become pure abstraction. Still, over the course of decades, as his work has playfully evolved, Shapiro has continued to address the

same fundamental concerns for him as an artist — form and scale. The pieces have just gotten bigger.

The Rice Gallery installation can be seen as a culmination of Shapiro's career in geometric sculpture. It is a far cry from one work of his in particular that many Houstonians are familiar with — his bronze statue in the nearby MFAH garden. That is a loose, bounding form of the human body in mid-stride. Here, he abandons heavy bronze for the lighter wood, and rather than let the material decide, he employs rich colors on each plank. It looks as if one of Shapiro's human sculptures spontaneously exploded, breaking off into its separate geometric pieces, and then someone mischievously hit a big pause button, suspending the pieces at their various points of dispersal.

Navigating this explosion of pigment and wood is like walking through a color minefield. You're acutely conscious of spruce wood and the black strings that connect it to the wall, primarily because you don't want to be that person who runs into them. As a result, slowly walking around the flat rectangles, you become extremely mindful of the shape the installation takes on, with its swirling vortex coming out of the middle of the gallery and the stray pieces along the exterior. It's best to pause at various intervals and get lost in the overlapping of color and line as the planks take on new forms. With every step, it's a completely new piece, with different depth and shape.

The result of a rather laborious process of planning the piece for months in his New York studio and then executing it over the course of a week at Rice, the setup is deceptively simple — it's just planks of wood, paint, string and hooks propped up as if by any capable handyman. But then you consider the density of the color, the thickness of the wood, the distance between each piece, the tight strings and their placement. All of these careful decisions are laid out before you, exposed. You see each brushstroke, in a sense.

Each color is also its own puzzle. Shapiro mixed his own paint to make the hues wholly unique. The yellow he mixed and remixed to avoid any clichéd comparisons to the yellow of taxicabs. He quickly decided to forgo black on the thickest piece of wood — a long, coffin-like shape in the middle — because black would make it too obviously coffin-like. Instead, he went with a rich blue that replaces any connotation of death with life and lightness. Each color has its own story like this, its own metaphor. They aren't meant to be referential or predictable, but to evoke a reaction unique to their use here. Shapiro is creating his own geometric language, drawing new meaning and associations through his obsessive mixing of supersaturated pigments.

And then there's the matter of Shapiro's now-signature suspension technique. Much has been said of the artist's grand attempts to "fight" gravity; in press materials and other articles on his recent career, his work is often described as "gravity-defying" and achieving "suspended animation." Of course, that takes a little imagination on the viewer's part. That's because when walking around his suspended planks at Rice, you see the magic at hand — the taut, nylon twine connecting the wood to the wall is the card up the sleeve, the trick back door, revealed. These strings are everywhere, and any illusion of floating is erased by their presence. But because of that, because of his attempts to make the impossible possible, to defy even the most fundamental of conventions — what goes up must come down — Shapiro may be the ultimate, crazy dreamer. Gravity will always be there; the apple will always fall from the tree. But that doesn't mean Shapiro won't stop trying to explore new territory by placing his art in the air around him. And it sure is fun to see him try.