

November 12, 2013

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Elizabeth Sobieski

JOEL SHAPIRO (American, 1941)

Now, 2013, Painted aluminum, 22 feet, 7 inches high

Gift of the artist to the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies with additional funding provided by Bank of America and The Honorable Ronald S. Lauder and Mrs. Jo Carole Lauder. Donated in honor of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.



It is a damp autumn evening in Manhattan and the handsome crowd applauds as

Joel Shapiro is being offered extraordinary accolades from Yale School of Art Dean Robert Storr. The members of FAPE (the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies) are toasting the sculptor at the Museum of Modern Art. Fellow artists Brice Marden, Carrie Mae Weems, Tom Otterness, Bill Jensen, Dorothea Rockburne, Julian Lethbridge and Ursula von Rydingsvard are here to celebrate Shapiro and his forty plus year career. Shapiro has most generously donated major works to the United States Embassy in Ottawa, Canada (the first site-specific FAPE installation, "Conjunction," from 1999) and to the US Consulate in Guangzhou, China ("Now," commissioned in honor of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and unveiled this year). In 2012, his screenprint "Toss Up" was donated and distributed to numerous embassies. FAPE, which is privately funded and non-profit, handled the costs for fabrication, transportation and installation, but Shapiro's artistry, time and labor were given freely. Joel Shapiro surrounds himself with an adorable bunch of young grandchildren as he graciously accepts the well-deserved kudos. His wife, the lyrical painter Ellen Phelan, beams.



Joel Shapiro, Model of Installation at LA Louver (detail), 2013

Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

And from November 14 through January 11, Shapiro is taking over the commodious first floor of the prestigious L.A. Louver Gallery for a site-specific installation, along with a display of his recent free standing sculpture. Shapiro tells me, "I'm doing a complicated sculpture of painted wood elements, all of which will be suspended in

the space. Many of the individual elements are large. One extends beyond the boundary of the room. Another is wedged between the floor and ceiling. The rest float about. Hopefully it all works out -- we shall see!"

A visitor to Joel Shapiro's studio is offered directions, eight possible and precise routes to Long Island City, Queens, employing either automobile or public transportation. A large and powerful bronze anthropomorphic sculpture marks the entrance to his monumental workplace, just a few blocks from the Silvercup film and television production facilities. His studio, a former power plant, features a massive first floor space, the scene of the sculpting. There are completed works, unfinished works, maquettes, pieces in natural wood, pieces in bronze, pieces formed from intense-colored caseine painted wood. A base-less sculpture juts from the wall. Shapiro points out a small, brilliant Klein-blue piece that was a model for the 22 feet outdoor sculpture in Guangzhou.



JOEL SHAPIRO (American, 1941) Toss-up, 2012, 40 x 30 inches, 2 color screen print Gift of the artist and Gemini G.E.L. LLC with additional support provided by Bank of America

At MOMA, I had been introduced to the team of art installers who worked with Shapiro in China. Describing that experience, Shapiro, an alumnus of both NYU and the Peace Corps in India, notes, "I was there for at least a week and did a considerable amount of outreach with other art organizations in the city -- lectures, discussions at the art academy, studio visits, any number of banquets. The state department organized an effective outreach program and my sense, aside from being fun, was that there was a real exchange of information and ideas. I thought the response was very positive, perhaps confirming my thought that fundamentally artists struggle with the same ideas, at least developmentally, regardless of the culture. "

He adds, "Guangzhou is a dense, teeming, rapidly developing, and gritty urban center where this a growing interest in contemporary art." His experience installing the sculpture for the embassy in Canada was very different. "Although it is the capital, Ottawa is bucolic -- serene -- in comparison. Contemporary art is part of the fabric of the city and of the site -- The National Gallery of Canada is nearly adjacent to the consulate. Guangzhou is much more of a frontier. "

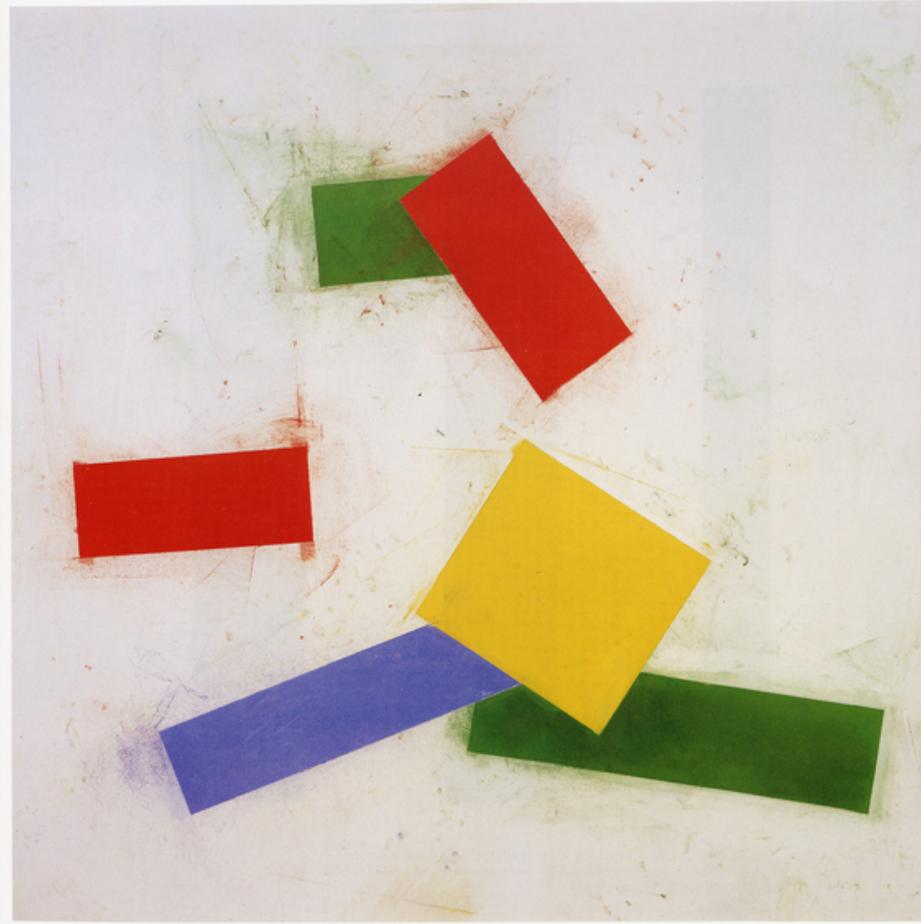


JOEL SHAPIRO (American, 1941) Conjunction, 1999, Bronze, 40 x 27 x 16 feet
Gift of the artist to the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies with additional funding provided by Arne Glimcher; Barrick Gold Corporation of Canada, Montreal; TrizecHahn Corporation, Toronto; an anonymous donor and members of FAPE's Millennium Committee © Joel Shapiro/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph: Raul Alferez

I notice that all the works donated to FAPE have titles and that Shapiro rarely names his sculptures. Why do the FAPE pieces have titles? "I actually think form is a kind of language and means something beyond words, so titles just get in the way. Public work, on the other hand, does have a more specific purpose and intent, so I thought titles were necessary. Besides, if you don't have one, it encourages the public to attach a moniker sooner."

At 72, Joel Shapiro exhibits all the excitement and passion of a young artist anxious to present new work, rather than a desire to simply relax into the satisfied world-weariness of a veteran of decades of museum shows and international recognition. He is palpably energized displaying a model, "I mean, how do you hold them up in

the air? It's all kind of new work for me! It's evolved over 40 years. And it's still new and fresh so it is far from formulaic. I had to figure out what fasteners to use."



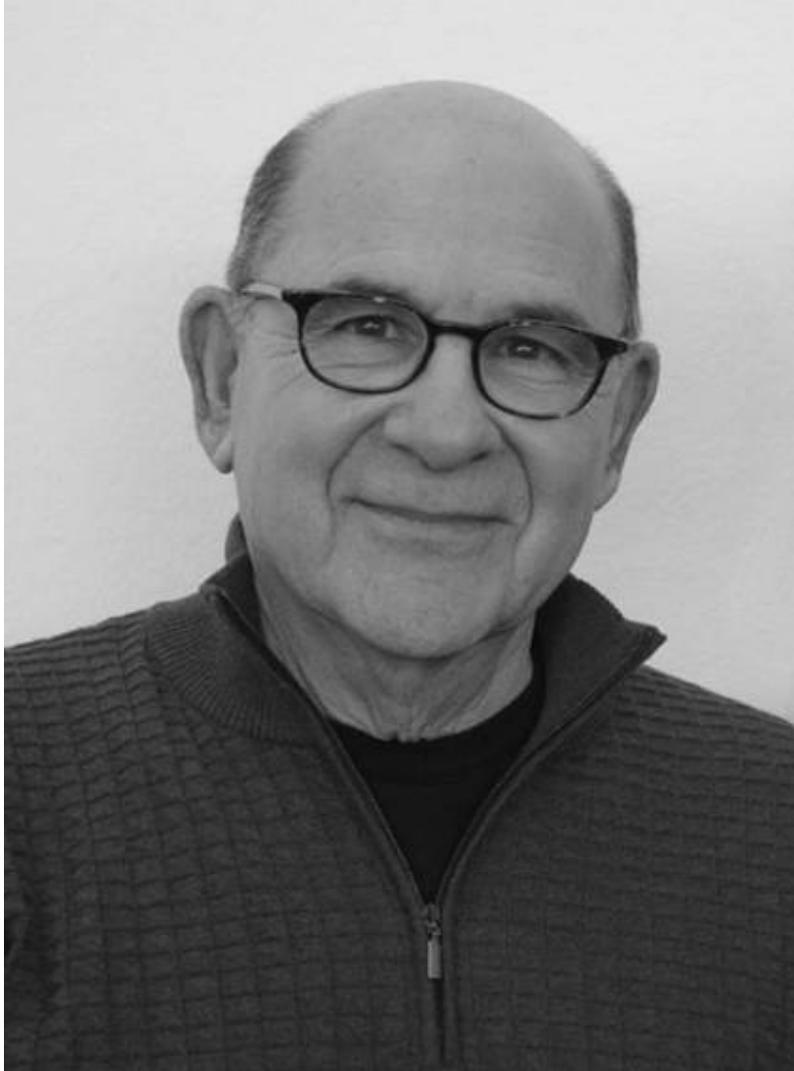
JOEL SHAPIRO (American, 1941)
Untitled, 2000, 54 x 51 5/8 inches, Pastel
Gift of the artist courtesy of PaceWildenstein Gallery
© Gordon Riley Christmas

Joel Shapiro was raised in Sunnyside, Queens, not far from his studio, the son of a physician father and a microbiologist mother. He tried to convince himself to follow his parents into science, but he knew he had no other option but to be an artist. "I always recognized that I was an artist but it was just a question of when I committed to being an artist. I mean, you don't have much choice!"

Explaining the desire to produce art, he adds, ""You have to have some real drive and deep belief, a combination of ego and humility, so it's difficult. You have to have some sense of self and have to have some doubting sense of self in order to externalize your interior, so it's a peculiar combination of factors, at least in my case, that you sort of, in retrospect, allow. I'm always surprised that the work looks good!"

The early artwork that brought notice to Joel Shapiro was both very architectural and very small. He built miniature mysterious-seeming houses, bridges, boats, and furniture in wood and sometimes cast them in metal, both bronze and iron. In 1970, he had his first one man show at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York and by the following year was being exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Joel Shapiro says, "I think making abstract art is hard. And I think it's really interesting. Artists struggle with it. It's not that work that's more depictive or representational is easier. But it has something to fall back on. A system of faith."



photograph by Yves Bresson

Joel Shapiro at L.A. Louver, 45 North Venice Boulevard, Venice, CA 90291
November 14, 2013-January 11, 2014