



Joel Shapiro hits nerve at Berggruen Gallery

Kenneth Baker

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Body imagery, the axis of sculptural and humanistic tradition, continues to shadow the work of New York artist Joel Shapiro. But he has learned to turn its inescapability against it. See his recent sculptures at the John Berggruen Gallery.

Perhaps our narrative habits of mind explain our inability to accept Shapiro's consistently untitled sculptures as abstract. Any given piece by him will show its abstract sides as we circle it. But sensitive viewers will feel the inner pull of those vantage points that least repel our projection of human content into these slyly non-referential structures.

Any sort of nominative title would doom to anecdotal cuteness a piece such as the small untitled 2011 white-patinated bronze that - all limbs and no head - pitches beyond the edge of a shoulder-high pedestal.

Just try describing Shapiro's pieces without resorting to figurative language. His art proves its value partly by making us uncomfortable with the vague, fantasy-ridden distinctions that we maintain between selves and things.

We might regard Shapiro's sculptures as monuments to the urgency of seeing things merely as they are. His connection to '60s minimalism persists in this reminiscence of the project to make objects stripped of everything extraneous and evocative.

Shapiro plays at staging narratable moments to provoke spasms of notional projection, the better to expose them to a heightened pressure of self-consciousness. They instruct us in the differences between seeing them as things and seeing something in them. They do not suggest that we ought to - or could - master either capability at the expense of the other, merely that the two must be held in balance. Precarious balance reappears throughout Shapiro's art, no matter how we interpret it.

Shapiro avoids topicality, but his art responds almost subliminally to large events. Work he showed at Berggruen several years ago, although unmistakably his, seemed to echo the "stress positions" aired during the public debate over torture as a tactic of antiterrorism.

Several more recent pieces showing now mirror popular consciousness of the global economy going over a cliff, as it began to do four years ago. One exceptionally literal stick figure of bronze beams cast from

wood has a nearly life-size figure striding along as if nothing could possibly go wrong.

Boyce at Altman Siegel: Early photographers liked to shoot sculpture because it stood still uncomplainingly for very long exposures. But probably no one else so far has reconciled sculpture and video - photography's descendant - as cleverly as San Franciscan Nate Boyce.

His new video pieces at Altman Siegel Gallery have it all. They acknowledge and exploit video as a hypnotic medium, whose sources in reality viewers can never know with certainty. They take us into a zone in which the language of description quickly loses traction, and several of them, such as "R-1" (2012), appear to depict sculptures.

"R-1" presents a golden form slowly rotating onscreen as if on an invisible spit. It looks like a chunk of abstract surrealism that might bring Henry Moore or Isamu Noguchi to mind. Reflected light ripples over the moving form, so nearly dissolving it at times as to make a viewer unsure whether digital animation morphs it as it revolves.

In fact, Boyce germinated "R-1" and several other pieces here by shooting sculptures that he carved from foam and gave a reflective finish. But the video medium, which he doctors by combining current and obsolete technologies, so digests the reality of the original object that we wonder in what sense, if any, we see "the same" form as it turns in virtual space.

The revolving views Boyce offers idealize the possibility of seeing sculpture in the round. But they also recall, almost parodically, the commodities revolving on turntables that we see so often in onscreen advertising.

Boyce has underlined the showroom reference of his work nearly to the point of mocking the gallery by fabricating slender custom supports for several of his industrial LCD screens.

Boyce shows a single sculpture, intriguing in its own right, and a couple of wall-bound structures that do not marry physical and depictive information very successfully.

But on the whole, what a debut!

Joel Shapiro: Sculpture and Drawings: Through May 12. John Berggruen Gallery, 228 Grant Ave., S.F. (415) 781-4629. www.berggruen.com.

Nate Boyce: Knockdown Texture: Video and sculpture. Through June 16. Altman Siegel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 576-9300. www.altmansiegel.com.

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