THE MODERN ART NOTES PODCAST

June 9, 2016

No. 240: Joel Shapiro, Linn Meyers

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By Tyler Green

Episode No. 240 of The Modern Art Notes Podcast features artists **Joel Shapiro** and **Linn Meyers.**

Joel Shaprio's newest immersive installation is now on view in an eponymous exhibition at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas that also includes works on paper and Shapiros from the Nasher's collection. It's on view through August 21.

Shapiro is one of the world's best-known sculptors. His museum exhibition credits include Cologne's Ludwig Museum, the National Gallery of Canada, the MFA Boston, the Addison Gallery, Munich's Haus der Kunst, Copenhagen's Louisiana Museum, and plenty more. His work is in pretty much every major museum collection in America.

On the second segment, Linn Meyers discusses her new 360-degree, installation at Washington's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Titled *Our View From Here*, Meyers' mural covers more than 400 linear feet along the inner-ring galleries of the Hirshhorn's second level. It will remain on view through May 14, 2017. Among Meyers' previous credits are solo exhibitions at the Hammer Museum and The Phillips Collection, and group shows at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Joel Shapiro, Nasher installation view with Yellow Then, Flush and Really Blue (after all), 2016.

Tyler Green: Joel Shapiro, welcome to the Modern Arts Podcast

Joel Shapiro: Wow, I'm happy to be here.

TG: Naturally the place to start is your exhibit at the Nasher Sculpture Center, we will have pictures of it up on Modernpodcast.com and I encourage everybody to take a look.

When you created this piece for the Nasher, do you start with the physical space they're handing you, do you start with a form that already interest you, or something else?

JS: Well I think you start somehow in between, that's a very particular space, a very beautiful space, and I went to see, I had been there before look at the space to have some real sense, and it becomes an arena is which you operate in. I think it's a question of what do I do? It's not a retrospective and the idea

of taking work that I already know and sticking it in the space just didn't engage me. So I thought it was more interesting to try and do something that was very specific about the space. What utilizing the space in a specific way and to extend my ideas into this new contents of that space which is a very unique space, very serene, all natural materials, and all natural light. So what I have been doing the last couple of years, working with a lot of color, and wood I just see ideas and certain spaces I just use planks of wood that I have painted, and configure them in different ways so they rearrange. And I just felt it wouldn't work for this space, so I wanted to introduce more specific imagery with more volume.

TG: You mentioned color, and we will come back to that in a minute, you have been playing with the idea of placing sculptural elements in the air, off the floor, and unanchored to a wall for the last 5 or 6 years or so. What prompted you to leave the ground or wall based supports?

Joel Shapiro, Nasher installation view with Yellow Then, Flush, OK Green and Really Blue (after all), 2016.

JS: I think pushing the idea of how pervasive the floor and the wall is in terms of the organization of thought. That if that becomes the format and is built up whether it is on the floor or a table top, it's like the architecture or the flatness becomes to really reframe your thinking and it's something I have been very well aware of in my work for years and the tendency to battle or fight that. I want the work to read more as a projection of a thought, an experience, that wasn't so conditioned by a format. In sculpture, in a lot of minimalist work you can see where the architecture itself becomes the format for the organization of the thought and becomes the beginning. I thought and felt this was a limitation in my work. And early on it is something I have been struggling with.

TG: Reminds me of how much that minimalist work isn't just something reliant on the floor but that we look at it by looking down at it, almost like we are bowing to it, and this piece at the Nasher is anything but that.

JS: Some early work that I did, in the early 70s and 80s, I'm totally interested in space and architecture and the room that work is going into and that conditions how you see work. But not as a basis of organization, it's the same thing of the drawings of the show, where I sort of want the work to overwhelm the page, that overwhelming flatness. And to a certain extent you can see that the floor is flat.

TG: Your figure referencing work of the 1980s, is full of the suggestion of movement, and I want to get to that in a bit, but when I look at the pictures from this Nasher installation, I also feel a sense of dynamism or expansion that reads like it was caught in the act of movement. Is bringing a movement or a sense of physical dynamism something you were trying to do, or simply an effect.

JS: No, I think it's something that is intended, whether you know it or not. No I was almost interested in this as a dream sequence, things floating in space and then certain things grounded. And then what a single unit means what a double unit means. When you put four things together do they have a different kind of medium and I think that the isolation of one unit in the middle of the room compared

to two others on either side is all meaningful. Don't ask me what it means, I can assure you that it is intended. I'm absolutely interested in movement and how the movement changes as you move around it.

TG: Two of the forms, the incline blueish one and the redish one, have shapes that refer to your interest in houses. You have been making house reference sculptures since at least 1973, how has this come back into your work in the past 2-3 years.

JS: When looking at the forms, I had a few of those figures laying around the studio, and how does a show evolve? You sort of get anxious and hysterical. Oh God your facing the void again, you don't know what you are going to do. Just sort of taking different shapes I have been toying with for a couple of years, and join them together. And to project volume which is what I did. There is one piece that didn't make it in the show, this is kind of I guess almost looked like a floating reclining figure and instead of a head there was a kind of house, and it was kind of a dream sequence. And that became the basis of the show, where I began to work on the installation. I eliminated that piece because number one it would be too large and number two I thought I reiterated what the show was all about so why explain again? I pulled the sixth out, or rather didn't make it because it would have been a lot smaller and I ran out of time. SO I was grabbing all this chunks and these forms that I had and was sticking them together and two of them are together and one is isolated that I changed and I wanted- it was a difficult show to do because- I had a plan but that doesn't mean I think it's going to be successful till it was done. At the time adventure is exciting, if it works out.

Joel Shapiro, 20 Elements, 2004-05.

TG: I'm curious of how these house like forms have come in and out of your work for the last 40 years.

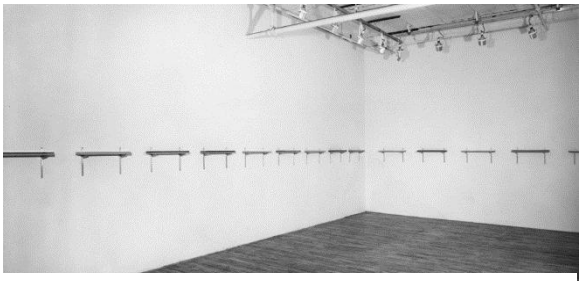
JS: I don't know what else to do. Basically I'm interested in form and space, all sculptures are. Whenever I make a form I understand that I am not going to invent a form, no one invents a form, it's unrealistic. It is an unrealistic point of view to think you can invent something. You might rearrange a form into something new and unfamiliar, which is something I think I am capable of doing. I can grab the material that is a hand, or reach and search, and kind of reconfigure that so more or less it expresses my intent. Or my intent via that form. So it's not like I'm sitting with paper and a pencil generating a form, I've never done that. I might chop up a bunch of wood copiously, but then generate a form and use them. They were stretched out house forms and geometric forms I had laying around that I joined together and they were the right size and stuck them together to see how that worked and I think even though they were kind of hand sized, they became satisfactory in terms of what I wanted to do.

TG: my sense is that house forms have come in and out of work for the past 40 years, I mean they are there in the early 70s, and then they kind of go away for a while, and then in the early 90s, the most famous one perhaps is the memorial piece at the holocaust museum in Washington and then a couple years ago they came back with fire.

JS: oh those burnt pieces. I was doing them in the 70s and somehow . . .

TG: Oh you were? That's interesting.

JS: There was a completion for a holocaust museum, and I took a house and I just burnt it up. Nothing ever came of it, the competition was nixed but anyway. The house is such a loaded metaphor. It's so common.



Joel Shapiro, Untitled, 1970. Installation view at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York City.

TG: Yeah, which makes me wonder why, if there is a reason that sometimes it's in your work, and then it goes away for a decade it comes back, why does it go away why does it come back?

JS: Because I don't know what else to do!

TG: it is that simple or is there a reason that has to do with the power of the thing?

JS: It's a form, it's sort of figuration, I mean you can can't avoid doing figuration. You can make work in the most abstract way and you can put 10 planks together and it's going to have some figurative reference, it's going to look like something. It was made by a human. I have tried to avoid that frequently, and at some point you just give in. and of course the house is more specific, but even if you stretch geometry if it's not a house you end up with some type of architectural figure, and that's what interests me. So if you put a plane in the room there is a hardscape of the plane of the work and the context.

TG: this is a good transition into turning the clock back to the 60s and 70s, in your first gallery show at Paula Cooper you made a series of untitled shelf like forms, planes of wood and different materials stuff like steal, plexiglass, and concrete. This is a piece I have known about for a while, it's a piece that forces the lookers gaze in a certain direction, not at the floor, not dead ahead just you know. . .

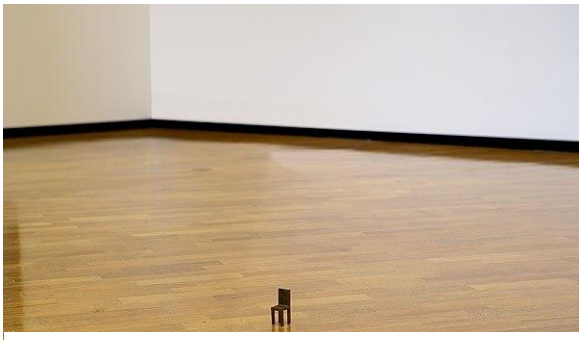
Joel Shapiro, Two Hands Forming, 1971.

JS: Yeah, you could determine to some extent how someone would look at the piece. You would have to come up to it, you know it was below head height so just about anyone could see it. I guess a kid could get up on a bench if he had too. I think I was really interested in material at the time, and how each. . . I think this idea of the sculpture presenting and inventing form is naïve. I mean you do invent form. . .

TG: So you were looking at inventing a different way of looking by the way you installed it. . .

JS: No, no, I was only seeing to what extent I could determine how the perceiver would see the work. So if they could see the way I was seeing it.

TG: That piece was installed a few years before I was born, I've never seen it installed since, so as far as I know its sitting in a warehouse of yours somewhere. It traffics the world in black and white photos these days, so help me out a bit. Is there color, material, tactility?



Joel Shapiro, Untitled (chair), 1974.

JS: Yeah, I think what I did for that was kind of common. I took common standards and brackets, I'm sure they are still made and I made chip board shelves and on each self I reiterated the size of the shelve with a slab of the material. Now some of it was cast, cast tar or wax, felt, or a slab of copper. I think the shelving was 5/8ths I don't remember the measurements. I think it was 5/8ths thick X 4 X something. So each of them was the same size. So I used this kind of template by making a wall work. So it was all about these equivalent sizes for a different experience.

TG: I think you still have it in your collection don't you?

JS: Actually no I don't think I do. I think it's now in a museum… I should know the name of the museum but I don't off hand. But it is in Portugal.

TG: so you went from that exploration of form and material to make examinations of material and work like 75 Pounds which is in a museum.

Joel Shapiro, Untitled (house on shelf), 1974.

JS: Right but that was all more or less the same time. I was interested in the possibility of form and material and how you could perceive the material. It was really about perception and point of view. But then again can you read weight, can you read density? I mean can you sense that a piece of lead is extremely heavy? Or is the perception of its density altered by juxtaposing a piece of magnesium that is kind of light? And you know can one levitate the other? It was all a very physical thing… if you see plaster you read plaster as light weight in relation to something that's dense like a chuck of copper. Maybe it's a collective memory for an experience. We know what metal looks like, we know that metal is heavy.

TG: Yeah, in the case of the magnesium and the steel piece, 75 pounds of magnesium, 75 pounds of steel, the viewer's eyes had to mediate… yeah… so at the exact same time, right in 1970 Jackie Windsor is exploring similar wear and periodical measurements in form and material meet. Where you aware that she was doing the same thing, did you know each other?

A good example of this is at the Carnegie now, called 4,000 Nails and took a 2X4 and pounded 4,000 nails into it. The idea that the weight of the nails and the displacement of the wood is a different weight would kind of resonate in a way.

JS: No, I wasn't aware of that but I think young artist trying to address similar issues. I mean they all have the same information in their brain right now. They know what going on, they begin to extend what they have known to their own personal language. But I was aware of Jackie's work and I was aware of the more nature aspect of it.

TG: It's funny you know, we talk all the time about painters trying to get out of defects but do we ever talk about sculptures getting out of minimalism?

JS: I think that my entire generation is trying to do that. And minimalism was a dominate critical posture, and I think you sort of had to work your way out of it. And I think the minimalist had to work themselves out of it too. It was pretty concrete. But I think lots of artist and people were dealing with similar issues of trying to find valuable form. And in that investigating material and process.

TG: You made a piece in that time period for example called 200 Blows or 600 Blows where you take a hammer and you hit a piece of zinc or copper 200 times, 600 times. Was that just trying to get rid of the perfection of the finish and form that minimalism imposed by applying a very physical process to materials?

JS: I mean I was trying to find some structure that I could use that would allow me to invent a form. I think artist were interested in structuring their thought, pushing their languages, far as they could within a given structure. And in a way the forms became justified by the process.

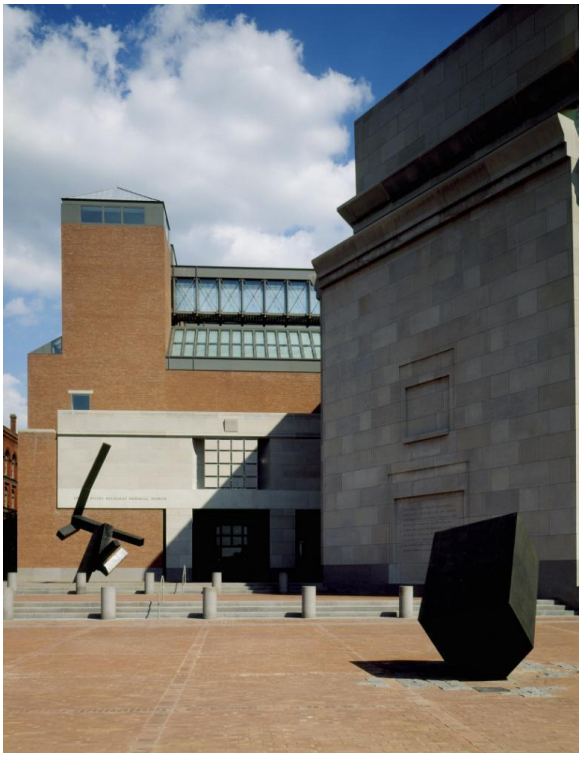
TG: And this is a fascinating moment for a lot of artists. In doing that you included there the two bronze birds of 273 which look alike but they aren't. They are made with the same material but differently. One with your right hand and one with your left hand.

JS: They were kind of mirror images and at that point I began to introduce images into the work.

TG: Yes, this is a moment and especially in American art, painting and in sculpture where imagery is not cool. So why did you want to bring representational imagery in? Was it intentional? Or was it just kind of where you come up with the idea that your two hands are going to make an object was it just the representation a what they could do?

JS: I just thought that was a rich vain to tap, that it hadn't really been looked at, and emotionally I was trying to find some imagery that corresponded with my emotional state. You know it's hard to relate to a chunk of steel. You know you can only get so much out of it. You know how many sort of egg shapes can you carve out of pine wood to make a pile and that was enough? You know it would look a little different but again you can only go so far. I was much more interested in this discourse of language and reference. I think it's so much richer. But I also think the investigation of material kind of gave this void of I hate to say creepy looking art but one could express their current emotional state with dignity. Which would make for a more powerful presentation and clarity. And I think that's when I began to use images. And believe me I wasn't the only person to use imagery, but I also wasn't interested in creating a narrative. You know story telling doesn't interest me. I was interested in my own experience as to see my development as an artist and a certain rational clarity, to see the irrational rational to structure it.

TG: Part of your presentation at that point was to make things that were really small. So some of that representational work ends up as a horse that is 5in X 3in or a chair that I think was even smaller, a bridge that was about that size.



Joel Shapiro, Loss and Regeneration, 1993.

JS: Yeah the bridge was about 19 inches, I think the important aspect of that work was what the image meant to me reflected in scale and size. So I'm not inventing a chair, chairs are pervasive, chairs and houses run through art history. So it was making the size not intentionally small but small enough that it wasn't useable. I wasn't making a chair to sit in, I was making a chair more as a metaphor or a symbol. And insisting upon that as big enough, I mean it was large enough to identify with. And that's when scale enters in and you begin to get this real discourse and the scale between you know my thinking and your experience or someone else's experience. How one perceives work has always really interested me. I'm interested in doing the work for myself, but how do you see that? How does someone else participate in that?

TG: In the late 1970s you have kept that sense of scale and began making shelf release if you will. Works that are small wooden releases in construction that were installed on a wall.

JS: Oh yes right on the wall. There was no need to make them large. There was a persistence of personal and also the work as a model of thought rather than work being made for the public consumption. The colossal or building it up larger for the public. I think it's the Nasher that is different at this point in my work. I mean there is a change.

TG: when you make those shelf releases on a wall, you know they never make figure references. You are using rectangles and such that come together and they make these sculptures.

JS: Well I think those are more or less successful depending on the extent I could show the wrestle of geometry I could break away from. I have never liked geometry, I like it, but I also want to violate it or form it to where it becomes my own language.

TG: so when I look at the shapes of those sculptures, it seems to me they might be the Genesis of the more human or figure recalling that would come to stand alone in a room and evoke people in the 1980s. Are those reliefs? Am I reading it right?

JS: Well I think some of them refer to that, there is a certain point in my work where in the late 70s I did introduce the figure, I think 76?

TG: Yes, it was.

JS: and I was doing these small pieces, and I thought well you know if I actually made this sort of object figure and made it strong enough you could read it as language. You would read it as fear or joy. You would read it as some human state. They weren't big enough to where you could aesthetically relate but they were small enough to where they had enough posture to imply a certain emotional situation. So it wasn't that different than a chair, I was interested in the sort of physiological state they could invoke, induce. And I did a little of that work on the wall, but at a certain point, I made this tree, there was a death in my family and I made a tree that sort of laid on its side, and I would always justify this stuff conceptually as a metaphor, probably as a means of avoiding the emotional battle I may have been going through or even unware I was going through. But at a certain point, I just couldn't function in this magical world of the small. So all the small chairs and houses, you know I just didn't want people to mentally enter into these atmospheres to see something and to go on a journey. That's something I abandoned and I wanted the function to work more in a real world. And when I say the real world I mean an ambient space, not in a magical space.

TG: You made a bronze table top sized sheet with three houses on it, and the suggestion of fourth, from a scuff in a corner. And for me it feels like you are bringing your houses, a form you really like, on a field in which Jacques Emmeti often played, using a sheet or horizontal, was that an intentional engagement, or maybe was it more a back door engagement?

Joel Shapiro, Untitled, 1989-90. Installation view at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth University.

JS: I have always been interested in Jacques Emmeti. The work of that time, where something was seen directly on the floor, and then to kind of pull it into a pictorial space of a flat plane. So instead of having a plane… if a house was on the floor in front of you, you relate that to the space you occupy. If you make it slightly smaller and stick it on a plane and remove it from the floor, you are moving it into this other world, which is something I think my works been playing with. I don't think it was about Jacque Emmeti, but establishing your field in which you see the work. But clearly there are references of him in the work but if you had to ask me what was the most power Jacque Emmeti I would say the one with the throat cut.

TG: And you made a piece that referred to that in the 70s.

JS: But that kind of range or anger is relatively common, that's a pretty enraged piece. That sense of frustration is a common experience we all have, Jacque Emmeti turned it into a profound artwork, and I think that's the power of art. That it can make one understand the sort of emotional world that they are living in. I think if Jacque Emmeti can do that anyone can. Yes, I have thought a lot about Jacque Emmeti but I also have thought a lot about Donatello, I know this sounds outrageous but I remember giving a lecture at Cal Arts and I had been to Florence and I was so taken by Donatello, we all know he's

great and I did that house on a shelf that the modern has and I really angled the house based on I think Donatello's David, or my memory of David's helmet. There was an exhibition of Biblical Art in New York, it was a fabulous Donatello show, and what differentiated Donatello from his peers I think was his involvement in how the work was perceived. It wasn't just his modeling I mean he had all these other skills that were just used to make an object for modeling. He was very conscious about how you would see the work.

TG: Do you ever make work that specifically addresses an artist or sculpture whether it's Rodin or Matisse or whoever?

JS: Well I did, you know I was in this show at the d'Orsay, and you know the piece as you enter the museum at the Nasher? 20 Elephants, for a lack of a more creative title, I was invited by Serge Lemoine from d'Orsay, and he sat up a series of shows called correspondences where he asked contemporary artists to find a work from the museum that they felt corresponded to their own work. Does this ring a bell?

TG: Yes, this is the piece from 2004-2005.

JS: So yes, I came over, and I was thrilled I don't know how many times I went and marched through that museum. So at that point I was doing all these pieces, hanging from the ceiling and wires, and I would take these strings of blocks I made and stapled, rearranged, and pull them apart and reconfigure them until I found a configuration that seemed to be loaded with meaning. So I had all these I had one that totally corresponded to The Dance, and I have looked at this before and thought this was a great 19th century French sculpture and what I am trying to get to is that I made the piece larger in relationship I didn't change the configuration in relation to Cora Po. So it was made to that extent. But I think there was that much more continuity between the centuries then is given credit or that the thought and the process of making sculpture and the language of form has this commonality that almost transcends time. Stylistically things are different.

TG: Yeah there is work of yours from the 80s and 90s in which I think I can find Matisse and Degas. Either figure referencing standing if you will.

JS: Yeah I remember asking 'Sir I don't know if I want to do the Cora Po but actually it would be better to do Degas as a clear relation.' There is a certain attitude and kind of brilliance in Degas. The way it just appears to be there and totally natural. That's something I admire. I would love to have that freedom in my work. So yes I would agree. I think there is this continuity and I think in my early I work I was more involved with artifacts.

TG: We won't get to spend as much time in this conversation about figure referencing work but hopefully someday we can pick up with that, but there is one thing about that work that I did want to get to. You're figures always seem to be caught in a movement. You know it's never a figure standing there, laying there. It's almost always mid movement. Why is that because I just assumed why it was always there but then I read in a 1980 interview that you said it took you a long time to get movement in your work. And that really surprised me because it seems that it's always there and easy and fluid. When did you start trying to get movement into the work and what was it that got it there?

JS: No I don't agree with that I think there is always a sequential movement. Maybe as the work became more sophisticated it was more kind of implied movement. So no I don't think it was hard for me to get movement. I'm a pretty jumpy guy.

TG: And finally something that has been in the news lately. You did one of your largest earliest outdoor sculptures in 1989-1990 for the Hood Museum of Art for Dartmouth and the space outside, I think the piece is 21 feet tall. And when talking about that piece in the past you talked about dealing with a specific sight as well as architectural situation. And now both of those things the sight and the architectural situations are changing as the museum and the university embark on a 50 million dollar expansion project. Are you concerned for what that means for that piece there?

JS: Well yes, I mean I was, it is just an awkward situation. It is ironic. It was a challenging difficult courtyard, and I looked at the space and I was nervous. So I made this large figure with that I thought sort of overwhelmed the situation and put it on that balance rod as a response to that space. So it was a reaction of that space and I thought it sort of had the right scale. So when I found out about this, you know I'm not a preservationist, and they said they wanted to temporarily remove the piece, and I said 'well, cut a chunk of that rod off and move it outside and stick it over there. So that way I have a memory of where it was.' I don't know where they are going to put it, but do I think if it is reinstalled will it engage the space in a similar way? I actually think it can. I think things can be moved, it will be different, but what can I say? You know I'm not going to hold up a project.

TG: Well Joel Shapiro there is so much more that I want to know and hopefully we can soon, but thanks for joining me this time**,**

JS: Okay, it was a pleasure.