

Frieze

Features /

Mindy Shapero



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Truth to materials; the mundane and the amazing

When I first met Los Angeles-based artist Mindy Shapero a few years ago, she compared her sculptures and drawings to run-on sentences – a point driven home by a 2004 sculpture entitled *Almost the exact feeling one gets when staring at the blinded by the light for too long just before anything is about to happen*, similar to the images that you see when closing your eyes and pressing into your eyeballs (blackness). Such a generously loquacious mouthful of a title is confirmation that the artist, who did a stint in Brooklyn before heading west to attend the graduate programme at USC, still knows how to access a fantasy-inclined mentality she knew as a child growing up in Louisville, Kentucky.

One might describe *Almost the exact feeling ...* more literally as a fractally expanding cluster of starburst-like forms fashioned from wooden dowels, painted various colours and piled together into a linear tangle, lighter and warmer in colour at the centre and gradating toward darkness at the periphery. Such literalist dissection can be rewarding with Shapero's works, which tend to flaunt their odd structures and approaches to materials – often taking the old-school sculptor's dictum of 'truth to materials' to hidden-in-plain-sight ends. But if you really want to get at how the work makes its impact, there's no choice but to get literary: weird storybook literary. The object in question is more aptly described as a frozen star, an explosion that stands still, a blazing fire and imploding lump of coal all rolled into one, as if stored energy and released energy were one and the same. And yet, getting back to the literal, it's still just a bunch of painted sticks.

Shapero's works fuse the mundane and the amazing in ways that push you to flex a literary muscle or two of your own. Such narrative/associative responses come simultaneously with the

literal/material understanding, and it is here that one realizes the deftness of Shapero's works, which at times come off as under-crafted, formally unresolved or tiresomely abject, but which more often succeed in inspiring one's imagination with the most modest physical presence. It is perhaps most effective simply to bear in mind the literal – the materials, which rarely rate higher in the fine arts hierarchy than cut-and-pasted paper, wire, dowels, polystyrene and spray paint – while drifting into her literary dimension.

In the world Shapero has created there is a woman who grew out of a wall, and whose arms stretched until they took root in the floor. There is a sunset that became a mountain, and rainbows that became icebergs, and small boulders with feathery multi-coloured surfaces that might flutter away if only they also had wings: The orb (it exists behind your eyes and you only see it when you die and it tells you everything you always wanted to know), (2004). There are low-lying clouds and fog banks that teeter like sheep on spindly legs of lightning: I know you can't see through the air in this place especially with the lights so low, but eventually the sky will open, (2003–4). Rainbows have full-colour 'A-sides' and black and white 'B-sides', piling up and sprouting from one another – multiplying like crystals, growing like cacti. And once upon a time there was a rainbow that burnt and left nothing behind but charred black arches, like skeletal trees after a forest fire, that continued to cast a full-spectrum shadow as if the light hitting the ground were passing through a prismatic ghost. Shapero could and would describe these objects differently. Her works are born of fantasies that only she knows; but they can give rise to our own.

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That her sculpture might signal mixed inclinations toward the spiritual dramas of Gianlorenzo Bernini, the wide-eyed mysticism of William Blake and the softened probings of the supernatural and the uncanny, laced through the surreal Sid and Marty Krofft children's television shows of the 1970s, should come as no surprise. She is a poster child for a generation that has left the high/low debate far behind – coming of age at a time when Pop and other artistic practices rooted in common culture and media were seen no longer as provocations but as increasingly polymorphous expressions of a late 20th-century experience. Consumer products, hand-crafted objects, as well as styles and images promiscuously borrowed from around the globe, became modes of expression to be absorbed and adapted at the individual level. Shapero's work is also authentically post-psychedelic, nurtured by a culture in which innumerable aesthetics have filtered out into popular visual experience.

Shapero's penchant for mining the formally fantastic, the Romantic and the spiritual suggests that she also is fully in line with a generation that is post-critical and post-cynical: not naive, but refusing to be completely jaded; knowing and aware, but willing to suspend a little disbelief. Shapero may not be a daydream believer, but she seems very much a recreational daydream enthusiast, and more and more she seems well on her way to becoming an out-of-the-closet visionary.

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