

STORM KING ART CENTER

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

JOEL SHAPIRO

April 26, 2018

Interviewed by Sarah Dziedzic
Storm King Oral History 015
© 2018 Storm King Art Center

Use of Oral Histories in the Storm King Art Center Archives

The Storm King Art Center Archives welcomes non-commercial use of the Oral History Program Special Collection in accordance with the Storm King Archives Use and Reproduction Policy at <http://collections.stormking.org/about/UseAndReproduction>.

The following transcript is the result of a recorded oral history interview. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the person interviewed and the interviewer. The reader is asked to bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

The Archives requires that researchers give proper credit when citing oral histories, including Oral history interview with _____ (date of interview), pages _____, Oral History Program, Storm King Art Center Archives. Only the transcript may be used for citations. The recordings associated with this interview may be made available upon request. Timestamps corresponding with original audio files are included in the transcript at one-minute intervals.

For commercial use of any sort, including reproduction, quotation, publication, and broadcast in any medium, distribution, derivative works, public performance, and public display, prior written permission must be obtained from the Storm King Art Center Archives. Permission will comply with any agreements made with the person interviewed and the interviewer and may be withheld in Storm King's sole determination.

Please contact the Storm King Art Center Archives with any questions or requests at archives@stormkingartcenter.org

Thank you!

Support for Storm King Art Center's Oral History Program and Archival Program is made possible by generous lead support from the Henry Luce Foundation. Support is also provided by the Pine Tree Foundation.

Interview with Joel Shapiro
Conducted by Sarah Dziedzic
April 26, 2018

Joel Shapiro's studio, Queens, NY
1 audio file
Some restrictions on use

Audio File 1

Dziedzic: Okay. Today is April 26, 2018, and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Joel Shapiro for the Storm King Oral History Program. So, I just want to start by asking you how the commission for *Untitled*, 1994, came about.

Shapiro: Charles Gwathmey was renovating the Philip Johnson building for Sony, and he felt that they wanted a sculpture in the lobby, and they approached Arne Glimcher [00:01:00] to get in touch with me. At that point, Mickey Schulhof was the president of Sony, and Mickey knew my work because his parents were very serious collectors, and I think they had a piece of mine, maybe two pieces, perhaps three. I know one was from the Hannelore and Rudolph Schulhof Collection that's in the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice.

So, there was back and forth, and basically, I said, "Yes, I'd love to do it." It was exciting. It was a very challenging, difficult space. Everybody knew that. It was originally a Philip Johnson building, and I think those arcades were open, and then they closed them off. I'm not sure of the history. And Charles and I worked on the size and scale, [00:02:00] and I made it much smaller and Charles kept saying, "Make it larger; make it larger. You really have to obliterate the space." So, the piece was essentially an outdoor piece that was put inside to kind of overwhelm and distract from the almost folly aspect of that building.

Dziedzic: Can you describe that space, the visual interior?

Shapiro: Not really. I could, but I'd need a photograph. But I know one sense of it was, it had a lot of form in it, and very tall ceilings. I mean it really was interesting. [00:03:00] The building received a lot of attention, and it was a kind of serious, postmodern building that Philip Johnson did, so it was almost a theoretical building. He was an adventurous architect, so he was adventuring into an area that dealt with kind of "décor" from the past. It was very postmodern. And at its conversion, it was more normalized, but I'm sure it was an open arcade in the beginning, and this was now closed off, and it had a semi-public use. People would go in there, and I think you could go inside and access the Sony stores on the side. [00:04:00] So that's how it came to be.

It was basically commissioned by Sony. The head of Sony was Mickey Schulhof, and the architect was Charles Gwathmey.

Dziedzic: What do you remember about first going into the space when you knew that you would be making an artwork to go in it?

Shapiro: Well, it had a very busy floor. I mean it was busy, so I made it a modest size, originally, and then Charlie said, “You know, Joel”—I’m not going to use his language [laughs]—“make it bigger; I mean just really overwhelm the space.” I don’t think it was space that he particularly loved or admired. So that was the idea, that you would have this big physical presence in the space.

Dziedzic: So, you said that you made a [00:05:00] model for it.

Shapiro: I made lots of models.

Dziedzic: Can you describe the process of determining which one would become the full-size work?

Shapiro: Well, I came to the form relatively fast, but then it was a question of size and scale, and I made a model—I’m sure I have some records of that that we can give you. It was really a question of size. I mean, there weren’t a lot of options. Once I had the form, then I sort of put them—invented the form, whatever form would like to be so grandiose. And once I made the form, it was really a question of location, which was fairly obvious, and size, and because it was such a high ceiling, I wanted the work to hit the ground and expand on it, [00:06:00] have that two legs on the ground, a large torso, and those two arms sort of expanding out, so it engaged the entire space.

Dziedzic: You said in the interview with John Stern that you did last year that you tried to make the model right away to try to capture the moment, and I wondered if you could just elaborate on that.

Shapiro: Well, I think with my work, there are moments you have an idea, you think about a situation, you don’t know what you’re going to do, and finally, you’re pondering the situation, analyzing it repeatedly, and it’s sort of frustrating. You don’t quite know how you’ll resolve it until you start to do the work, but it’s like you’ve been thinking about it. I mean, I’m working on a project now too. [00:07:00] I was working on a commission this morning. I had no idea what I wanted to do. Now I have some real idea of what I want to do, and I began putting stuff together and in this case, for once, I actually picked up a pencil. Usually, I don’t.

Dziedzic: You usually are working with forms to sketch.

Shapiro: Yes, work with my hands, hot glue—but I don't sit around pondering. And then you rearrange and alter it, but the conception of work is relatively fast. I think the thinking about work, let's say the genesis of work, is long and slow, and you don't quite know what you're doing until you do the work. If you knew what you're doing, then you're not doing anything. So, I think the whole idea is that [00:08:00] if you want something new, you just have to endure that period of thought and reflection.

Dziedzic: In 1993, you had a work that was commissioned by the Holocaust Memorial Museum. So, how was it different creating a work for a corporate space compared to creating a work for a memorial or museum?

Shapiro: Well, there was a certain narrative—the Holocaust commission was a competition, and it's something of course I never experienced but I was familiar with. I read lots of literature, and [00:09:00] you know, you are mediating the museum, so, it's not like you're literally representing the Holocaust. That was a much more reaching collapsed form, I think, versus Sony. It was much more challenging, and required greater depth, more complicated.

Dziedzic: More negative space?

Shapiro: No.

Dziedzic: No?

Shapiro: I don't think so. Why, why negative space?

Dziedzic: Well, what I remember of the form is that there are many angles.

Shapiro: It's a much more complicated form, and it was all about collapse and almost survival and getting beyond [00:10:00] collapsed. It was very controversial, initially, but doing anything in relationship to the Holocaust is controversial. I mean, I think Theodor Adorno said, "There can be no poetry after the Holocaust," which I think nobody takes literally, but I just mean that when you have something so absolutely destructive, then how can you—what sense is art? So that's serious stuff, and depending on how you interpret that, if somebody interprets it literally—

Anyway, the difference between a memorial and something else is a memorial deals with common experience, or common knowledge. [00:11:00] It's sort of a collective endeavor, and Sony was not that at all. That would be the real difference. So, you know the World War I memorial in London Hyde Park, have you ever seen it? It's really something. It was all these dead soldiers. It's very moving, but this was I don't

know how many hundreds of thousands people, or millions, died during World War I, unnecessarily, almost gratuitously. So, it makes you question. I don't think that's something one's doing in the Sony building. You're not interested in engaging doubt. [laughs] I was interested in overwhelming the space with the form, [00:12:00] which is radically different than doing a memorial, or doing anything where there's a narrative involved, whether it's a tragic one or—but I think there are moments in work where you sort of triumph over stuff and you're not thinking about that. I mean, it's a wide-open arena.

Dziedzic: Can you talk about the role of memory in your work, just generally?

Shapiro: I think my early work, small pieces—not the one at Storm King—they [00:13:00] weren't so much about physical, but they were about an inverse physical presence. So, they were small, and they were more memorialish, like a little chair. I don't think it was a memorial but it was a kind of, a certain sense of self that other people could relate to, so it was like this inversion of scale. They deal with memory, but I think most work, even if it's done in the most present tense, has references that hark back or relate back to prior experience. I think one aspect of art is its capacity to invoke memory, and relate to somebody else's experience. [00:14:00] It can be the experience in the present and the past, depending on the nature of the work or both. You could have a present physicality that elicits certain memories. But that's the artist putting stuff into the work with a kind of degree of straightness, or honesty, versus disguise.

I think most interesting artists to me are probing their own history and probing their experience and trying to figure stuff out in the work, and if that happens, then that's communicated, and a lot of it's the past and the present; it all gets mixed up. I mean that's where, [00:15:00] I'll just say that's where art differentiates, or sculpture differentiates from other objects. But the isolation of an object, we would consider sculpture. I mean, Duchamp's inverted toilet is a sculptural gesture. So even the recontextualization of the ordinary, what you might encounter all the time, in the right context could invoke memory.

Dziedzic: Can I ask about your leaving works untitled?

Shapiro: Well, that's my own stupidity. I think I've suffered for that. I've always had trouble titling. [00:16:00] There are quite a few sculptors who've had very ordinary titles: *Running Man*, *The Cat*, *The Dog*. And then there are a lot of artists who have totally gratuitous titles, just as a point of reference, and I just never wanted a title, so they were not really untitled. Untitled is a description; they do not have a title. So, I think people read it as *Untitled*, but it's not really *Untitled*; I just don't have a title. I just never wanted to make that claim about work. There's something grandiose about titling. So, it was a kind of modesty. Now, maybe it was a faux modesty. [00:17:00] I was always ill at ease with finding a phrase to express a series of complex thoughts. And of course, it's been a huge pain because how do you refer to the work?

[Portion removed]

Dziedzic: [laughs] Well, I can imagine it's difficult to assign words to a work that's sculpture, because the sculpture is, it is, that is the complex thought.

Shapiro: Is the work. I mean, sculpture's so different than painting, or drawing. Not cave drawing, maybe not, but somehow you read a drawing. A drawing's on the page; a painting's on a flat surface; sculpture's in space. If I had to do it all over again, which I will not have the opportunity to do, maybe I would use titles. And I was always hesitant about my work. I wasn't afraid to show it, what it was, what I was doing, [00:19:00] but the titling seemed grandiose to me. And a lot of titles I read I find grandiose. Other artists have fabulous titles, so it's my—it's a limitation, one of many. [laughter]

Dziedzic: I think I know a lot of artists who want—who have *Untitled* as the title, and then other artists that struggle with the same kinds of things that you do.

Shapiro: Well, you know for years, I used to insist that when you refer to “untitled,” do it in lowercase because this is not the title, but I gave up. It was a hopeless fight. So, for the record, “untitled” means there is no title. It's not the title; it just means there is no title.

Dziedzic: You'd said something about, [00:20:00] a sculpture could gain a title, in the future.

Shapiro: Yes, well—

Dziedzic: What is that process like?

Shapiro: Well, I mean, you know, it can be shocking.

Dziedzic: Does it come from you or does it come from—

Shapiro: No, no, I think people refer to something collectively. They're not going to say, “Oh, have you seen that sculpture without a title?” [laughter] That's where “untitled” came from, and that's art historians and registrars, you know, at galleries and museums.

Dziedzic: We're having an issue going through our archives right now that a lot of the photographs we have are by an unknown photographer, and so simply by the way that we're cataloging them, every time the photographer is unknown, it looks like the same person took all those photos: Unknown! [laughs] So we're working through that in a [00:21:00] different—

Shapiro: Yes, it could be: Unknown.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask about, I guess, creating work that's public art. How do you think about that term, and is it meaningful for you? Is there a different term that you—that's more meaningful?

Shapiro: Well, I think public art, and to some extent the Sony piece was public, because I don't think the City had jurisdiction over that, but I do think that that, due to some land use issue, that lobby had to be open, people could come in and out. I don't think it was isolated private space, so it was public.

Public art's a big responsibility. [00:22:00] Most of it's pretty problematic, too. I've had some things that I think were very successful, and others that were not as successful. I think you adjust the form and you would—most commissions, the artist applies what they're doing, so you're no longer thinking about it in your studio; you're thinking about it in terms of another space. You're thinking about another context. I think it's a big responsibility. Historically, it was much more about memorialization, and sort of a more collective [00:23:00] experience, whether it was religious, or historical, or you know, it was a sculpture of General Washington or Sheridan, the Saint-Gaudens, that everyone knew about, so they could respond to it. I think in the twentieth century, it was radically different, where a lot of memorials were much more abstract, and more difficult to understand for the general public. But I still think people have to be able, even if it's abstract, they have to be able to relate to it in terms of size and scale.

[00:24:00] I remember going to Murmansk in the Russian arctic, and I toured around, and I saw this huge statue of a Soviet soldier. I don't know how big. It was big. I mean, it was towering over the river, and I thought it was so impressive, not that it was a great sculpture, but that this collectively memorialized all the struggle and misery and heroism that went on in the Soviet Union to defeat the Axis, so, it was colossal. On the other hand, a colossal sculpture could [00:25:00] be a giant sculpture of Saddam Hussein. Could be a giant sculpture of Donald Trump. That could happen. It's scary stuff. So in that aspect, as propaganda. Sculpture can be used as commemoration, propaganda, memorialization, particularly public sculpture. So, I've tried to avoid that in my work, to avoid the colossal and the implications of the colossal, because there's a totalitarian aspect about it. You're imposing something on the public. So, I think you have some obligation to make that understandable within their experience, [00:26:00] rather than awing them, rather than shock and awe.

So, the component parts of my work are tangible; they're not that big. I mean, the piece at Storm King is not that large that it's overwhelming. It could be 70-foot-tall, taking over the entire sculpture park and destroying everything else. A certain degree of taste is required, and I say taste, in terms of a human quality. Yes, public art's interesting. A lot of it stinks, horrible stuff, and it's sad, you know, because there

it is. [00:27:00] If you're doing something in public, you have a certain obligation to the public, and you can't fault the artists as much as the commissioners.

I did this big public piece in China, for the US Consulate in Guangzhou, and it's very successful. You can't get in there; there's a fence. You can get in there if you're doing something with the State Department. But it was sort of simple and I just think putting stuff together in some way that people can relate to, that has something to do with their own experience, and then seeing that this act of will, of making something, is in itself a very important statement. The making of a form that expresses one's self, and having the opportunity [00:28:00] to have that in public is a responsibility. I think people can feel that; it elicits their own creativity. Of course, and a reaction. I remember making a proposal, an early public commission for the Charlotte Hornets stadium, and of course I was attacked—[they called it] a “stack o' boxes.” It was defeated by the City. I remember the [00:29:00] people would say [of the proposal], “My grandson can do that. That's child's work.” So, the good aspect of the work was the very quality that they were denigrating.

Dziedzic: Well, it's interesting because, you know, I think a lot about art education, not just because that's a big part of what Storm King does, but just through conversations with artists. A lot of people still have that reaction that you described, of looking at something that seems to them simple, and not having exposure to thinking about the complexity of those things, or—

Shapiro: Right, [00:30:00] so what they want to see is a statue; they want to see something that reiterates some external experience. They want to see something figurative and representational that they're comfortable with. They don't want to be provoked. That's predictable, but on the other hand, the work has to overcome that, and it has to insist upon itself and deal with that level of resistance, and deal with some basic human quality. That has to enter the work. [00:31:00] Listen, I'm no different. I walk around, and I see public work that absolutely does not interest me. I don't shut my eyes, but—and then I've seen work that's sort of kitschy or decorative, and that can have its own place and purpose too. But good work exists on some other level. It can have its decorative capacity, but it also can have a certain depth, and I think that has to do with the artist's ability to infuse a sense of character into the work. We know Saint-Gaudens is really good. Why? He shows great subjects but they hold up. They're not of [00:32:00] their time. They transcend their time. They're deeper. He's just a deeper artist. More talented, perhaps is the right term. He can put more into it.

Dziedzic: What were the responses to your sculpture when it was installed in the Sony building?

Shapiro: People liked it, but they were all my friends, so it's hard to know. My general sense, people really liked it. Well, it's powerful, and assertive, so.

Dziedzic: Yes. And it sounds like you were saying that the atrium needed something like that because it was also assertive, yes.

Shapiro: You know, Charles said, "This is a really fucked up lobby." He said, "We have to obliterate it, or make it bigger," [00:33:00] and he was right. He knew the space. He was a really good architect.

Dziedzic: Well, that's part of the postmodernist architecture dialogue, right?

Shapiro: No, I don't think Charles was a postmodernist. I think he was a modernist, so I think he wanted to restore some sanity into the place versus all the kitsch reference in the place, and I think that sort of overbearing vulgarity. So, he wanted it to be big and powerful, so it would be the center of attention, versus being subject to the décor, or being subject to the architecture. He wanted to blow the [00:34:00] architecture out.

Dziedzic: How did you decide on using bronze?

Shapiro: Well, actually I don't think you could do that out of anything else. Yes, you could weld it out of steel, or out of bronze or aluminum. But I think since I made it in wood, and you couldn't make it out of wood—I guess you could, but it wouldn't hold up. I don't think you could do it. I think it would have to be internally welded and bronzed. So bronze was the way to go. I mean, there's a certain point where you can't work on wood, and I don't; I'm not interested in wood. I was interested in that; I was interested in the wood as a trace of what I had done, so you know it was cut on a saw.

Dziedzic: [00:35:00] When did your work start to get bigger?

[Side conversation]

Shapiro: You know, in the '60s, late '60s, I was doing some—I wasn't so involved with size. Size didn't matter to me, and then [00:36:00] I was doing these small figurative pieces, and they weren't about the figure, per se; they were just sort of a sign or a symbol of the figure. So, I wanted the posture to evoke a particular emotional response, and at some point, once I had a sense of elation, I made them larger, but not really large. What do you mean by large, big?

Dziedzic: Well, I'm thinking about [00:37:00] your retrospective at the Whitney where writing about that exhibition pointed to your work as being miniature, or tiny—

Shapiro: Right, small.

Dziedzic: —really deliberately—

Shapiro: Right, intentionally.

Dziedzic: —small and on the floor.

Shapiro: I think at that point, I started to do things that were more slightly under life size. I was using found wood, like 4-by-4s, to make things. And then at some point, yes, I just wanted to push it, and make it larger. I forget what date, though.

Dziedzic: I think the first commission that I saw you had was in maybe 1983, in the Cigna building in—

Shapiro: Oh right, that was a little large but that wasn't that large. [00:38:00] Then I did something in LA that wasn't that large. They were all kind of physically doable, otherwise we could put them together, make them out of wood, and at least mock them up with some supports in the studio. Probably the first large piece I did, it could've been this piece for Dartmouth. I'd have to look up the chronology.

Dziedzic: I think that was '88, Dartmouth.

Shapiro: Well, maybe I did something before. Dartmouth was big, and that was a very specific space. That was another place where there was this enclosed courtyard between two parts of the campus, a [00:39:00] pathway through and there was this big balustrade staircase going up into the museum. It was a Charles Moore building, who was an early postmodernist and very important teacher and architect. And I wanted my work to look as if it just blown into the space, it just appeared to be there, and that's something I've always wanted work to do, particularly in a commission that has a sense of immediate arrival. So, it's not on bases; it's not treated as statuary. That piece was important.

Dziedzic: What was your relationship like to the sculpture [00:40:00] when it was in the Sony building?

Shapiro: I went in there maybe once every two years. I once went in to buy a TV. [laughter] It was nice that it was open to the public. I think people really liked it. I'm doing a work now, it's going into the Hess Center at Mount Sinai, and it's a large figure. It's painted red. It's a medical school, and also, it's a place where they treat cancer patients, so I was very careful about the red, that it evoked joy versus blood. I mean, dark red is blood, a lighter red [00:41:00] could be—and to some extent, I really picked a piece that I thought was relatively cheerful, and ebullient, because I don't think people in that place need to

contemplate the negative aspects of their—not negative aspects, but the kind of horrifying aspects of their anxiety about the future. What a challenge to put a piece into the hospital, though.

Dziedzic: Yes, wow.

Shapiro: Do it at midnight, and no construction. The base is being dropped into a preexisting place, but it's being made outside. I don't want to be there when they do that. I [00:42:00] just want to be there when the piece is lowered on the floor threaded rods. [laughter]

Dziedzic: What was the procedure for installing the work in the Sony building?

Shapiro: It was a nightmare. The riggers who did it were unprepared, and it was very limited access. So, they couldn't bring in a crane. I think they were using a forklift, and ladders, and my striking memory is, we were trying to bolt up that one arm, and these two big movers, like 300-pound guys, each one goes up on the other side of the ladder, and I see one guy, [00:43:00] he couldn't get the bolt right in the right place. He wanted to nudge it a bit, so he went underneath the piece and tried to push up the bronze element with his shoulder, at which point—the load of the ladder's probably 300. Let's say it's 300 and can really hold 900 pounds or 600 pounds. So, they had 600 pounds on it, and so when he lifted that up, at some point the whole ladder just crumbled like wet pasta. I've never seen that happen, and it was just, the molecular strength, the molecules just went, you know, they no longer had any alignment, and the thing just goes like molten metal. It didn't puddle, but it looked like somebody had dropped pasta. The guys were okay, they were; had some major aches and pains.

Dziedzic: [00:44:00] Did the arm, the piece of the sculpture fall?

Shapiro: No, the piece was rigged on a forklift, so the piece didn't fall down, but taking the weight of the piece off the forklift, it was inexcusable.

I think the first piece I did was in front of the Seagram's Building, that piece. That was the first large piece. I don't know the date of that. That was fun. Problem with the Seagram's Building, you had to put it on a base, [00:45:00] which I didn't want. Once you put it on a base, you no longer have this sense of being another element in your view, and all of a sudden it gets sanctified and important.

Dziedzic: When did David Collens first start inquiring about the sculpture?

Shapiro: Well, I knew David off and on. Somebody from Storm King wanted that piece that was in front of the Seagram's Building, and then somehow, David and I, we had met, and he once mentioned to me that

that's a piece like that he would love. So then when they were going to sell the building, and this thing evolved, I kept that in mind, and I suggested instead of auctioning the piece off—and it wouldn't do well at auction, not that many people want to buy a 22-foot, massive bronze sculpture. So I said, "Why don't you just give it to a non-for-profit?" And the head of legal counsel, Mark Khalil, [00:47:00] was so cooperative, and he liked the idea, and it was nice that Sony could do that. It was a really sweet resolution. And in a way, the piece got liberated, because it was in this—it was a lot of energy in that small space, so I think it really functions and holds its own outdoors. I'm happy with it.

Dziedzic: Did you have any concerns about relocating a sculpture had been, I guess, developed for a particular architectural space?

Shapiro: Well, I think in this case, it was developed to overwhelm the architecture, so, based on that, I wasn't particularly worried about it functioning outdoors. I was curious, [00:48:00] but I wasn't anxious. I would've been much more anxious if the piece was going to—I knew it was big enough, because and I think the thing is, it was commissioned, but the intent of the commission was to overwhelm. That was part of the mandate. So, it wasn't to have some demure sculpture that kind of curtsied to the surround.

Dziedzic: Or integrated the surroundings.

Shapiro: Yes, it didn't integrate. It was always—

Dziedzic: Its own form—

Shapiro: —on its own, which was nice. So, it was sort of a good perfect storm.

Dziedzic: Did you have any concerns about its capacity to exist outdoors?

Shapiro: [00:49:00] I worried about the patina and I think that is an issue that we have to deal with, because, I remember, the piece was patinated indoors, not outdoors. By the way, I remember when the piece was being built and I spoke with the engineer, and the engineer said, "You know, this is going to be indoors; it's not going to be subject to wind load." And I said, "Well, no. You have to build something so it can hold up outdoors, because sculpture has a life of its own, and it might go outdoors." So, I had no anxiety structurally about it, which would've really made me nervous. I mean that's something I'd be much more concerned with. No, you do have this obligation that's something's safe, or if it's not safe, that everybody knows about it.

Dziedzic: [00:50:00] Did your decision about the patina change from what you wanted indoors to what you wanted to see outdoors?

Shapiro: No, but other than certain greens in the patina, I don't know if you can hold that outdoors. I think light, dark, pieces get their own patina from being outdoors. I've never been a real person who patinates stuff. I kind of age it rapidly, and a lot of stuff I never patinate.

Dziedzic: So, any kind of weathering that might happen outdoors at Storm King would be to enrich it, in a sense.

Shapiro: Yes, unless it's destructive, unless it's, you know, there's—

Dziedzic: --structurally a problem.

Shapiro: Yes, right. But I think Storm King's very savvy about all that.

Dziedzic: Yes, a lot of the sculpture that they've had in the collection have been kind of [00:51:00] case studies for how best to protect the structural integrity of the sculptures and how to—

Shapiro: Yes, it's an important source of information.

Dziedzic: Yes, exactly.

Shapiro: I had to look at a piece at Christie's. I don't know what these people did to it. It was a painted piece, but I swear they used house paint. Who knows what they do? It's not my work, but I was called in on it, on an object restore, and I saw it. I just said, "You know, you got to bead blast the thing and totally repaint it." So, we went inside the leg to find the original color. I would've amped up the color, but I felt that I shouldn't do that, that it should be what it was.

Dziedzic: Can you describe the de-installation process from the atrium? I know you were there for part of it at least.

Shapiro: Yes, I would say it wasn't bad at all. I was worried about it—it was much easier than I thought. [00:52:00] I don't think they had to take out a door. Moore Fine Art did it, and they did a good job. It's exciting to install a big piece because it's like [makes sound effect] all of a sudden, it's there, it's in the world. Very different than banging some wood together.

Dziedzic: [laughs] I think for part of the de-installation, they had two lanes of Madison Avenue closed down.

Shapiro: Yes, at night.

Dziedzic: Yes, you might not have been there until [laughs] the 2 AM—

Shapiro: I was there. That's always fun. It was relatively well organized, and it was at night. It was fun. Yes, you have this sense of real importance, the whole city [00:53:00] block, Madison Avenue is shut down. It's all for your sculpture, two giant trailers, and all kinds of people. It was exciting. It's more exciting when it goes up than when it comes down, but I was excited that it was getting out of there. I did this installation in front of Penn Station, the Moynihan Post Office, that was wild. I can show you the photographs. I mean, that was, we started 11 o'clock at night. We had a monster crane from Bay Crane, my neighbors.

Dziedzic: Oh, they're my neighbors too.

Shapiro: Where are you?

Dziedzic: Greenpoint.

Shapiro: Oh, you're here! Okay. [00:54:00] Are you an art historian?

Dziedzic: No, I'm an oral historian. [laughs]

Shapiro: Oh. So, Bay Crane, then we had the whole team from Skanska, biggest—and this was all backed by Empire State Development, and one piece was a breeze, man, went right up. We drilled; SOM made the bases. We hit the concrete where it was supposed to be hit, we epoxied in the bolt, the piece went in. The piece was moved over. You could see all—not all of Penn Station, Madison Square Garden and back of it. The piece is flying through the air, you know like in, is it 8 1/2 that starts out with the Madonna on the helicopter? All kinds of stuff was going on, deep in the night. The second piece, [00:55:00] we had to boom in from a different street, and that street couldn't bear the weight of the crane. There's old tracks underneath. They spread out the beams. That didn't work; they got something else. They finally get the piece in place, they drill, and they can't find the concrete, because the template that was supplied to them was the ideal template, not a template of actual condition. So, they had to take it down, rebuild it, and go there the next night. [snores] It was a two-day adventure, but that was really fun.

Dziedzic: Wow. Now, were you on site for the installation of your work at Storm King?

Shapiro: No. I didn't. It wasn't necessary. I had [00:56:00] gone, and placed it, using a model. I mean, it was always worked out, so I had full confidence in their ability to do that.

Dziedzic: What was the discussion about its siting at Storm King?

Shapiro: Where could you see it from? A little bit about pride in place. I mean, there are good spots and there are not good spots. Would it hold up from the building? Have you been there?

Dziedzic: Yes.

Shapiro: Yes. And how it would look from below. I was pleased with it.

Dziedzic: Who suggested the spot that it's in?

Shapiro: I think that was from—not me. They asked me if I approved of the spot. [00:57:00] So, it sort of has its own space, but I didn't want it hidden in the woods, either.

Dziedzic: Do you remember when you first went there and saw it installed, where it is?

Shapiro: Yes, I think there was a lunch. It was fun. I was very happy. It was hot as hell that day, I know that.

Dziedzic: Yes, you're pretty exposed out there, to wind, rain, heat.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: You'd mentioned liberating it from the [00:58:00] Sony building. Did that—

Shapiro: Yes, yes—

Dziedzic: —when you saw it—

Shapiro: —I thought it was so much better, and also, it was no longer colossal. I think it functions with the landscape, but it doesn't overwhelm. It's not overwhelming. And it's nice to be part of that collection, to be part of that history of sculpture. A lot of friends of mine have work there, lots of artists who I knew. In fact,

I could've known [Alexander] Calder. I knew Calder, when I'd see him around, but I didn't really meet him. But [Isamu] Noguchi I knew, not well, but I'd met him, and of course I know Mark, and knew Tony Smith and Bob [Robert] Grosvenor and David von Schlegell, and Frosty [Forrest] Myers. I mean there are all kinds of people.

Dziedzic: There [00:59:00] must be a lot of intersections through Paula Cooper Gallery, too.

Shapiro: Right. I have a show up now at Paula's.

Dziedzic: I'll see it soon.

Shapiro: You better see it very soon; it closes on Saturday.

Dziedzic: Everything's always "closing on Saturday!"

Shapiro: It got a review in the *New Yorker*. I was so surprised. Nothing gets reviewed anymore.

Dziedzic: There's so much.

Shapiro: And there's so much and so few reviews. It's really tough.

Dziedzic: You talked about how your goal is to animate sculpture.

Shapiro: Well, yes. I just want work to be lively and meaningful. That's all I ask for. We can be dead [01:00:00] and meaningful too. The Paula show, there's quite a bit of morbidity in it. I want it to be animate, to have a life. Not an unreasonable request.

Dziedzic: How did putting it in the context of the landscape affect that?

Shapiro: I better go back up and look before I answer the question. How did that affect that? Well, I think you see the piece at a distance, it comes, it could be even bigger. It's such a huge landscape. I thought if anything it was a little small from the building. It can be even larger. But once you're anywhere near it, it's amply big. I think it [01:01:00] functions in the landscape, because it's a more intimate part of the landscape. It's sort of almost a bosque, bordered with grass, and I think it really worked. Yes, I like it! I approve.

Dziedzic: [laughs] Well, something that I wanted to—you'd mentioned this too, that you're kind of always working, and then when there's a commission, you fold in whatever you're thinking about into that commission, that you're always just working. It's not necessarily a different process.

Shapiro: Right. Well, I think it is a bit of a different process, but you know—

Dziedzic: I wanted to just ask you, what does your working look like? What does it look like when you're working? What is that process like? I'm getting a sense of it having seen your—

Shapiro: [01:02:00] Yes, it's just a pigsty. Well, actually, because I have two shows up right now, it's kind of an in between. I was working feverishly to complete—well, that wall, I'm working on a bunch of wall reliefs. Some are complete; some are not complete. Some are just chunks of wood scrapped from something else tacked up on the wall. I just work.

Dziedzic: So, a lot of the forms that I see are sort of sentences, that may turn into something else, may be revised.

Shapiro: Yes, particularly on that wall, like the red and yellow one, I'm just trying to sort of do some reliefs. And I just pinned them all up on the wall, just so I could look at them, and [01:03:00] so I thought it looked good. [laughs]

Dziedzic: Yes, well, you'll probably be showing them in a gallery context, so.

Shapiro: Maybe, yes, some I will. Just looking at what I've done and where I can go, and lately I was finishing a piece downstairs, and I was working on a little commission—because of these two exhibitions, I've neglected quite a few things in my obligations that I've committed to. So, I'm going to Africa on Saturday, to Dakar, so I'm sort of interested in at least getting things to a certain point, a beginning, if not a conclusion. I'm not worried about the conclusion.

Yes, I think you change things according to a commission, but it very [01:04:00] rarely—[even with] the Holocaust Museum, there were no specific instructions. I always try to deal with the kind of painful memory of that situation, and not to represent it literally, and I think that's something artists work from anyway, so.

Dziedzic: Was that something that affected your family?

Shapiro: Individually, immediate family? No. Relative, yes, it must have affected a huge mass of relatives who never immigrated or couldn't immigrate. You know my family immigrated, [01:05:00] I know my grandfather was 13, so they immigrated late nineteenth century. Yes, if he hadn't, and I'm sure that he had all kinds of relatives and all people who must've been slaughtered, but they weren't personal. No one in particular. Well, it's just the sort of horrendousness of it. It still is, you know. There's an article in this week's *New Yorker*, by Alex Ross, on how Hitler adapted, or was inspired to some extent by American racism.

Dziedzic: It could happen again.

Shapiro: It could. I don't think so, but it could. No, but the slaughter of Indians, and Jefferson's [01:06:00] endorsement of slavery—now, to take it to this demonic level was something else, because people don't trust others. It's just like sculpture. They can't deal with sculpture unless it relates to them. It's not the same thing, people are very uncomfortable.

[Portion removed]

People are comfortable with their own group.

Dziedzic: Yes. And how directly they want to see their experience reflected. Here's a hero, here's a person in recline, here's a thinker.

Shapiro: There's a good cartoon in this—did you see the new *New Yorker*?

Dziedzic: No, I haven't.

Shapiro: Two monkeys sitting on a branch, and one monkey says to the other one, "He uses tools and he flings excrement. Why not vote for him?" [laughter] It's sort of a great cartoon. [laughter] That's sort of what we're down to. It's bad.

Dziedzic: It's bad, it's bad.

[Side conversation]

Dziedzic: Well, let me just ask if you have any concluding thoughts about having your sculpture at Storm King.

Shapiro: Well, as I said, I'm delighted. It's nice and I think Storm King is such a beautiful sculpture park. There's nothing like it. I mean, the Louisiana is a nice place; it's quite spectacular with the Kattegat, you know, the sea in front, and—have you been?

Dziedzic: I haven't.

Shapiro: It's very beautiful. But Storm King is equivalently beautiful, and it's very well curated. [01:10:00] The pieces are really well installed, where you can encounter them independent of others, with the memory of what you've seen. It's very negotiable and idyllic. It's really good. I'm delighted that it's there. I couldn't be happier. I think the whole outfit is great. Storm King is great, and a lot of people go there. It's well attended.

Dziedzic: All right. Well, I think those are all my questions, so unless there's anything I haven't asked about that you want to add—no, nothing?

Shapiro: No, nothing.

Dziedzic: Okay. Okay, great.

Shapiro: Okay, well I appreciate it.

Dziedzic: Thank you.

[End of interview]