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Joel Shapiro's 20 Elements serves as a sublime entry point to his very cool show at the Nasher

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Joel Shapiro's *20 Elements* serves as the entry point for his new show at the Nasher Sculpture Center, after which it will return to NorthPark Center.

When one enters the Nasher Sculpture Center these days, there is an immediate sense of familiarity.

It's as though we're being greeted by an old friend, and in a sense, we are. It is a friend who has, on one notable occasion, suffered an injury, but overcame it and is now better and bolder than ever.

Standing there, in the lobby of the Nasher, almost as though its arms are extended in a kind of welcoming hug, is Joel Shapiro's *20 Elements*. You may not realize it, but yes, you've seen it before. Its home is NorthPark Center, where it was first installed in May 2006.

It is now the entry point of Shapiro's inviting, colorful, self-titled Nasher show that opened May 7 and runs through Aug. 21.

It will then return to its home in NorthPark, where it's seen by an estimated 26 million people a year, a figure that few artists anywhere in the world get to experience. Shapiro loves having *20 Elements* at NorthPark, despite the car wreck-like moment four days after its installation.

It happened at precisely 4:43 p.m. on May 9, 2006, when a little girl worked her way past the plant perimeter and jumped on *20 Elements*. It toppled, breaking into pieces, leaving Nancy A. Nasher, co-owner of NorthPark Center, devastated.

The pro that he is, Shapiro restored the piece and returned it to Texas, where it now enjoys a reputation of resilience and endurance.

"I love the burst of color," says Nasher, whose father, the late Raymond Nasher, built NorthPark and founded the sculpture center. "It's very joyous. It's like a fountain of color."

She first saw its brightly colored rectangles of yellow, green, red and purple wood as an image, screened in a presentation by Shapiro in February 2006 at the Nasher. Shapiro had conceived and crafted the work from 2004 to 2005 for a special exhibition at Paris' Musée d'Orsay.

Asked to construct a piece in conjunction with an ongoing Musée d'Orsay project dubbed "Correspondences," he picked Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *La Danse*, which had once adorned the exterior of the Paris Opera.

"It was very controversial for its time," Shapiro says. "When Carpeaux put the piece up, people threw bottles of ink at it. They thought it was pornographic. It had a lot of nudity. It had a central male figure with these maidens dancing around it. It was a hot, sexy piece and way ahead of its time."

Shapiro saw Carpeaux's design as being emblematic of that century and "not as the end of something, but rather as the beginning of something, of a kind of fluidity and modernity."

So, at the moment, *20 Elements* serves as the gateway to a show featuring seven sculptures and 26 drawings, although five of the seven are a permanent part of the Nasher collection.

Shapiro, 74, was born in New York but moved with his parents to an Army base in Mineral Wells soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. He returned to his homeland when the war ended and has stayed there ever since.

He remembers staging an exhibition at Fair Park, when the Dallas Museum of Fine Art made its home there. In 1984, it moved downtown and became the Dallas Museum of Art.

He has been a longtime favorite of the Nashers.

“Art,” Shapiro says, “is about degrees of rapture, these moments of realization. It’s about a kind of self-definition and a clarification of who one is in the world. And then you always hope, of course, that your work has meaning elsewhere.”



Joel Shapiro’s work as seen in the primary viewing gallery of the Nasher Sculpture Center, where his new show runs through mid-August.