



half of what  
you see

SHARON SHAPIRO



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Brenau University Art Gallery, Gainesville, Georgia  
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# archaeology and reflection

recent works by SHARON SHAPIRO

## DEBRA WOLF

Sharon Shapiro stands in a turquoise wading pool. She's afraid of water, but drawn to it. She wears a black dress with a bold white design of Mount Rushmore on the hem. It's an irresistible juxtaposition - the founding fathers seem to rise from the artist's reflection in the water. *She* is the monument, masked like an outlaw or a heroine.

This is *Badlands*, a stunning five-foot painting filled with contradictions and clues in Shapiro's personal universe of recognition and revelation.

The exhibition, *Half of What You See*, is the most recent chapter in a visual narrative spanning more than a decade. Shapiro chronicles the complexities of growing up female, the sources of self-definition that mark us in our youth, sometimes imperceptibly, and the suggestion of unspoken aspects of relationship. She captures the tender, beguiling sensuality that emerges at an early age, and the electric interplay of power and sexuality that surfaces in the framework of the everyday.

*Mount* places the issue of sexuality and objectification front and center, with a cool, blue-eyed blond sitting astride a horse, one breast visible through the jockey's jersey that clings to her. She

is undeniably desirable, distant like a Hitchcock heroine. While her demeanor puts her simmering appeal at careful remove, the painting's title underscores Shapiro's intentions. *Turning* is a different sort of portrayal. An exquisite, pubescent girl is reading, holding a popsicle. Its juice stains her lips. Her expression is earnest, and full of wonder. Shapiro captures a fleeting moment between childhood and womanhood. We are enchanted, and vaguely uneasy.

*Appointment* stages a young woman in pony tails, from an earlier, simpler time. She's deep in thought on the telephone, gingerly holding a small slip of paper. There is something furtive in her look and her body language, raising unanswered questions about the nature of her intentions. *Spark* is a startling painting from the same series. Shapiro casts herself in a white floppy hat and dark expression. She listens attentively, clutching a hot pink receiver to her ear, the curling cord running along her forearm like an artery. With her slightly pursed lips and averted eyes, we can only conjecture about her conversation.

Shapiro has focused primarily on single subjects over the years, but is beginning to address twosomes, adding to her exploration of self and relationship. *Hinged* is a haunting canvas of

Siamese twins co-joined below the neck. For her source, the artist pulled from a photograph and article she found in a 1950s issue of *Life Magazine*. The two faces dominate the canvas. One infant appears to sleep, while the other is awake and alert. The metaphor for relationship is bitter-sweet—one confronts, the other closes his eyes; one takes, the other is bled of strength. Sadly, neither child survived the surgery that sought to separate them. *One From Another* offers a second view of twins, older and identical. There is something charming in these two little girls and also disquieting. Their eyes are magnetic. Fine hair falls to their shoulders onto tops patterned with blue butterflies. It's utterly impossible to tell one from the other. A closer look reveals the possibility that they aren't twins at all, but mirror images; one is a creation of the other, a reflection, like representations of inner and outer selves before life's events irrevocably alter perception.

A brilliant, claustrophobic commentary, *When I See You* pairs two sisters in a carnival fun house. The painting uses hot, primary colors that are almost jarring, heightening the intensity of the scene. The girls pose in front of the mirror, trapped together in close quarters, deep in the ponderous process of early adolescent examination. The elder studies herself intently; her cheeks are widened, her torso is elongated. The younger

girl's misshapen form is even more exaggerated, stretched and twisted as a roller coaster screeches by in the distance in this strident and harrowing composition of distorted self-image.

Water is a recurring leitmotif for Shapiro, and she uses it to chilling effect in *Tributary (New River)*. This is a rare canvas in which two boys are used as models. The artist situates them in a dark, slowly streaming current. Though they stand together, there is a noticeable space between them. The younger boy scowls just slightly, while his brother gazes pleasantly and without concern; he has the reassurance of greater height, as well as a float resembling bright orange wings. There's no explaining why one warrants this measure of safety and the other doesn't, and odder still that the younger, smaller one is left (it would seem) with fewer defenses. Eventually these waters will rise and churn, challenging the calm of one and the ingenuity of the other. In this stark tale, we read the story of a family tree, the dramatically different experience of siblings, and the inevitably divergent paths that lay ahead.

In a number of brand new drawings, Shapiro takes an alternate route to unearthing our psychological and behavioral foundations. She utilizes backgrounds formed of imagery she collects—photographs, old postcards, memories culled from childhood. Her setting is vaguely mid-century, the idealized resort with its towering buildings, pyramids, palm trees, and diving boards—all reinforcing the male potency of the surroundings.

Constructing these works in layers, Shapiro uses soft graphite on colored vellum to create the hazy atmosphere of her backdrops. Surface figures on mylar are bolder and more distinct, drawn with indelible marker and intentionally left in outline, rendering them more as types than individuals. The layered effect seems to fuse dream and recollection, pieces of what we know and what we imagine.

In *Lot's Wife*, Shapiro's subject rises from the water, a strong, feminine persona dressed in a man's collar and tie. A log flume ride in the background twists and turns, then plunges forward into the deep pool. But the woman is unaffected; she is surfacing, and there's no looking back. *Breaking in Her Body* presents a lithe, totemic figure, partially nude, raised up as though in adoration or sacrifice. She appears to be dangling from a hook over an empty swimming pool, about to fall. She teeters on the verge of orgasmic bliss or a kind of emergence, like a butterfly, escaping the protective cover of her chrysalis.

Shapiro is a master at consciously staging scenes that manipulate the subconscious, combining subtly contradictory imagery to achieve unsettling and sophisticated results. Her work is strangely but decidedly feminist, and humanist. She elaborates on what she sees and senses. She depicts the inherent power of external beauty, proving it to reveal little of the true self. She crystallizes the breathtaking quality of innocence, and shows it to be a loaded gun. If these extraordinary paintings and drawings arouse

both desire and discomfort in our adult sensibilities, then they accomplish their objectives. This is work that walks the high wire—visually arresting, provocative, and vaguely voyeuristic. Ultimately, Shapiro's territory is archaeology and reflection; she is driven to dig inward through memory, instinct, and experience, and to extract from the detail of daily life what she observes around her. From this excavation, she offers questions, leading us to contemplate our own motivations and behavior.

While the artist presents herself as the inscrutable heroine in *Badlands*, she bravely discloses another story for us to consider. In *Monument*, she steps down from her triumphant pose and faces us, unveiling a more vulnerable beauty; a gaping hole in her costume spreads from the abdomen and rises into the chest. The mask is off. This is a strikingly different portrait, the poignant view of each of us who, heroically, and for a moment, lets down the guard.

Like Sharon Shapiro, we constantly refashion our sense of self from fragments of personal experience, from what we think the world perceives, from the mythology we have created of our pasts in trying to piece them together, and from what withers or flourishes inside. Shapiro is instructing by example: stand up, question everything, but only believe half of what you see.

DEBRA WOLF IS A FREELANCE JOURNALIST WHO WRITES PRIMARILY ON CONTEMPORARY ART. SHE IS A CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTNEWS, FRANCE MAGAZINE, AND WRITES WEEKLY ART REVIEWS FOR THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION.

## works in the exhibition

dimensions are height precedes width precedes depth

all works courtesy the artist, unless otherwise noted

### paintings

**Appointment, 2005**

40" x 44", acrylic on canvas

Courtesy Otto Zielke, Poplar Forest, IL

**Badlands, 2006**

60" x 48" acrylic on canvas

**Hinged, 2006**

38" x 60", acrylic on canvas

Courtesy Neal R. Deputy, Charlottesville, VA

**Mount, 2006, 60" x 48"**

acrylic on canvas

**One From Another, 2007**

48" x 60", acrylic on canvas

**Spark, 2005**

28" x 36", acrylic on canvas

**Tributary (New River), 2006**

38" x 48", acrylic on canvas

Courtesy George and Peggy Vaughan,  
Charlottesville, VA

**Trigger, 2007**

38" x 60", acrylic on canvas

Courtesy David and Julie Weinstein, Atlanta, GA

**Turning, 2007**

28" x 36", acrylic on canvas

Courtesy Jason and Margot Coleman,  
Charlottesville, VA

**When I see You, 2007**

60" x 48", acrylic on canvas

### drawings

**Breaking in Her Body, 2007**

25" x 16 7/8", graphite on colored paper,

permanent marker on mylar

**Double Blind, 2007**

22 1/2" x 17 1/6", graphite on colored paper,

permanent marker on mylar

**Lot's Wife, 2007**

20" x 18", graphite on vellum,

permanent marker on mylar

**Monument, 2007**

22 1/2" x 19 1/2", graphite on vellum,

permanent marker on mylar



ABOVE

**Turning, 2007**

28" x 36" acrylic on canvas

courtesy the artist



**RIGHT**  
**Monument, 2007**  
22 1/2" x 19 1/2", graphite on vellum,  
permanent marker on mylar  
courtesy the artist



**RIGHT**  
**Breaking in Her Body, 2007**  
25" x 16 7/8", graphite on vellum,  
permanent marker on mylar  
courtesy the artist